Ascension Sunday

Commissioned, Empowered and Formed

First preached as “The Bread of Life” in 2011

Acts 1:6-14

1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

6So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. 13When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of£ James. 14All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

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We come near the end of Eastertide when we have been reflecting on the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection. Today we consider the great change that took place in Jesus’ followers. Before his death and resurrection they seemed to always miss the mark. Surely the odds on Jesus’ followers continuing his ministry must have been slim to none. But something happened. The book of Acts describes them as the ones who turned the world upside down.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is significant that the book from which we read this morning does not have the title of the *Acts of the 12* nor is it called the *Acts of Jesus’ Followers*. *Acts of the Apostles* means the “acts of the ones Jesus sent into the world”. With Jesus’ ascension the identity of the twelve changed; no longer were they just his followers, they became *Jesus’ sent ones.* And the history that Luke tells to Theophilus has moved from age of Jesus to the age of the Spirit.

What happened that the disciples changed from bumblers to those who were able to turn the world upside down?

Today’s Scripture tells us of three factors:

1. Jesus commissioned them – “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It’s one thing to set your mind to a job, but when you’re given that job and when it’s Jesus doing the giving, you do take the assignment seriously and do it to the best of your ability.
2. Jesus promised that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you….”[[3]](#footnote-3) The job Jesus that Jesus gave the disciples was expansive and they would face many challenges. To fulfill their calling Jesus gave his followers the *authority* to witness and the *power* to be witnesses.
3. Those two factors are hugely significant: Jesus gave them a job to do and the power to do it. But the third factor is also very important. We read in today’s Scripture: “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus was passing on the mantle of his mission, the disciples who had been watching him would soon be the ones carrying on his mission.

What we have all likely experienced is that there is a steep learning curve when we move from student to professional, from tech school to mechanic, from apprentice to journeyman to master, from seminary to pastor, from nursing school to nurse, from law school to lawyer. The move from student to practitioner may happen in a day, but the living into that change takes time. It is one thing to know well a theory of education, it is another matter altogether to apply that theory to a student who is struggling to learn square roots, or the grammatical difference between subject and object.

There must have been a steep learning curve when the disciples became apostles, but they seem to have known this one thing: to do the *works* *of Jesus* required the *heart* *of Jesus*. Developing the heart of Jesus required time.

When we are disappointed by church people’s words or actions, we think “Just act like a Christian.” And often we’d settle for that - *acting* like a Christian. But Jesus has something more in store – having the heart of a Christian from which *acts of apostles* naturally flow.

As one Christian writer has put it, “God…emphasizes the importance of the inner being and the changes He means to forge there. Jesus said, ‘the kingdom of God is within you”[[5]](#footnote-5). The apostle Paul spoke of the Word of God being ‘at work in you who believe’[[6]](#footnote-6). He also focused our attention on ‘God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose”[[7]](#footnote-7). Although outward acts matter (you can tell the type and health of a tree by its fruit)[[8]](#footnote-8), God looks first upon the heart.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

So, before the disciples *do* anything, they devote themselves to prayer; asking-God-for-what-they-needed, simply being-with-God and listening-for-God-in-prayer.

We often discover God speaking to us as we “pray the scripture”. One of the blessings of Mark’s Gospel comes in the first chapter. Jesus has been healing many who are sick and casting our demons. Mark tells us that “the whole city was gathered around the door”.[[10]](#footnote-10) Early the next morning Jesus goes by himself to a deserted place to pray. Mark does not tell us directly what Jesus prayed.

If you know what it’s like to have the “whole city at your door” you likely can guess what Jesus prayed.

* I’m overwhelmed.
* I’m used up.
* Or simply, Lord, what do you want me to do?

What speaks to me in that passage is how we all need “re-time”: re-assessing our life direction, re-newal and re-connecting with God. If we are open to it, the stories of Jesus allow the priorities and practices of Jesus to become our priorities and our practices. And slowly, we discover the heart of Jesus is formed within us.

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There is another way of praying that shapes the heart of Jesus within us. That form is listening prayers.

It may be that the first prayers we learn are “asking prayers” that focus on our needs and wants. An elementary school child who knows of prayer asks for God’s help to complete a project or to pass a test…or to heal the grandparent they love.

In her book when Poets Pray Marilyn McEntyre tells how praying changed for her when her focus shifted from *listening for* to *listening to*. She describes it this way:

…listen came to mean something more like open-hearted waiting, breathing, relaxing into wordlessness, becoming aware of Presence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Often we read in Scripture “the word of the Lord came to Abram, to Jacob, to Moses, to Samuel, to Nathan, to Jehu, to Elijah, to Isaiah and Jeremiah.”[[12]](#footnote-12) And what those examples suggest is that listening preceded the hearing.

I’m guessing that some of you, perhaps many of you, have had a similar experience when “the word of the Lord has come to” you. Not long ago someone told me about that the word of the Lord came to her in a time of trial; that word was “God is my strength and my salvation”. It seems that the Spirit gives us words to comfort, to encourage, to challenge us, or to change our direction.

Busy people might let that word pass from thought and give it no attention. But people of faith are those like the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning who know (and I paraphrase) that the “Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only he who [listens] takes off his shoes; The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

Sometimes, the word of the Lord comes to me in hymns

“What a friend we have in Jesus”

“Our God our help in ages past our hope for years to come”

And I confess that it is not only church music, sometimes it is secular song

“Oh what a beautiful morning, oh what a beautiful day!”

Or a spiritual

“Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen, nobody knows, but Jesus”

The point is God speaks in many and various ways and *listening to* can open us to hearing and having the heart of Jesus shaped within us.

What is it that you hear when you hear children laughing?

Echoes of “let them come to me” and “to such belongs the kingdom of heaven”?[[13]](#footnote-13)

What is it that you hear when you hear the rhythmic beating of a cane against the floor?

Or the chatter at the table as the meal is being served?

Or the subdued sounds at the visitation of a funeral home?

As the soon-to-be-Apostles listened in their prayer, I think they heard the sounds of people

* yearning to be loved,
* searching for meaning,
* straining for purpose

I think they heard

* stomach’s growling to be fed
* sinners yearning to be forgiven

and through those sounds God’s love for the world and the deep urging of God to go into the world.

I think they also heard

* people bonding in love and laughter
* people enjoying life

We can open our lives to the work of God’s spirit by our reading and praying Scripture stories and by listening to life around us. And the heart of Jesus can be formed in us through that opening.

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The *Motley Disciples* become the *Effective Apostles* by

The commission of Jesus

The power of the Spirit

The heart of Christ being formed within them through time with God.

Devoting ourselves to prayer, to time of listening to, likely works best when you limit the distractions and focus your mind as best, but it can also happen during a walk, sitting at a little league game, a brief time out at work or overhearing the conversation of children making sense of their world.

Time with God is a way that the heart of Christ is formed within us, the way that we know Christ deeply, and it is the prerequisite for being effective apostles – people who are sent to continue Jesus loving work in the world.

Sisters and brothers, listen and hear and be shaped in the goodness of the Lord.

Charge to the Congregation

Each Sunday when we receive communion, there are leftovers. It reminds us of the abundance of God’s love and mercy and it reminds us of our task to be apostles – sent ones – taking this bread of life into the world.

Having been fed by the bread of life, let the heart of Christ be formed in you by devoting yourself to time with God in prayer.

Benediction

Disciples and apostles,

God bless you and keep you

and shape the heart of Christ *in* you

that God may work *through* you

to bless the world.

Amen.

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1. Acts 17:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Acts 1:8b [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Acts 1:8a [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 1:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luke 17:21 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1 Thessalonians 2:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Philippians 2:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew 7:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jan Johnson, When the Soul Listens, NAV Press, Colorado Springs, CO, 1999, p. 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mark 1:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Marilyn McEntyre, When Poets Pray, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2019, p. 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. IBID [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Matthew 19:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)