

Life: Bold and spicy

A study in ancient-fresh Christian living

Acts 1:1-14

September 9, 2007

Last month I attended my thirty year high school reunion at Edina-East in Minneapolis, MN. During the conversations a handful of us huddled in the corner and started reminiscing about the bold plan we had to share the message of Jesus Christ with our classmates. About six of us decided that we should send a letter to everyone in our senior class – all 477 students. The letter would be very simple, just a few paragraphs to let our fellow seniors know that we cared about them and that we wished them well and then we invited them to consider the claims of Jesus Christ. As we worked on the letter, about a dozen more students joined with us. Then we all hand-signed every letter, personally addressed every envelope and mailed the letter to every student. We expected dire persecution and social ostracism, but most of the students appreciated someone who had the courage to share their beliefs in a loving way.

In one sense, those fifteen high school seniors were merely trying to live out one of the key themes in the Scripture reading you just heard – and it's also the key theme in this entire book. Read 1:8. Off and on over the next six months we'll journey together through a very exciting portion of the Bible. I'm calling this series: "Life: Bold and Spicy" because Acts gives a wake-up call to all Jesus-followers to live a bold life, a life flavored with the spice of the Holy Spirit, a life of adventure and risk and challenge.¹ According to this verse God has a very simple plan and a promise for us and for the world. The plan involves us – everyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus. The plan is to reach the world with the message of Christ by working through us as we love others. The promise is this: we won't do it alone. God will work in and through us in the power of the Holy Spirit.²

¹ As always, the Bible isn't just a record of facts and spiritual truths; it's a narrative, a story of God working in and through real people in real places. For instance, Acts begins like this: "In my former book, Theophilus..." The "my" is a man named Luke, a physician and historian and follower of Jesus. The "former book" is the third book in the New Testament – the Gospel according to Luke (see Luke 1:1-4). And Theophilus literally means "dear to God," but he was probably already a follower of Jesus who needed to know the whole story of Jesus.

² The first few verses lay out some of the other key themes in the Book of Acts:

1. Jesus – "I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach." In everything we do at TVC, somehow and somehow we always get back to Jesus. It's not about us. That's why the Lord's Supper is so powerful; it points us back to Jesus in such a simple and powerful way.
2. Historical accuracy. See verse 3: "After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days..." Luke was a careful historian who believed in meticulous research. Although he was a follower of Jesus, he didn't just accept it all with an uncritical mind. He most likely spent hours interviewing eyewitnesses, sifting historical data, and trying to get the story right. I want to counter here the idea that faith is disconnected from historical research and scientific thinking.
3. Eating – Notice verse 4 – "On one occasion, while (Jesus) was eating with them ..." The reference to Jesus eating with people isn't accidental. In Acts the early Christians were eating together often. Eating wasn't just a way to get fuel for your body; it was a huge part of sharing life together. People that share life together will eat together.

Verse 8 is an invitation to the bold and spicy life because it's so outlandish and practical at the same time. It's outlandish because at this point the disciples are a motley group of rag-tag, untrained, unsophisticated, and sometimes uncouth of men and women. They have no five-year strategies, no resources, no political clout, no church buildings or budgets or paid staff members or committees. And yet Jesus has the audacity to say, "I want the whole world to know about the good news of salvation. But someone needs to take it and share it with someone else. So you are my plan."

Notice that they weren't looking for this mission. They didn't come up with the plan – and we wouldn't come up with this plan either. They kept getting distracted (see verse 7 and verse 10). And Jesus kept pulling them back to their central plan, their primary mission. "It's not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." In other words, "That is none of your business. That's not your job. But here is your job: verse 8."

This is one of the central themes of Acts: "you will be my witnesses." And Jesus gave a simple strategy to go with the plan. He told them to start right where they live: Jerusalem. Did you know that we have a Jerusalem? You start right here on 25A and you make a circle about 10-15 miles in diameter. That's our Jerusalem. So every person who walks through our doors or who potentially walks through our doors or who may never darken our doors for whatever reason, is part of our Jerusalem – and it should get our blood moving and our senses engaged because we have a job to do. Our children and our youth and university students are part of our Jerusalem. Our Jerusalem includes rich and poor, PhD's and GEDs, the abused and abandoned, the broken-hearted and the happy-go-lucky. And did you know that you have your personal Jerusalem as well? Draw a circle around your life – your family, your neighbors, your co-workers, your fellow students, your soccer team, your choir, your school – that is your Jerusalem.

This may seem strange to us. We have the notion that missions and missionary are always out there. Yes, they are. We have missionaries out there and – unlike us – most of them eke out a living with a paltry salary and little social support and they rely on others as their only base of financial support. On the other hand, the old notion that missions is just "out there" has been eclipsed by a new global reality: the majority of Christ-followers are not Americans nor are they Caucasians. They are African and South American and Asian. If you have a passion for reaching the world for Christ, start by building a bridge with your neighbor. I can't emphasize enough that it is NOT an either/or: we start in Jerusalem and we fan out to the Judea and Samaria AND we also go to the ends of the earth (see verse 8). But we can't skip over our Jerusalem. And you and your family can't skip over your Jerusalem and keep running to church activities and church events. Work on the relationships in your own Jerusalem as well.

The key is this: if you consider this church to be your church family, then you are a missionary and not just a member. You have a Jerusalem and you are a sent-out child of God and participant in this church. You can never say, "That's not my job. That's not my gift or I don't have time." That's not an option. You have a Jerusalem and you have

been sent there and assigned there – by a Sovereign God who always works for our good and for His Glory at the same time – to serve and impact your Jerusalem.

And I can't tell you how to do that. You have to pray, you have to trust the Holy Spirit, you have to wait on the power of the Holy Spirit, and then you have to follow. But the key is taking responsibility for *your* Jerusalem. I can't take responsibility for your Jerusalem and you can't take responsibility for mine. We all have different places, different circles and different passions for ministry.

And the only way to take responsibility for your Jerusalem is to start building relationships right there. It's all relationships. (My friend John Cragg is the director of Long Island Youth Mentoring. Recently I had lunch with John and he told me an amazing story about having an impact in his own Jerusalem ...).

Build relationships in your Jerusalem. Frequent the same places. Ask people questions. Ask people if you can pray for people. Ask them if they want to come to church.

You see, Jesus left a powerful, undeniable, unforgettable visual of our role in his kingdom. See verse 9. He left. He said, "So long. Take over now and I'll see you later. The job is in your hands." It's a terrifying moment. Every parent can probably remember the first time they said to the kids, "Hey, we had a great dinner but I'm going out so could you guys clean up, wash the dishes, and put them away?" Or every coach knows the terror of saying to your team, "Okay, I can't be out there with you; it's all yours. You make the plays; you call the shots; you guys have to step up and do it now." That's what Jesus is doing – and he's making it so clear that they could never forget it. Although as we'll see, Jesus isn't actually departing; he's just present in a totally different way – through the power of the Holy Spirit.

They were stunned. So in verse 10 we read that "they were looking intently up into the sky as he was going." And then I love the next part: "two men dressed in white" – no doubt they are angels – appear and say, "Hey, stop gawking into the sky. He'll be back some day, but for now he already gave you a job to do."

At this point they were very open to hearing about the second aspect to the theme found in Acts 1:8 - Jesus' promise. The promise is first mentioned in verses 4-5. This is the first of 57 references to the Holy Spirit in Acts. This book should be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." Who or what is the Holy Spirit? The Spirit isn't an impersonal force; the Spirit is a living reality, the third person of the Trinity, the very outpouring power and presence of the living God and the Risen Christ. We'll talk about the Holy Spirit much more over the coming weeks. For now it's enough to say that we can't live without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit – although many of us sure try. (The young guy at the gas station pushing his car and trying to fill up a coke bottle with gas). In the same way, living without the power and presence of the Holy Spirit is way too hard – and way too stupid. Another New Testament writer, the Apostle Paul would say that to live the Christian life means to be led by the Holy Spirit – see Romans 8:9 and 14.

How do we get in touch with the power of the Holy Spirit? First, we wait. See verse 4 – “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised ...” Literally, it means: “Stick around! Don’t go anywhere, don’t try anything; don’t plan anything until the Holy Spirit comes.” Wait for the gift my Father promised. Waiting creates space in our lives. Waiting means that I take time to listen and to trust. When we’re so busy with our own activities, when our heart is so crowded with our agenda and our needs, when we’re so consumed with our own plans, we don’t have any space for the Holy Spirit. Wait means stop for a minute. Wait means be still, be silent, and be alone with God. Wait means that together, corporately, as a church family, listening to God and for God isn’t just a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of our meetings or a weird and quixotic tangent to our spiritual lives. Waiting is the oxygen in our blood stream. Without waiting we never open up to the Holy Spirit. Do you have time in your life to wait?

Secondly, everything I know about the Holy Spirit implies that in order to experience the outpouring of the Holy Spirit I must be open. It starts with coming to the end of our selves and opening ourselves to the Power and Presence of Another – the Holy Spirit. It’s like this cup with the plastic wrap on it. If I pour this water into it, nothing gets in. Why not? Because there’s a lid on it. You have to take off the lid. You have to be an open and receptive cup. If I’m still struggling through life in my own resources and my own power and cleverness, I will see no need to be open to the presence of the Holy Spirit. After all, I can do it myself. So even if I sign a statement of Christian belief and pass for theological correctness, I still may not be living in the reality of the Holy Spirit. It begins with an end of our own resources. It begins by saying, “God, I can’t do this. You’ve given me this incredible mission, to reach the world, to reach my neighborhood, to love others well, to live for you boldly and passionately, to live a holy life, to be more like Jesus in everything I do, but I keep falling flat on my face. Okay, I give up. I surrender. I take the lid of my own pride and arrogance and self-sufficiency and rip it off because I just want you. I’ve been chugging along in my own power.” And then God responds, “Ah, that’s what I’ve been waiting for: here be filled with the Holy Spirit. Let me pour it into you. Let me pour it until it overflows.”

Now I have some bad news and good news with this spiritual dynamic. The bad news is that we usually only get to this point after repeated failure and brokenness. We usually only get there when we realize our spiritual poverty and emptiness. The power of the Holy Spirit doesn’t pour into our lives when we get busier for God. It happens when our spiritual poverty grips us and seizes us at the core of our being and we cry out – without shame and without embarrassment – “God, I am empty. Fill me with your Holy Spirit.” It grips us so deeply and the thirst is so intense that we no longer even care if others see our thirst ... And God fills us and keeps filling us.

Third, this happens as we build a community. See verses 6a and 14a. The word “together” or “united” is one of Luke’s favorite words to describe the Holy Spirit. It’s always so tempting to remove ourselves from other followers of Jesus because they’re too annoying or too slow or too hard-hearted or too sinful. At times it seems easier to just cut them out of our lives so it can be just my private and personalized encounters with the Holy Spirit. After all, we say, why can’t I just bypass all these slow and

cumbersome people and go directly to the Holy Spirit? Sorry, in the Bible it never works that way. We always encounter the fullness of the Holy Spirit together – in the midst of our sin and personality differences and slowness. Are you seeking private, personalized encounters with the Holy Spirit devoid of Christian community? Be careful! Satan likes to give private experiences as well. He loves to give personal instruction to our hearts. If you're alone, who will challenge you? Who will help you decide: Was that from the pit of hell or was that the Father's voice? As one of the early Christians said, "If you're alone, whose feet will you wash?" In other words, how will you learn to love if you're just off having private conversations with the Holy Spirit? Most of the greatest saints in the history of the church would warn against this as well.

This is the promise: you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. It's not just an intellectual concept. Jesus did not just say, "You will know some very impressive truths about the Holy Spirit." No, he promised, "you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit." To baptize means to immerse or deluge or plunge someone into water. You don't just stick your big toe in; you get plunged into it. When you dive into a lake or pool you encounter a reality other than you. It's real. It's wet. It changes you. In the same way, when we get baptized into the Holy Spirit we encounter a presence and a power that is different than us. It's not a program. It's not a schedule. It's not a formula. It's a plunge into the Holy Spirit of God. It plunges into you.

Now what I want to do is connect the plan with the power – the plan to share the Good News with the power of the Holy Spirit. And in order to do that, I want to give you a very simple, clear assignment for the rest of the year – at least. Prayer Experiment Cards in your bulletin.