

## **The Community of the Spirit**

### **Acts 1:1-14, 2:43-47 by Patty Friesen (May 13, 2018)**

Luke, the physician friend of Apostle Paul and the author of the book of Acts, dedicates this book to Theophilus, the same person to whom he dedicated the Gospel of Luke. Who is Theophilus? Theo means God and phila means lover so Luke is dedicating this book to any God-lover who may read it. In Luke 1, Luke states the purpose of producing an orderly account so that Theophilus or all God-lovers may know the truth concerning the events of Christ and the early church. This has been interpreted to mean that Luke-Acts was written as a defence of Christianity; first and then a defence of Apostle Paul who becomes the main focus at the end of the book. It may have been a document used in connection with Paul's trial before Caesar, either as general information about Jesus and Paul for the public or as an actual brief at the trial. Acts may also have been used as a defence for other believers of Luke's day who were also facing trial. The second purpose of Acts is to win nonbelievers to Christ and for creating Christian fellowships throughout the Roman empire. Finally, the book of Acts provides guidance for those who are already convinced Christians and provides instruction on how to be further nurtured in the faith.

Acts picks up where Luke left off with Jesus' resurrection in Luke 24. Acts is a continuing Gospel, the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught the disciples for 40 days after his resurrection, to trust the movement of God just as God taught him to trust it in the wilderness for 40 days after his baptism. They need to understand what they have seen in Jesus' life and resurrection. The Holy Spirit does not work in an intellectual vacuum. The experience of God's salvation must be interpreted for all of life. This is a period of preparation, of proof of resurrection, of growing confidence and spiritual authority.

Jesus promised the disciples he would send the Holy Spirit but they have to wait to receive it. Waiting for God to act is a community project. Waiting with others in an act of

solidarity. The disciples do not scatter and go their separate ways to await a private Spirit filling experience but were joined together to await God's action on them all. Acts 1 lists the community's leadership which includes women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and makes it clear that the women who followed Jesus will continue to play an important leadership role in the early church. Even so, they do not choose a woman to round out the twelve after Judas' suicide, nor do they vote democratically on a candidate but trust on the Holy Spirit to guide their choice of Matthias. They cast lots by putting names written on stones in a jar and the jar was shaken and the name on the stone drawn out first was determined to be the one divinely chosen. Mennonites chose pastors in such a way in the past, names written in hymnals and hymnals then selected with a sometimes less than willing candidate chosen.

So much of this passage in Acts 1 involves believers coming together in order to learn, to wait upon God and to pray in preparation. Waiting is not a passive inactivity. They waited by praying and studying together. They are in spiritual training, training their hearts and minds for the power of a moment that cannot predict but trust in all the same. They are already being socialized into a community of the Spirit, a community that lies by very different norms defined by Jesus' life and teachings. Their community is already defined by those who gather for worship and discernment and sharing of resources, despite their different backgrounds.

The disciples ask Jesus again when he is going to restore the kingdom of Israel because they still think he is going to establish a new political kingdom. They still don't get what Jesus is trying to accomplish. They don't get that the transformational power of the Holy Spirit will turn the world upside down not through armed revolution but through the formation of the church as a counter-culture, alternative community, a breakdown of the class system, a gathering of equals, men and women, slaves and masters, Greek and Jews. A koinonia, a well-known Greek phrase meaning friendship but here it means much more than friendship. It means a fellowship of believers that share more than common beliefs and core values; they also practice

worship together and sharing resources or offerings for the good of all those in need, even beyond their fellowship. This formation of community is the truly powerful act of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, the community has to wait in Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will come to the urban center, Jerusalem, ironically, not in Galilee where they were from and where Jesus spent most of his ministry. Jesus taught in the country and preached on images in nature such as seeds and grain and fish and birds as images for the kingdom of God. Maybe Jesus knew we all need our grounding in nature before we can survive life in the city and make sense of the kingdom of God in an urban context. Maybe Jesus knew we have to get in touch with our past before we can launch forward into uncertain futures.

Since the crucifixion, the disciples have been lying low and getting out of Jerusalem as often as possible. Why stay in the city that represents persecution? Jesus is telling them they have to stay in the place of fear and death and in the midst of fear and death, the Holy Spirit will do a new thing. The Holy Spirit will come in the heart of the action, in the religious center, where it will impact the largest number of people gathered from around the world in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Jerusalem will be the launch pad to carry the good news forth to another urban center, Rome and the far reaches of the Roman empire in Athens and Ephesus.

Acts establishes the Christian movement as a non-violent revolution. It establishes the criminally crucified Christ as king above all Caesars of the Roman empire - a king who frees slaves and gathers together all kinds of people from different religions, classes and ethnic backgrounds, challenging the very foundations of Roman society. The movement joins people together in forgiveness and peace without breaking the law or resorting to violence - a movement of changed hearts and minds.

The Book of Acts or the Gospel of Acts is rich with themes of conversion, discernment and leadership, community building and new religious insights. It is an exciting account of

healing, preaching, church conflict, soup kitchens, trials and sentencing, visitations by the Holy Spirit, travel and shipwrecks. It reads like a page-turning historical fiction novel that has profound relevance for us today. Around the fire of the Holy Spirit is heat, life, comfort and a new community. May we gather around this fire next week for Pentecost communion and these next weeks of spring and summer worship.

Let us pray: Gracious and Eternal God, thank you for your fire of love and creation. Thank you for Jesus who has joined us into a new community. Enable us by your Holy Spirit to break down cultural barriers and to walk together in unity of purpose. By justice and mercy, may we show your way to the world. Amen.

Faw, Acts: The Believers Bible Commentary

Hays: The Moral Vision of the New Testament

Kraus, The Community of the Spirit