

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**May 21, 2023**

**Acts 1: 1-14**

Let us pray for the awareness of the presence of God's Spirit.

We are hungry, Lord, for truth, for justice, for love. Nourish us this day with better food than we could ever purchase, engineer or manufacture: your Word, your love, your Spirit, your daily bread for our life's journey, in the company of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**Acts 1:1-14**

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 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. 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; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But 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." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They 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.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When 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. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, the writer of the Gospel of Luke is the same as the book of Acts. The two books together tell a larger story. The first describes the details of the life and ministry of Jesus, and the second part details the beginnings of the church and what the disciples did after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The author of Luke-Acts intends the two volumes to be one story – because that is what they are. There is the good news of Jesus, and there is what happens after Jesus is gone. The good news does not stop after Jesus’ time on earth, but rather it continues as the good news of what Jesus has done is spread throughout the world. Historically, Acts has been read in the church after Easter because it is the only narrative in the New Testament that tells the story of the community formed after, and by Christ.

Our reading for this morning is the introductory chapter and so in its few short verses it does a number of things. First, it connects the book of Acts to the volume that came before, that is the Gospel according to Luke. Acts is addressed to the same person as the gospel – Theophilus – which means lover of God – and may, in fact, not be a real person, but a device established so the author can tell the story. The second thing this introductory piece does is foreshadow the purpose and theme of the book – which is that we are witnesses to the good news of Jesus in our own location as well as to the ends of the earth. The final thing this

passage does is get Jesus out of the way, so to speak, so that the focus is placed on the disciples and what they are to accomplish.

In the middle section of our reading, in verses 4 through 8, the disciples and Jesus have a conversation. These are the only words that Jesus will utter in the book of Acts. The disciples have gone back to Jerusalem after the events of the final days of Jesus life, after his crucifixion, and after his resurrection. Toward the end of the Gospel of Luke, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Gospel of Luke has Jesus appearing to several disciples after the resurrection; there is the walk to Emmaus, and a scene where Jesus eats again with his disciples and where he promises them the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples are gathered in Jerusalem, happy at the news of the resurrection, and worshiping daily in the temple. At the beginning of Acts, we are reminded of this promise, and of Jesus appearance with the disciples for 40 days. It is during this time when the disciples ask Jesus the question, “is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel.”

You gotta love the disciples – the disciples, trying as hard as they could, but never getting it right. And here they are again, after all that has occurred, asking if Jesus will now establish Israel back to glory. And Jesus gently dismisses their question with a simple, “it is not for you to know the times or periods,” and instead he focuses on the truth that he needs to tell them – the thing that maybe they haven’t yet fully grasped – Jesus tells them, “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.” After he delivers this message – he ascends into heaven. Jesus, in essence, gets out of the way so that the disciples can get to work.

At the conclusion of this brief interchange with Jesus and the disciples, the statement that Jesus makes about the disciples being witnesses is easily misread. I think we read this statement and we assume it is an imperative – a command. So, when we read or hear the statement, “you will be my witnesses,” we assume it is Jesus charging us to go and be disciples – “you must be my witnesses.” But, as one scholar I read

pointed out, the passage is not imperative, rather it is declarative. It declares a fact – a fact of the future.

The ones that Jesus talks to and who follow him will be his witnesses. And, indeed, the rest of the book of Acts demonstrates just that. In the first several chapters, the disciples minister first in Jerusalem, and then the disciples set off and minister in neighboring Samaria, and then finally, through Paul, Barnabas, and others, the news of Jesus Christ is taken to other parts of the Roman Empire until the book of Acts ends with Paul sitting in prison in Rome awaiting trial. In many ways, the book of Acts is a celebration of the witness of the apostles to the good news found in Jesus.

As I thought about this grammatical “aha!” – the fact that Jesus’ statement is declarative – that it is just stating a fact, over against an imperative command to go and be disciples – I thought about one of my favorite hymns. A hymn that is most likely familiar to many of you, and one that is a favorite of mine, is “They will know we are Christians.” You can find it on page 300. It highlights this very statement of fact that Jesus mentions to the disciples. If you know it, sing it with me - the first verse.

We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord;  
we are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord,  
and we pray that all unity may one day be restored:  
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love;  
yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.

It’s wonderful – right? It talks about unity of Spirit, and restoration, other verses go on to highlight working with one another to guard dignity and pride of every individual, and that together we will walk hand in hand that God is here, and people will know us by our love. This was a song sung by my youth group – a lot. When I plan worship and pick hymns, I turn to this one a lot, and then remember we can’t sing it every month (or maybe we could). The message is so clear and so simple. It has a vision of what the world could look like, what the church

would be known for when it is at its best. People will know us by our love. We will be known by our fruit. We are witnesses for Jesus – and people will look at our actions, our way of being in the world, and our treatment of others – that is what will define us – and in many ways what will define how people understand the Christian faith. “You will be my witnesses,” Jesus says – statement of fact. You will be known by your love – statement of fact.

And yet, week after week, we see plenty of statements that are the opposite of love. We hear news from state legislatures and lawmakers, draping themselves in the guise of Christianity while they put forward hateful bills based in ignorance. We hear talk of Christian nationalism that ties together the Christian faith and white supremacy. Frankly, I worry about what exactly people think of Christians and by what, exactly, we will be known. It makes me wonder sometimes if I want to own the label of Christian because the witness I have seen is so antithetical to what I believe the Gospel is about.

But – I also know that what gets the headlines isn’t the full picture of Christianity or of Christians. I know there are people, Christians, doing good work in the world that, indeed, can be described as acts of love. I believe that Jesus was scandalously radically inclusive. Jesus is about equality and love. I believe that with my whole heart. And I believe that we get to be the witnesses to that good news. And I know that for the most part – I am preaching to the choir here – and maybe it would be more fruitful if this sermon was given at a different church.

But I think it is important that we constantly remind ourselves of the good news of Jesus, *and* that we are witnesses of that good news. There have been some remarkable strides in the last few years for equal rights for LGBTQ+ people. I am encouraged by the conversations and actions in this country that have begun around racism and sexism. I am excited that the Presbytery of which Oak Grove is a part, unanimously adopting the report and recommendations from the Institutional Race and Equity Self-Assessment Team that commits the Presbytery of the Twin Cities to

continue its anti-racist path. We have come far, and we know we still have work to do.

Congregations like ours are important. Witness like ours is important. Showing others that Christianity can look different, must look different, that we understand the good news of Christ to be inclusive of everyone – that message is important in our homes, in our schools and workplaces, in Bloomington, in Hennepin county, in Minnesota, in the United States, and to the ends of the earth. It is important that we speak to our children, to our friends, to our neighbors against such hateful language and laws. It is important that our legislators hear from us – and it is important that we identify as people of faith when they do hear from us. We ought not let others speak about the Christian faith in ways that we think are antithetical to the good news without a voice calling them out on their hate. We need to strongly proclaim the inclusive love that we know through Jesus. We are Christ’s witness.

You have heard me say that the church is one of the only organizations in the world that was created and exists for the benefit of its non-members. The church’s purpose is not its own. The church is present in the world on behalf of God. We are the ones to heal, to harmonize, to give relief, to love, to reconcile, to bring wholeness, and work for peace and justice. My friends, as disciples of Jesus, you do not *go* to church, you *are* the church! You do not go to church to receive services; you are the church who serves God in the world. By this you and I are the church.

You will notice in the bulletin that we have a moment to recognize volunteers. And I want to say a couple of things about that before we get there. First, I want you to know that I am a little uncomfortable with the language of volunteer when it comes to talking about the church. I love that people volunteer, I just don’t love that we talk about it with the term of “volunteer”. In a broad sense, a volunteer is one who isn’t paid for the work they do, whereas what we are doing when we “volunteer” is we are living out of faith in loving ways. We are being disciples of Jesus. We

are using the gifts God has given each of us to participate in the kingdom of God in service of God. We are following our call.

The second thing is to remind us that everyone, absolutely everyone, is gifted and called by God into ministry. It may not be in supporting the institution of the church – although it very well could be. More than likely, it is some work outside these walls for which you are gifted and called. But if it is done in the name of Christ, reflecting the love of Christ, then it is definitely the work of discipleship. We are the church. We are the ways in which God's reconciling love is made known.

I close with this, dear disciples of Jesus:

- If you have ever taught Sunday school for children, youth, or adults, please stand up if you are able and remain standing.
- If you have ever fixed dinner and served meals at Loaves and Fishes, stand up if you are able and remain standing.
- If you have ever visited someone in prison, stand up if you are able and remain standing.
- If you have ever spoken out against an injustice, stand up.
- If you have ever worked for peace, stand up.
- If you have ever worked to help the environment, stand up.
- If you have ever been the advocate or voice for someone that had no voice, stand up.
- If you have ever invited someone to worship, stand up.
- If you have ever told someone your faith journey, stand up.
- If you have ever sat by the bedside of someone who is ill or someone dying, stand up.
- If you have ever invited someone to your house for a meal and said grace before the meal, stand up.
- If you have ever said hello to someone at church who didn't look familiar, stand up.
- If you have ever prepared or served communion, stand up.
- If you have ever served on the Board of Deacons or on Session, stand up.

- If you have used your gifts in the church office, stand up.
- If you have helped prepare a meal on Wednesday nights, or washed the dishes afterward, stand up.
- If you have been a greeter or an usher on Sundays, stand up.
- If you have sung in the choir, played in bell choir, or played an instrument in worship, making a joyful noise to God, stand up.
- If you have helped maintain this building in any way, stand up.
- If you help us stream our worship services or run sound and lights, stand up.
- If you help decorate this sanctuary, stand up.
- If you have volunteered for VEAP, Oasis, Bridging, or Urban Homeworks, stand up.
- If you have ever helped guide a child in the ways of God, stand up.
- If you have ever prayed for someone other than yourself, stand up.

I could keep going, but I think you get the point.

Now, take a look around you. You are gifted and called. You do not *go* to church, you *are* the church. You are disciples of love.

We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord;  
we are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord,  
and we pray that all unity may one day be restored:  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love;  
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Amen