

Acting Out: Signs and Wonders Sunday, 7/1/18

1 We're continuing our journey through the book of Acts, recapturing the vision and missionary impulse that lit the early church on fire with passion, power, and purpose. Acts is all about God's forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and the mission of sharing both with the world, all of which remain central for us as Christians today.

It's never too late to start reading along in Acts at home. You could start at the beginning and catch up or just skip forward to Acts 7 and 8, which is where we'll be next Sunday. Each week I'm also giving you a challenge to act out the good news of Jesus in some particular way. How did you do with last week's challenge? I asked you to act out in one way that encourages you to be refilled with the Holy Spirit. Does anyone want to share a way they reconnected with the Holy Spirit this week? {take handheld wireless mic and field some comments} We're also continuing to take and post selfies for Jesus with a mention of how we're acting out the love of God. Remember that we're not secret agents for Jesus, we're what? Sacred agents! And sacred agents proclaim the Gospel in deed, word, and yes, even with selfies!

2 Have you ever been surprised by an answered prayer? Back in my seminary days, I worked as a chaplain at Central Baptist Hospital in Lexington. The floors I covered included a cancer wing and an ICU. Some of the patients and families I ministered with for only a few days or even a small part of a single day, but there were a few patients who seemed to have taken up permanent residence in the hospital. I remember one man, Carl, who was in the ICU. Carl had been in a coma for a couple of weeks when I first visited and prayed with him. His prognosis was hopeless, but I prayed fervently for his recovery, his family often at the bedside with me. In many respects, I felt like I was ministering more to his family than to Carl. One day, after about a month, I walked into the ICU to find Carl sitting upright and talking with his family. I was astonished! Why was I surprised by his healing, when my prayers and the prayers of a great many others had been for just that? The truth is, I've prayed for the recovery of plenty of comatose people who never regained consciousness before they died. In every case, I'm certain I told myself and others that the deceased did receive healing- not in this life, but in the resurrection life. I have to believe that, because our prayers for healing often aren't answered immediately or in the ways we'd prefer.

But what are we to make of it when God does answer our prayers, directly and immediately? When we're surprised by the unexpected, how will we respond? In many ways, the book of Acts is a study in the contrast between how people respond when God interrupts the ordinary with a supernatural sign. Just as in the Gospel accounts, not everyone was pleased when God chose to heal. Let's rejoin Peter and John as they are confronted by the Temple authorities in the wake of the healing of the lame man. I'm moving on to the beginning of Chapter 4, reading from the New Living Translation.

{Read Acts 4:1-12 (NLT)}.

3 Let's imagine that we were watching this healing story on BlueRay and we could freeze the frames and zoom in on the faces. What a variety of emotions we'd see over the course of only minutes! If we zoomed in on the lame man at the beginning of this story, he might have had a bored expression on his face, resigned to yet another day of sitting in one place, asking for coins to provide for his daily needs. He knew that giving alms was a time-honored expression of righteousness, so after years of begging in this way, he fully expected to experience that first coin dropping into his hands. He might have even smiled when Peter told him to look at him, certain that meant he'd receive money! I imagine that just as quickly as that smile appeared, it disappeared, hearing that there would be no silver or gold coins given by Peter and John. A waste of his time and his attention. And perhaps a little puzzlement over why Peter would ask to see his face and then not offer a coin.

And then it happened. Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!" That's when everything changed. He could have yielded to doubt and refused Peter's hand. He could have insisted on silver or gold. He was at least curious enough to take Peter's hand, when his look of curiosity changed to surprise and then unbridled joy as he went from sitting to walking to leaping and praising God.

How do you respond when God surprises you with answered prayer? Do you recognize it? Do you doubt it? Or do you act out your faith, leaping up with joy and shouting aloud God's praises, showing and telling others what God has done for you?

4 Let's shift our imaginary freeze-frame to the faces of Peter and John as they look into the face of the lame man. Following in the footsteps of their master, Jesus, I see a look of compassion on their faces, a desire to look into the lame man's eyes and acknowledge not

just his disability, but his personhood. Like Jesus, they're concerned for the man's eternal salvation, but they also see his present, earthly need. They know that Jesus can help him with both. I imagine smiles on their faces in gratitude for what God accomplishes in the name of Jesus, but not surprise at the outcome. There was no hedging, none of the qualifying statements we use today, like "God's timing is not our timing." We've become adept at offering those kinds of words when we expect our prayers to be at least unseen if not unanswered, as if we need to apologize for the absence of God's immediate response. Peter and John had no doubt on their faces, in their words, or in their actions. Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk," after which he simply reached out and helped him to stand.

How do you approach offering prayer for another person? Do you hedge your bets, either praying in a sufficiently vague way as to not be on the hook for an outcome, or apologizing ahead of time that God may well not respond in a way we can see? Peter and John acted out their faith by offering healing with faithful confidence and expectation, not at all surprised when God did the miraculous for the lame man.

5 And then there were the authority figures. One of the biggest burdens of being a pastor is that I'm constantly being reminded in the holy scriptures of how often the religious authorities were on the wrong side of what is true, holy, and just. In a way, the Temple authorities were like a Chicago mob, with a small number of families, Sadducees, in charge of managing the Temple, including the Temple police. Were they, like the crowd, "astonished" by the power of God? Did they leap with joy and give loud praises to God like the lame man? Did they, like Peter and John, confidently and faithfully identify the miracle as further evidence that the salvation of God ushered in by Jesus was continuing to arrive through the followers of Jesus? No, no, and no.

Instead, they were "disturbed" because they were afraid that these kinds of miracles would lead credence to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead! Which is, of course, exactly what happened. With Jesus, the debates over theological doctrine moved from the academic to the personal. And with the disciples of Jesus now performing miracles, it was becoming clear that crucifying Jesus didn't put a stop to this new and troubling sect.

The Sadducees, who didn't believe in a resurrection from the dead, saw their

theological position threatened, and with it, their base of power. Their reaction to the miracle seems, at first, to be incomprehensible, even to Peter, who incredulously asks them, “are we being questioned today because we’ve done a good deed for a crippled man?” But their resistance is plain to understand in the scriptures- they desperately wanted to stop anything or anyone who challenged their religious authority and political power.

How do you respond when God does something in your midst that disrupts your schedule, your perspective, your priorities, or even your power? Are you quick to adjust your life and your perspective so that you can follow the movement of God’s Spirit, or do you act out in harmful ways like the Sadducees, disturbed and determined to confine God’s actions in this world to your plans?

6 Our church staff have been praying for five of our church families each week in our Tuesday morning staff meetings. This past Tuesday, we received the following note from Sally Froehming after she received our letter inviting her to share any prayers with us:

God’s healing power has truly amazed me. The [doctor] said I may not be able to fully ever raise my arm, but gave me an “A+” when I showed him. My [Physical Therapist] daughter-in-law was amazed at the improvement week to week. I quickly went from walking only 10ft to over 1000ft (with a walker) – more amazement. They had said it was the worst possible break and then the late discover of the collar-bone didn’t help. BUT thanks to all those wonderful prayers – all is back to where it was before. The BUMC church has been a tremendous support. THANK YOU!

Sally is acting out the Gospel in sharing her testimony that God does answer prayer, and sometimes in dramatic and immediate ways. The question is, what will we do when it happens? What will we see in the still frame image of your face, captured in the moment of miracle? Will you be wearing a frown of disappointment because you didn’t get what you asked for? Will you be wearing a scowl of anger, frustrated by your lack of control? Will you be wearing a face of compassion, focused on what God is doing to bless another? Will you be wearing a smile of joy, eager to share your praise of God with others? I suppose there are as many possible ways for us to respond to God’s works in this world as there are people in it. Fortunately, there’s only one of those 7.6 billion people you need to concern yourself with today. How will you respond the next time God surprises you, maybe even today?



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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