

## Acting Out: Escape Velocity 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. The Holy Spirit allows us to receive God's forgiveness and gives us the gifts and the fuel we need to share the Good News of God's forgiveness with a hurting and lost world.

Each week I'm 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 watch for a sign that God was at work in your life or in the world around you, and then share that observation with someone else. Who is ready to share what they saw? And if you saw something but didn't share it, this is your big chance! {take handheld wireless mic and field some comments} Remember that we're not secret agents for Jesus, we're what? Sacred agents! And sacred agents proclaim the Gospel in deed, word, and even with the crazy pictures we're still taking out in the lobby.

**2** In the Early Word, I described the problem of inertia: an object at rest will remain at rest, that's true physically as well as spiritually for people. There's a second problem that's faced whenever we try to move beyond the familiar center of our world- escape velocity. NASA describes the problem as follows:

*Escape velocity is the speed at which an object must travel to break free of a planet or moon's gravitational force and enter orbit. A spacecraft leaving the surface of Earth, for example, needs to be going about ... 7 miles per second, or over ... 25,000 miles per hour, to enter orbit. The vehicle requires an enormous amount of fuel to break through Earth's gravitational pull. All that fuel adds significant weight to the spacecraft, and when an object is heavier, it takes more thrust to lift it. To create more thrust, you need more fuel... That cycle of speed, fuel and weight was a primary reason the Saturn V rocket that took the first astronauts to the Moon was so large.<sup>1</sup>*

In some respects, escape velocity was the biggest challenge to the early church as they set about fulfilling the mission Jesus gave them to "be [his] witnesses, telling people about

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nasa.gov/audience/foreducators/k-4/features/F\\_Escape\\_Velocity.html](https://www.nasa.gov/audience/foreducators/k-4/features/F_Escape_Velocity.html)

[him] everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>2</sup> Jerusalem was like a giant spiritual gravity well, the location of the Temple and therefore the center of the Jewish world. What could possibly accelerate the early church to a sufficient spiritual velocity to get them to leave Jerusalem? In a word, persecution.

In our first reading, we heard about the stoning of Stephen, an explosive act of persecution on the part of the Jewish Sanhedrin. We continue the story now in Chapter 8, where we see the force of persecution rocket some of the disciples, and with them, the Gospel, beyond Jerusalem and into the countryside of Judea and Samaria.

**{Read Acts 8:1b-8, 14-17 (NLT)}.**

**3** Let’s review Newton’s First Law of Motion as it relates to the early church. Newton said that things tend to stay the way they are, whether they’re just sitting there or moving along, unless something happens to change that. You can think of the early church as a soccer ball. Before the day of Pentecost, described so colorfully in Acts 2, the ball of the church was completely at rest, with the disciples just waiting around in the Upper Room and the Temple. You can think of God’s Holy Spirit as the foot that moved into the picture and gave the church its first big kick, setting Peter and John in motion with a whirlwind of miraculous signs and sermons and the adding of thousands of new believers. The problem is that an object in motion tends to continue with the same constant speed and direction unless some force acts to accelerate it. That initial Holy Spirit kick got the church moving within Jerusalem with signs and wonders and sermons, but there wasn’t enough missional force to get the Jerusalem-centric apostles to sufficient velocity to escape the orbit of the Temple.

**4** Escape velocity dictates that the bigger the planet, the faster a rocket has to go to escape a planet’s gravity well. The spiritual mass and radius of Jerusalem were enormous, so it took an enormous force to get the disciples moving. Did God orchestrate all this, causing Stephen to be stoned? I don’t think so, not any more than God caused Jesus to be crucified. God did, however, know what would happen and how to redeem that which was intended for great evil into an even greater good. It’s sad but often true that the pull of the familiar in our lives is so strong that it takes a cataclysmic outside force to get us to leave the

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:8, New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)

familiar behind. Think about the last time you made a change in your life, something that required you to try something new, go somewhere different, meet people you didn't know. What made you take a chance and try something new?

When people visit our church for the first time, there's often a precipitating event: A move, a new job or retirement, a significant illness, birth, or death in the family, a marriage or a divorce. Big life events often propel us into new places and new social circles. Otherwise, most of us are inclined to stay firmly within the gravity wells of our familiar routines. That's where we tend to feel competent, secure, and loved. It took the threat of arrest to get Philip to Samaria to share the Good News of God's forgiveness in Jesus. What is it going to take for you to reach escape velocity, sacrificing the comfortable and familiar for the sake of reaching new people?

**5** We don't stone people in this country for expressing a faith in Christ, although in many parts of the world being a Christian is still a dangerous path to take. If anything, persecution for us is more likely to take the form of mockery or, increasingly, disregard of our Jesus movement as being entirely irrelevant. When Stephen was stoned, it was because the Sanhedrin clearly understood that a church that proclaimed and demonstrated the risen Christ simply could not co-exist with the old Jewish order. What about today? Are we still demonstrating Christ? Are we even proclaiming Christ? As long as the world sees Christians as trapped in the gravity wells of their own local congregations, serving themselves rather than serving the world, the world will be content to ignore us and our message of God's forgiveness. None of us are likely to get stoned for our faith, but there are sacrifices we can make, individually and as a church, ways that we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit that might increase our missional velocity.

**6** How many of you have ever filled out a timecard at work, either electronically or with paper? Now how many of you have ever done an audit on your use of the 24 hours in each day and the more than 700 hours in each month? There was a time in my life when I would habitually sit down each morning with my cup of coffee and watch a morning news show. One Lenten season I decided to fast from television and discovered that I suddenly had 90 minutes free every morning in my weekday schedule! Think about all the ways you could use 90 minutes every day if you were willing to sacrifice some screen time to pray for

someone else or even visit someone who's lonely. We all have responsibilities that fill our calendars, but if you carefully account for how you use your time, I'm willing to bet you would be able to find time that could be put to better use. As John Wesley put it, "Never trifle away time." I'm not saying we don't need sabbath rest, just that our careless use of time can keep us from "leaving Jerusalem" with the Gospel.

**7** The same thing can be said of the way we spend our money. Have you noticed that your spending tends to increase in direct proportion to what you earn, while our giving generally doesn't? That's why all the money-management courses always insist on beginning with a basic inventory of all the money that comes in and all the money that goes out. Just as we can form a budget with our time, we need to form a budget for our finances. And yet most of us resist budgeting. Why? Because it holds us accountable for our use of God's resources, resources that we are stewards of for God's purpose of blessing all creation. Does that mean we can't have a nice home and a nice car? No, but it does mean that if we're going to escape the comfortable routines of our everyday lives for the sake of others, we'll need to challenge ourselves to give more proportionately to what we receive.

**8** I love serving as your pastor, and I so appreciate the warm fellowship, the high level of caring we express for one another, the way we care for and share our building and our resources. There's nothing wrong with loving each other as a church family and loving the way we gather in this place. That's a good thing. Sometimes, however, we need a little kick in the pants from the Holy Spirit to remember that there's a bigger world out there, filled with people we haven't met yet, people who are likely to bless us as much or more than we'll bless them. If you're like me, finding the resources to do one more thing seems impossible. And it will be impossible, until we're ready to let something go, lightening the loads on our calendars and wallets so that when the Holy Spirit does give us a little push, it's enough to allow us to escape the gravity well of the familiar and safe, discovering the freedom of stepping out with courage and conviction to risk more for the sake of Jesus.

Your challenge this week is to identify one behavior, activity, or attitude in your life that ties you down and prevents you from taking more risks for the sake of Jesus. Talk about that, pray about that, and then, when you feel the kick of the Holy Spirit, act on that!



# *Buffalo United Methodist Church*

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



**609 8<sup>th</sup> Street NW  
Buffalo, MN 55313  
763-682-3538**

**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**  
*pastorbill@buffaloumc.com*