

Acts

No, today is not Pentecost, even though that's what we just read about. That's May 19. We will celebrate Pentecost on its appropriate day. But we're spending the next several weeks on the book of Acts and the early church. And none of it makes a lot of sense if we don't ground it in the ascended Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' followers.

The full title of the book is usually written as the Acts of the Apostles. But many scholars have pointed out that it should really be the Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.

We'll be spending the next several weeks...and maybe into summer...looking at the early church. And we can't do that without also diving into what the Holy Spirit is all about.

Today's our starting point. So first, a definition. Apostle. Apostle literally means "one who is sent."

In the gospels, that meant primarily the 12 original disciples. In Acts, it's the 11 original plus Mathias, who was elected by a roll of the dice to replace Judas. Apparently rolling the dice was a perfectly acceptable way for the Spirit to act.

Paul became an apostle by virtue of his encounter with the risen Christ which comes a little later in the book. As time went on, other disciples were added to the Apostle ranks. Although our denomination tends to talk less about apostles in the present age, there are still clearly those who are sent out to proclaim the gospel. Being an apostle will later be listed as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And for the record, Paul mentioned several fellow apostles who were women.

Just as Jesus' incarnation was a pivotal moment in the world's history, the coming of the Holy Spirit to his followers was a pivotal moment for the church. The Holy Spirit gathers and enlightens the community of faith that came to be called the church.

And the task of that community of faith is to continue the work of Christ to bring salvation to the world. It does so through its witness to the kingdom of God, in both words and actions.

As part of that witness, the way they live is a model for life in the kingdom. This newly gathered church is the place where people are nurtured, physically and spiritually. It is a place where salvation can begin for those in need of it.

Let's flesh out this business of being saved. The last verse says day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Being saved has come to have a meaning in our time that it did not have in the early church. All too often for us, salvation has come to mean going to heaven when we die.

But Acts never says anything like that. Jesus never really did either. It's a pretty anemic view of salvation. But what does salvation mean then?

First, from what are they being saved? They, and all generations, need to be saved from a life of meaninglessness and futility. A life of oppression. A life of separation from God and others. A life of fear. A life that is not what God intended.

Being saved isn't just about what happens after death. It begins the moment believers are transformed by the gospel. It begins the moment they enter this new life modeled after the kingdom of God.

To be sure, it has an impact into eternity. Christ's resurrection is a victory over death. But that has a major impact on our whole lives. We don't have to wait until we die to experience salvation.

Salvation is the healing of all the predicaments that keep us from living as God intended – our sin and the sin of others; the illusion of separation from God; sickness and injury; and yes death.

Another important thing about the biblical understanding of salvation: it's not just individual – Jesus died to save the world - to heal communities and nations as well as individuals.

The vision of the early church we just read shows not just a collection of transformed individuals. It shows a transformed community.

In this community Christ's teaching is at the center. It's a community where meals are shared – probably ordinary meals as well as the Lord's supper.

It's a community where rich and poor are in real community as equals. It's a community where the needs of all are met – where the rich and poor share equally. No small number of people have read the description in verses 44 and 45 and said, why this is communism!

And in fact, Karl Marx essentially quoted it – from each according to his ability to each according to his need.

OK, don't worry. I'm not advocating communism. As ideal as this vision of community might sound, we have learned that as a system on a large scale, it's very problematic.

This description of the early Christian community probably didn't exist on any large scale. The rest of the New Testament would indicate not.

It's probably not meant as a blueprint for Christian community. But the ideas, if not the specific structure, do provide a model for Christian life...a model where the needs of all are met.

Perhaps most importantly, it's a demonstration of what the Spirit can do in and through people. When the Spirit acts, you are never the same. Old divisions fall away. The desire for all people to share in the blessings of the kingdom becomes deeply implanted.

And it makes us ask the questions - Are we being drawn into that way of living? What would that even look like today?

These are crucial questions for the church today. Somehow, that witness of the early church and their care for one another won them the goodwill of all the people. And that's what led to their rapidly rising numbers in the church in Jerusalem.

From this nurturing environment, the apostles were sent out to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We know from other historical documents as well as the Bible that the church did grow exponentially during its first few centuries. This model worked.

The apostolic mission spread through the Roman Empire to the point where over a few centuries, Christianity became the dominant religion in the Empire.

Now, that dominance will come with serious problems. The church will essentially become the Empire. That's never what was intended.

But for those first few centuries the church was forged in times of plenty and times of want.

It was forged in times where they had the good will of all the people and the times when they were persecuted.

It was forged in places where the Greek and Roman pantheon of gods still exerted their influence – it was forged sometimes over against those pagan practices, sometimes subverting them, and sometimes incorporating them.

All of that was the start of the church as we know it today.

We probably can't go back to what's sometimes called the Acts 2 church.

But what we can do, and what I hope to do over the next several weeks, is to really focus on the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the early church. And to tease out what that looks like for us today.

The work of the Holy Spirit is still the hope of the church and the world. But the church has too often had a very narrow view of that work.

Author Phyllis Tickle famously wrote about the great emergence. She said that every 500 years or so the church goes through a massive upheaval. A garage sale she called it. We're probably in the middle of one right now – we were due.

Many have said this new age is the age of the Spirit. The thing is, the Spirit pushes people way, way out of their comfort zone.

The Spirit leads people to do surprising new things in surprising places. As Jesus said, the wind of the Spirit blows where it will.

We can fear that. Or we can trust...we can trust that the Spirit is leading to salvation in the here and now, just as in the first Century. And we can find ways to spread our wings and sail on the wind of the Spirit.