

“What Should We Do?”

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Lesson from Acts – Acts 2 14a, 36-41

In this Easter Season the reading from Acts continues to skip ahead to the story of Pentecost Day – the followers of the Risen Christ are blessed with the Holy Spirit – it is the birth of the church. Last week we heard Peter speak to the crowds giving a summary of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus...and that passage continues today with the conclusion of what Peter says, and the response of the crowd to what they have heard....

I am packed and I am ready to go! – right after this worship service I am heading out on vacation with Anna and Bethany – our suitcases are in the car – and our road trip snacks are stocked in abundance. I was thinking this could be a very brief sermon and then I could have Anna get the car running during the final hymn – pull up in front of the church, and I could just join the processional and keep going right out the doors! – actually, I’ll be going out down there, so she can pull the car up to the Gathering Area doors! Obviously I am looking forward to a week off – I like vacation –it’s a break from what I DO – if someone asks me “what do you do?”, I answer by saying ‘I’m a minister’ – a Pastor at Hope Church. It is one of the primary ways we identify one another in this world – what you do is central to your identity. For me a vacation is a chance for a different kind of doing – like driving to New York with 4 teenage girls – we’re picking up my 2 nieces – it sounds fun to me! You know what you do – and you know about vacations; and then there’s some people when they take a vacation, they take a road trip of a different sort than I am – there’s a bunch of people from Hope Church heading to South Carolina for Spring Break to Water Missions International. For vacation – they go to work!...many of you know about that sort of thing too.

And I just want to bring up that whole mix of how it is that we think about and talk about our lives in terms of what we do – all that we share in it and the particular way that settles in you. People who have worked many years at what they do; people beginning and figuring out what to do; people unable to find work to do or unhappy in what they do; people who stay home and care for children and are slapped with, ‘oh, you don’t do anything?’; young people figuring out what to do; seniors who are retired; people who recreate and volunteer and serve; people who isolate themselves by what they do; people who have disabilities and different abilities and are characterized as unable to do much; people going through seasons of sickness and suffering and are cut off from an identity of doing that was so central to who that person is. All the ways we see ourselves and others in terms of what we do... And all this may sound like some sort of riff or reflection on work and vocation and even vacation – but it’s really not that so much. It’s really just a way to get us to realize how much, how deeply, we identify ourselves and our value and our lives not as human beings, but as human doings – we are what we do...

And what got me thinking about all that was the question that echoes from the crowd in the book of Acts today: “what should we do?” It’s a very human question; and by that I mean an instinctive sort of human response – because it is a response – to the story, the sermon, Peter has shared. The story of who Jesus is – how he lived and died and rose. And when the people hear it – their response is “what should we do?” And I think: ‘of course that is their response – a human response – our response’. What has been heard by the crowd is that there is something that has gone wrong – something that needs to be fixed: who Jesus was had not been recognized; his death has been exposed as unjust; his resurrection gives a sense of wonder and power and mystery. So, the response is: ‘what should we do?’ – and I say it is a human question – a question of then and of now and of always – because it gets at something very fundamental to who we are as human beings – which is, that we look at life, at ourselves, as human doings.... And that is something that comes out of both our fears and our capacities; both our insecurity and our strength. There is a kind of fear and insecurity in the crowd after hearing this story of Jesus that comes from guilt and obligation: ‘what must we do to be OK with this God? – to fix things with this Jesus who lives and dies and rises?’ – ‘clearly this God is powerful – how must we appease this God?’ And so with that comes this sense of capacity and strength as well: ‘we can do it! whatever it takes to make things better – we’ll do it. Tell us how to fix it and we’ll get it done – that’s what we do.’ It is a basic and eternal question of how we are right with God – spoken as much in us as it was that day: “what do we do?”

And that’s what makes Peter’s response to their response – Peter’s answer to that question – so remarkable. Because what has been rumbling around in me this week as I’ve listened to Peter’s answer is that what Peter says is actually all about what God has done – what God is doing – and even more about who God is; I think Peter’s answer is basically this: ‘there’s nothing you can do – it’s about what God does.’ Because here’s what Peter’s answer is: ‘repent...be baptized...receive the Holy Spirit’ – 3 things – 3 things which are all about God.

The first is repent – repent is a wonderful word that literally means turning – turning from one direction to another – in this case, turning toward God. Which may actually sound a lot like something for us to do, right? – but it’s really not like that at the heart of it – because at the core

repenting is a response to God's grace, it is a turning to God that comes from God. I think the kind of turning that repentance is, is like a flower – flowers which we can finally start to see again outside here as Spring is slowly blossoming. If you would watch a flower on a stem closely on a sunny day, you would see that it slowly follows the sun, turning always toward its light – sunflowers are the best at it, I think. And that's what repenting is like – it is within us, it is within the human heart to respond to God's grace – to hear the story of God's love and turn toward it. It is a mysterious thing how that happens, and doesn't happen – how the light of God comes through, and does not – it is not simple. But I know that when Peter says repent, he is talking to people who have a sense of God's light pulling them toward God's ways – it is the reality of the story of Jesus turning us again and again to the light of God's grace.

Repent...and be baptized – that's the 2<sup>nd</sup> thing. Does that sound like something we do? – nope: what is baptism? – it is God's mark, God's claim on us; it is our joining in Christ's death and resurrection, receiving the new life and renewal only God can give; it is being joined to the body of Christ, the Church, which means we belong to a community, belong to God. Baptism is the opposite of life as a human doing – it is the sign and seal that it is what God has done in Jesus Christ that identifies us – gives us our identity – as a beloved child of God. 'Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven' – it is in fact much of our own doing, our sin, that needs the cleansing – the new life – that baptism marks. And God knows, Peter could have said more – as God's grace in baptism bathes in its embrace all that sin is...sin we do, and done to us – sin of the person and the community, injustice done and received – brokenness in need of healing and hope. Baptism unites us to the grace of God at work in all that sin would keep hold of.

Repent – and be baptized...and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit – that's the 3<sup>rd</sup> thing. And that is obviously not something we do. God's gift to us – the Holy Spirit – God's living presence, within and around us: the spiritual gifts each one is given to build up the body of Christ and serve this world in God's grace – grace is a word that comes from the same root as Spirit; and the fruits of the Spirit which shape who we are to reflect the goodness and wholeness of God. Peter's answer leaves no doubt that the focus is on what God is doing – God's Spirit at work in the world.

“What should we do?” - turn to what God is doing – turn to who God is. Which really takes away the control that us human beings like to think we have - and reveals the truth that we depend on God – all our doing is not the key – it is the doing, the story, the person of God in Jesus Christ and all we receive from that.

Except...then...our doing isn't important? - all our doing of work and play and relationship and service?...just sit back and let God do it all? That doesn't seem right... Well, that got me thinking about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. - who perhaps many of you have had in mind this week as well, as events in our nation have marked 40 years since the tragedy of MLK's assassination. And who more could we lift up as an example for all that he DID? – his DOING was so important, in the struggle against racism, and injustice, and intolerance – and all the DOING he called so many other people to take part in. But part of what I find to be so profound about the life and message of MLK is that in the midst of all of his doing and his calls to action, that he knew it was the human heart that was the most important – the human heart turned from God – or turned to God; the human heart broken by sin or cleansed by forgiveness; the human heart empty or gifted by the Holy Spirit... Martin Luther King Jr might point us to a theme that is present throughout the scriptures we heard today about the heart: ‘the crowds were stirred in their hearts’ Acts says; ‘love one another deeply from the heart’, we hear from Peter himself in the letter to the church; ‘were not our hearts burning within us?’ say the disciples of the Emmaus story.

Of course all our doing is important – it was for the early church, and ever since, to be faithful to God – to serve others: what we do shapes each of us and this world. But where all that doing comes from is the heart – and at the heart of it is what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ; only a heart transformed makes for the doing of transformed lives and world. ‘What should we do?’ – the repenting that is a heart turned to the light of God our Creator; hearts claimed in baptism by our God Jesus Christ in baptism; hearts gifted by our God the Holy Spirit. It is always the same to sustain us in all our doing – all our being: to turn in faith to what God has done for us – God's grace and peace in Jesus Christ that the hearts of this world need and seek. AMEN.