

A Word About the Words

This Fall, we have explored nine of the most impactful books of our canonized scripture. In their own way, each of these works explore those truths that are beyond human reckoning. Something so big, and so complex not only birthed a universe(s) into existence, but also loves all its components, right down to the cellular level, with the care and attention of a parent. And this force, or energy, or spirit, or umph does miraculous things: healings that we can't explain; physics that don't make sense; resurrections, and reclamations, and redemptions that seem impossible.

I would argue that many of these truths (and I will leave it to you as to how you choose to define truth(s)), are easier for us to process, because they are sometimes so audacious that the only explanation is they must be true.

But then we get to *The Acts of the Apostles*. And yes, we do have supernatural miracles in this text, too. But the biggest miracle, well...it isn't really a miracle. A group of believers lived with glad and generous hearts. Their joy, and their generosity prompted them to respond to human need. For one fleeting moment, people shared what they had, for all who had need. Gone was poverty. Gone was hunger. Gone was alienation.

We have embarked on a journey to discover the texts that inform our faith, some housed within a canon, some within our less formal, but no less sacred extended canon. As you travel this journey, by all means, search for the historical Jesus; observe in the courtroom as Darrow and Jennings Bryan debate the merits of the creation narrative; seek every avenue at your disposal to understand the patterns of human behavior; do whatever is necessary to claim (or reclaim!) our sacred texts in ways that make them relevant and meaningful for your life in the present. Such pursuits are the good, noble, and sacred work of understanding the divine source that fills us. But these pursuits are only half the work. The search for the source must

be accompanied also by the search for what that source empowers in each of us.

Acts tells us that God has made in each of us glad and generous hearts. And *Acts* tells us that our glad and generous hearts can respond to human need in ways that make God's presence known in the world. Good friends, as you engage *Acts*, or any sacred text, canonized or contemporary, may your lives, indeed your very existence, be affirmed, and may your minds and hearts be inspired to share your gifts with the world. After all, this is no longer the story of some distant, far-off ministry in First Century Palestine. This is the story of us. This is the Gospel of Sardis. May our acts of joy and generosity make it one worth sharing!

Homily:

I mentioned to you earlier the importance of both understanding the source who has created us AND understanding what it is that source empowers us to be and do. What do we know about God? And what does our knowledge of God tell us about ourselves, and specifically, the gifts God has given us?

It's atypical for us humans to love both/and statements. We tend to prioritize. And we tend to assign hierarchies. Faith must come before works, unless of course, you think works must come before faith. How else will you demonstrate your faithfulness? With Busy-ness, of course! Yes, but how could one be good at their busy-ness without having the faith that allowed them to do their business well?

The author of *Luke/Acts* does a masterful job in illustrating this tension. In the story of Mary and Martha, one sister sits at Jesus' feet, and one sister prepares meal and home. In today's text, there's growing interest in the new congregation. So much so, that the Twelve only have bandwidth for spiritual matters. A set of seven deacons are appointed to care for widows, and ensure that meals are served to the whole community.

The author of *Luke/Acts* includes a verse in each of these two texts that provokes the tension of using our spiritual and physical gifts in the service of others.

In our first story, Martha is the worker bee. Jesus says to her:

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:42).

Oh no he didn’t!

In the second story, we also get a gasp from the audience. Burdened by bandwidth, and maybe even an over-heightened sense of importance, the Twelve say to the congregation: “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.” (Acts 6:2).

Oh no they didn’t!

He said it. And they said it. But I think there’s a good reason why our author has Jesus and the disciples speak words that seem to relegate physical acts of service to a secondary status. I believe Luke’s author wants us to linger, and ponder, and even be uncomfortable with our desire to have these two kinds of service compete with one another. When we hear a description of characters performing acts of service in these texts, we are immediately reminded of how Jesus served. He made space for people to hear and receive the good news of God’s presence, while also using the gifts at his disposal to be of service to others.

In the first story, Jesus isn’t so much telling Martha that her work is invalid or less important, so much as he’s affirming Mary’s work. It’s not one or the other. Martha has prepared a place for presence to happen, and Mary has offered presence in that space. Mary has also carved out space to hear a

good word, and for that, she is commended. Martha is so distracted by her desire to serve, that she is unable to make herself present in the present. But she will not always be distracted. In John's gospel, it is Martha who is the first to offer Jesus a warm embrace – the ministry of presence – after the death of Lazarus. And it is Martha who listens for a good word.

In the second story, we have an urge to tune out after verse two. Great, the Twelve are going on about their business, and we'll just insert some warm bodies to wait tables. Don't tune out! These seven are much more than warm bodies – they are people of good standing, full of spirit and wisdom. They will take on their appointed tasks with rigor, and determination, and devotion, and compassion. The congregation will lay hands on them, setting them apart for service. The story illustrates the importance of all kinds of service. The Twelve are preparing people to hear about God's presence, and indeed God's good news in the world. The Seven, and indeed, all of who follow them, are serving in a way that allows the community to actually experience God's presence, and to live out God's good news. Spiritual and physical service cannot and do not exist without the other.

This is a timely text for Reign of Christ Sunday. Jesus claims to act with the power and authority of God. And how does he act? He offers spiritual gifts – he creates spaces for people to become aware of God's presence. Jesus also offers physical gifts – he inhabits spaces with neighbors, and serves them in ways where they, too, can experience God's presence. This kind of service, and indeed this kind of power, stand in stark contrast to those rulers who serve only their own interests. So too does the egalitarian nature of Christian service – service in all forms and performed by all kinds of people, is necessary and valid for community. Jesus serves, and we, too, serve.

Leaders in our faith communities are often set apart for various forms of spiritual and physical service. Note that they/we are set apart, not set above, nor set away.

Acts
Bob Stillerman
Reign of Christ Sunday, 11/20/2022
Acts 7:1-6



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

As we prepare for the coming Advent season, some of us will use our gifts to tell others of how God comes gently, but profoundly into the world. Some of us will do the work of welcome: we'll make room in the inn; we'll offer a drink from the well; we'll stop on the Jericho Road; we'll be sure everyone's plate is served. Some of us will just say, "hello." Some of us will offer a quiet, but sturdy presence. Whatever the case, we'll all join together, at the same table, encircled by the authentic power of the One who reminds us, "We are enough."

It seems to me also, that our world can once more be enough, if we choose to be led by a spirit of service. May the leaders of this world embrace and be infused by such a spirit. Amen.