



*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dear Church Family,

We will soon be entering into a series on the Book of Acts. I will be leading a narrative study of the book while Stuart will be preaching on themes and topics that appear within the story. This past Sunday was an introduction to the concept of a narrative study of Scripture. From the beginning of Acts we realize that Acts is the second part of one work written by the author of the gospel of Luke. In a narrative study, we will be paying special attention to how Luke tells the story of the events that he is writing about. So our focus is more on the story than the individual events and teachings, and how that story is meant to affect us as readers. But first we need to consider the purpose and value of story when it comes to conveying truth.

Ancient and non-Western cultures have relied primarily on stories to transmit important truths and meanings. Their scholars are storytellers. We, however, are in a cultural heritage that has moved away from story. Stories are appropriate for children, but adult truth is conveyed and gained through propositional statements that can be analyzed and verified through empirical evidence. We are interested in truth that we use to help us shape the world around us. Knowledge is power. We seek truth that is knowledge that we can then apply to our lives. In the area of discipleship, this means that we want to know how we are supposed to think and act as disciples. So what we really would like from Scripture is an encyclopedia where we can look up certain topics and get the information we need on how we are to live.

But the Scripture we have is nothing like that. It has the truth that we need to mature as disciples. (1 Tim 3:16). But the format is frankly frustrating if you are looking for an encyclopedia of needed information. Most of it is in the form of stories and even what isn't, like the NT letters or OT prophets, is embedded in historical situations that must be accounted for to understand what might be right or true for your own life or situation. Stories and letters in historical situations require a great deal of interpretation. This makes many people nervous because they fear that they and others will get it wrong. We would prefer to have clear propositional statements. This is understandable, especially if you are concerned about orthodoxy and wrong understandings gaining attention. But we have to face the fact that God has given a Scripture that is full of story, so we have to assume that this Scripture serves His purposes better than the Scripture we may think He should have given us.

What then is the value and function of story when it comes to God's purposes? Michale Gabriel recounts the following scene: "A teacher was asked by his frustrated students one day, "Master, we ask to hear the truth and all you tell us are stories." The Master smiled and replied, "The shortest distance between a person and the truth is a story." We might object, like the frustrated students, that the shortest distance between a person and the truth is not a story. Stories require interpretation to get the meaning. Surely the shorter path is a clear propositional statement of the truth that can be immediately grasped. Ah... but where has that truth traveled? Hasn't it only gone to the head in that form? Has it gone to the heart? Does the person really believe that truth? Have you ever heard the saying, "The longest distance in the world is from the head to the heart"? It takes more than a clear propositional statement to travel that distance. Isn't the common complaint about Christians, and by Christians, that we have all this head knowledge but our lives so often reveal that we do not really believe those truths? A truth statement will engage our minds while a good story will engage our minds and our hearts. Proponents of narrative study

note that it is the stories that we believe that will influence our behavior, not what we mentally assent to. So one advantage of stories is that they are important vehicles of truth. They get truth into us more effectively than propositional statements.

But as vehicles for truth, stories still present a problem if we are seeking clarity and certainty. Many of the stories of Scripture are not clear on how we are to understand the different features or aspects of the story. If you do good Bible study, making observations and asking questions of the text, the answers to those questions are often not obvious. Why does God have it this way? An answer can be found in the idea that we are being shaped in important ways by the process of us interacting with a story and needing to figure out meaning and significance rather than having it given to us. Something is going on inside of us in this process that is shaping us into being the kind of people that God wants us to be. Story is not just a vehicle for truth, it is a means of our interacting with the truth that changes us and the way we operate. (I referenced the movie *Karate Kid* to explain this and also looked at the example of the Good Samaritan story. Listen to the message for those examples.)

Joel Green writes, “We [are to] attend to the invitation of the text, which inducts us into its world, so that biblical story shapes our lives profoundly and decisively, personally and collectively...with all this means in the transformation of our allegiances and commitments, realizing that this transformation will manifest itself in behaviors and practices appropriate to our social worlds.” Transformation is about change and this is change at a deep level. I can be told what my allegiances and commitments should be, but that does not mean I am able to have them or act from them. As we read Acts, there are important truths for us to learn and apply in our lives. There is also a process of reading or interpretation as we interact with the story. That process shapes us to be the people of God.

It is appropriate, especially in light of the story of Acts, to think about the Holy Spirit when we consider how we become witnesses to Christ, people who are able to live for God and His purposes. We, like they, need to receive power to be his witnesses. This is not just the power to do signs and wonders, but to be the kind of people who witness to the reality of Christ in our lives. Along with the Spirit’s power, we need the Word as well. The Church has tended to emphasize the Word or the Spirit, but we need both of them operating in our lives with their truth and shaping power. And we need the Holy Spirit as we engage in the shaping process of making sense of the story and stories of Scripture. We rely on His help in our interpretation and meaning making.

If we have read Luke, we bring a lot of themes and questions into our reading of Acts. One theme I highlighted at the end of the message was the importance of faith, especially when God is acting in ways that we do not understand. In the parable of the soils, it is the persevering faith that holds fast to the word with patience that bears fruit. And we have seen the disciples in Luke more often display characteristics of the soils that does not bear fruit. In fact, it is minor characters in Luke that display the kind of insight and faith that Jesus’ praises (*Your faith has made you well.*) All of these characters would have been perceived as spiritually disqualified... gentiles, known great sinners and long term diseases that rendered them unclean. Yet they are the models of faith. And we do not see where or how they could have arrived at this strong faith or insight. One way this should affect us is when we feel weak in our faith. The same God who is able to give such faith to characters that have no good reason to have it and plenty of reasons not to have it, is able to strengthen our faith. In most of these cases, they have far less reason to have this faith than we do. So ask the Lord and trust Him to help you hold fast to your faith with patience in whatever circumstances you are facing.

Pastorally Yours,

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