



Acts Of The Holy Spirit
Sermon by Pastor Sarah Rohde
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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As we've journeyed through the book of Acts this summer, one of the things I've appreciated most is the deep-dive that it gives us into the workings of the Holy Spirit. Acts begins with the Spirit's arrival, but that's just the first course; the rest of the book tells us the story of what the Spirit of God does with the earliest followers, and with those of us still trying to follow Jesus today. In fact, I've heard many people refer to this book as "the Acts of the Holy Spirit" rather than "the Acts of the Apostles." Because let's be real – the only reason the apostles have any courage and any clarity about what to do with this love that's inside of them is because the Holy Spirit is alive and moving among them and pushing them to do things they otherwise wouldn't do.

So far we've seen what the Holy Spirit has done with the early church close to home. Everything we've seen so far in this book has taken place in or near Jerusalem, which was the epicenter of religious life. The Spirit is doing new things among them, but, so far, it's all happened in Jerusalem, in the very place where they would expect God to show up.

But as we've seen over the last few weeks, things are starting to get a little tense in Jerusalem. The religious authorities are feeling threatened by these fringe preachers who are somehow drawing thousands to the way of Jesus. They tried to put Peter and John in jail – more than once - and to release them on terms of silence, but the apostles refuse to keep their mouths shut when it comes

to speaking of the power of God. This tension eventually leads to violence; the apostles are flogged, the preacher, Stephen, is stoned, so Jerusalem is not exactly the place they want to be.

After Stephen is killed, the church feels like it has no option but to flee for its own survival. Many of them scatter about, some to the countryside of Judea and some to Samaria.

Now, Samaria was not exactly the place they wanted to be, either. The tension between Jews in Jerusalem and Jews in Samaria goes back thousands of years, and so the internalized narrative that was passed down through the generations was that Samaria is over there, it's off-limits, a place you steer clear from at all costs. It's the place on the other side of the tracks. It's the neighborhood you shouldn't drive through at night. It's the group you'll do anything to not be associated with. That kind of place...

But when you're desperate, when your survival is at stake, you go to places you otherwise wouldn't go. And what the apostles will come to learn through this is a lesson the people of God have been learning ever since – the places we try so hard to run away from are often the places that save us, that put us in touch with love and its reach, or that give us an insight into God or human life that changes us, and moves us to live in a different way.

Once the apostles arrived in God-forsaken Samaria, they quickly realize it's not God-forsaken after all. The Spirit is already there, already at work, and the Spirit invites them to stay for awhile so that they can get a glimpse, too. For starters, the Samaritans seem to be okay with their enemies showing up – they welcome these folks from Jerusalem, and that's no small act considering their fraught history. While in Samaria, the Spirit calls Philip to preach, to tell the Samaritans,

the very people he wanted to write off, how much God loves them, and the Samaritans actually listen to him and want to hear more. The Spirit also works through an encounter with Simon, a magician, as he comes to discover that there's something more powerful and more amazing than his magic.

The movement of the Spirit here is rather indisputable; here in the margins, chasms are breaking down, enemies are opened to the possibility that there might be healing and a new way to tell the story, people who weren't supposed to have anything to do with each other are discovering a need for each other; at the heart of it, they're all experiencing what love can really do amongst broken people. This is the kind of thing that happens in the margins. And the margins are where the Spirit of God consistently calls God's people to go.

Now, when we talk about margins, when we think about the Samarias of our own lives, we may think of all kinds of different places, but what margins tend to have in common is that they make us uncomfortable. They're the places in this world that we judge and want nothing to do with, they're places of unfamiliarity, where we might feel like the outsider, unsure what to say or how to behave, they're places of wilderness where we're vulnerable or out of control or incapable of making things better. We find ourselves in the margins when we're around people who don't speak our language, we find ourselves in the margins when we go to an impoverished neighborhood and our surroundings instinctively make us feel on guard, we enter the margins when we enter a hospital room to visit the dying, and are scrambling to find words to say; we enter the margins when we reach out to a relative whose political perspectives are different than our own, with the hope that we might just be able to have a civil conversation.

These are the margins, the Samarias of our lives, the places we might rather run away from, and yet the places God calls us to go.

The church has been going to the margins ever since, but what has changed over time, is the way we think about how we go to the margins, or why we go there. For a long time, the church thought about mission work in the margins as pretty one-directional. The church was called by God to go to these run-down places because the church had something they needed, whether that was money or medical supplies or food or the stories of Jesus – we went to supply for others what they couldn't supply for themselves. Now these acts of care and generosity are significant, and the church continues to be called to do this good work in the world. But where we've needed to step back and be critical of this model is in the way it sets up a dichotomy between giver and receiver. This model of mission keeps us rather stuck in those roles.

But what we see here in Acts is precisely what the church has sought to recover in the last century – which is that we go to the margins to discover mutuality in our serving. The margins are this holy space where we not only fulfill the needs of others, but where we also discover needs we didn't even know we had.

The apostles went to Samaria to deliver the good news – that was the gift they brought to the margins. But they also went to Samaria because they were scared and looking for a place of refuge – that was the need they brought to the margins. And in that place the Samaritans, their enemies, had something to offer them, and something to receive from them.

This is why we're called to the margins. God does something remarkable in these places, these places where none of us are fully comfortable. We discover in

strangers a common humanity. We also discover differences that are real and worth honoring, that remind us our experience of the world is but one experience. In the margins, we're able to see more clearly through the labels and categories that society puts us into, and realize that none of them tells the full truth of who we are. And maybe most importantly, we discover that we're all a little hungry, and that we all have something we can bring to the table.

Father Greg Boyle is a Catholic priest who's worked with gang members in Los Angeles for over 30 years. He's the founder of Homeboy Industries, which employs former gang members in a variety of businesses – from screen printing to a bakery to running a farmers market. Even though there's no doubt that he's been a profound leader in guiding gang members toward a renewed and healthier life, he's very quick to emphasize that his ministry is not about helping, but about finding kinship. He tells story after story in his memoir, *Tattoos on the heart*, about these encounters with gang members where he hears their story and connects with it, even though at the start one would think they share nothing in common. Father Boyle says that he thinks “the measure of our compassion lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them.” He says that movement toward kinship means movement toward awe, and movement away from judgment. One of my favorite quotations of his is this: “How can we seek a compassion that can stand in awe at what some people have to carry, rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it?”

This is the invitation of the margins. It's an invitation toward mutuality, toward kinship with those who are not like us at all. God does such good and necessary work in the margins – may we be filled with the courage to go there, to linger there, so that we can experience the giving and receiving that happens there!

Thanks be to God.

Amen!