

New Testament lesson – Acts 1:1-14

Gospel lesson – John 13:31-35

One Secret, One Promise, and Two Commandments

I have a rather unpleasant memory associated with our lesson from the book of Acts. It happened during my senior year of college. During that year I was taking the second year of German, to meet the foreign language requirement for my liberal arts and sciences degree. I was also taking Greek to help me prepare me for seminary and also because I wanted to be able to read the NT in its original language. I had actually signed up for the Greek class before I decided to go to seminary.

I suppose my schedule was what led to this unpleasant memory. My Greek class was immediately after my German class. There were only ten minutes between one and the other.

I went to Greek class one day and we were having a translation quiz. It was partly over the passage we read today. I had no trouble understanding the Greek. I knew the words, knew the verb tenses and noun cases and so on. My problem was that I was still thinking in German syntax when I wrote the translation. The sentence “Why stand you there, men of Galilee?” would work fine in German. But in English it was not a good translation. My mind has an unfortunate ability to remember stupid mistakes like that for a long time. It’s a little over 50 years now.

This is a very important incident in Scripture. That is, the story is important, not my translation mistake. This is the very last time Jesus was physically present with his disciples. So it would seem reasonable to think that what he said on this occasion might be extremely important. I would not go so far as to say it’s more important than anything else he ever said. But if you were leaving some people behind to carry on your work, wouldn’t your last words be some important instructions? I think mine would.

It seems the apostles had the feeling that something great was about to happen, but it also seems they were mistaken about the nature of it. They had believed Jesus to be the promised Messiah until he was crucified. That was only six

weeks before this. When it happened, they were crushed, defeated, disillusioned. They were frightened.

Then came the news from a couple of the women that Jesus was *not* dead; he had been raised from the dead. Everything was turned upside down.

Jesus spent several weeks with them. We don’t hear much about what he did during that time. But he appeared to them “with many proofs,” and he spoke “of the kingdom of God.” But what did he say about it? We don’t know. Perhaps he simply reinforced the things he had been teaching during his ministry.

But somehow, the disciples had the impression, or at least the hope, that he was about to restore the kingdom of Israel as the kingdom of God, according to many promises in the OT. But Jesus told them the times and seasons which God fixed were a secret.

People don’t like to hear that. It’s rather annoying to be told someone has a secret but they can’t let you in on it. Have you ever told a child that you are keeping something secret? They will pester you until you tell them. Of course, in this case, Jesus had told them earlier that even he did not know this particular secret.

So on this particular point, the disciples are really left completely in the dark. And so are we. And that may be more significant than we realize.

When it became apparent recently that Iran was on the edge of building one or more nuclear weapons, I thought, well, if they build it, they will use it on Israel and we may well see Armageddon happen. And it had an effect on me that I don’t think I realized at the time.

It hindered my willingness to pray for peace in the Middle East, despite the fact that Scripture specifically tells us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Now that the Iranians have had that particular program stopped, I find it easier to pray for peace in that area, including Jerusalem.

But my point is this: regardless of how things look, regardless how much it appears that the end times are upon us, we must always remember that those times and seasons are in God's hands and we won't know exactly when they will be. Our tasks as Christians remain the same. I'll come to that in a moment.

Instead of worrying about things that are not your business, Jesus more or less told them, pay attention to the things that *are* your business. And first, stay put here in Jerusalem, and wait for the promise I told you about.

At the first mention of that promise in our lesson, we are not told much about it. But just before he leaves Jesus gives a bit more information about it. It is a promise for them to receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. He did not tell them when it would happen or how. But they trusted his assurance that it would happen.

As it turned out, that power came upon them on the day of Pentecost. That is next week, and you should hear more about it then.

However, Jesus gave them a hint about it beforehand. In fact, he gave them a commandment about what the power was for. He told them "You *will*" or "you *shall* be my witnesses." They would be witnesses for him first in Jerusalem, then in the surrounding predominantly Jewish territory of Judea, then in the territory of the more-or-less hated Samaritans, and then to the end of the earth.

There are two ways to understand what is meant by "the end of the earth" here. The word used there in Greek as in English, can either mean to the farthest parts of the world, or it could mean until the time when the world ends. Either way, Jesus gave the Church its marching orders. You – that is, *we* – will be the witnesses for Jesus in this world. We will be his witnesses around where we live and in places where we don't live. We will be his witnesses to the people like us, to people we like, and to people who are not like us, even if we don't like them, even if we despise them and consider them unworthy of God's love,

like Jews thought of Samaritans. We are to be witnesses for Jesus until the world ends. There's no retirement plan; kind of like farming.

What does it mean to be a witness? The word originally implied a legal use, just like the witness in a court of law. Every day in every place in the world, God and the gospel of Jesus Christ are on trial. People are wondering all manner of things. "Is God real? Does God love me? Does he care about what's happening to me? Does he care about what is going on in the world? Why am I here? Does life have any meaning? What happens after we die?"

Sometimes people are aware of these questions, and sometimes they are not. But our witness can either help them find answers to the questions or we might just bring the question into their consciousness. Either way, that is the reason God gives us the Holy Spirit. He doesn't give us the Holy Spirit to make us strong enough to work more hours of the day. He doesn't give us the Holy Spirit so we know how to make more money or pass a test. The Holy Spirit helps us to pray at times, as Paul says in Romans 8, but even that is not the *primary* reason God gives us the Holy Spirit. The primary reason is to be a witness for Jesus in this world, a witness to a world that is skeptical and in deep, deep need of the gospel.

That is one of the commandments given in today's lessons. The other is found in the gospel lesson and it is related to this one in Acts.

Our gospel lesson is taken from the words of Jesus spoken at the last supper. Like the passage in Acts, we can think of this as parting instructions, since Jesus was about to be betrayed, taken away, tried in a kangaroo trial, wrongly convicted, tortured, and painfully executed in public. Christians have always considered his words at this time to be very significant. All of his words are significant, of course. But his words at the Last Supper seem to carry a bit more weight for many people.

In our lesson, he claims to be giving them a new commandment. I think we could also look at it and think of it as an old commandment with a

fresh twist to it. On another occasion or two he pointed out the importance of the OT commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. This new commandment to his closest disciples to love one another as he had loved them is a variation on that prior commandment. But he kicks it up a notch.

If you seek to love your neighbor as yourself, that is a noble goal. You might be able to do that. It would be difficult, but it might be achievable.

But loving one another as Jesus loved the disciples? At this point in time, that was already a difficult commandment. But within 24 hours it was going to reach a level no one expected: Love each other to the point of being willing to die for each other. That's what this commandment would mean by sundown the next day.

I suppose if we wanted to act like lawyers we could say that technically, up to this point in time, he had not given his life for them, so that was not really the standard yet. But on the other hand, he *had* said that if anyone wanted to follow him they would have to take up their cross and follow. So splitting legal hairs in this way should be out of bounds.

This commandment comes with a predicted result if it is properly obeyed. If we love each other as Jesus loved us, people will know that we are his disciples. That's what he said. How are we doing with that?

I don't think it's always clear to the world that we are disciples of Jesus based on how well we love one another. We could look at 2000 years of church history, filled with disagreements, hateful rhetoric, church schisms, and even wars between Christian groups. It's better than it used to be, but there is still more than a trace of enmity between some Christian groups or denominations. At the very least, there is quite often a lack of cooperation, agreement, or even recognition. Baptism and communion spring to my mind when I think of barriers between various churches.

But we don't have to look at problems between denominations. Just consider the sort of

fighting that goes on *within* denominations. Baptists are not the only ones that do this, but they sort of have a reputation for infighting and splitting.

There is a story about a very wealthy Baptist man who had a fancy, well-equipped sailboat that he took on a long ocean voyage. Despite the advanced equipment, a storm that came up blew him off course and capsized his boat on the reef of a small island. He was stranded there for several months.

One day he saw a ship in the distance, so he built a large fire as a signal. A smaller boat came and rescued him. The rescuers noticed the man had built three buildings. They asked him what the buildings were for. He said, "Well that's my house, and that's my church."

"They asked, 'Well, what's the third building?'"

He smirked and said, "That's where I *used* to go to church."

But really, we don't even have to go to the denominational level before we find a failure to love one another as we ought to love. How are we doing here at Bethany? Do we love one another *as Christ loved us*? Are we loving one another enough for people to know we are his disciples? If we didn't have a building and worship services, would people be able to look at our behavior towards one another and conclude that we are Christians?

Maybe they would. How much money would you be willing to bet on that?

There is always room for improvement, isn't there? Even in the early Church, which people often idealize as perfect, I have no doubt there was actually room for improvement.

But let's move one step closer to home. In fact, let's move into the home. Paul also said husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church. Now listen very carefully here. I absolutely forbid anyone to check with my wife to see how well I do this. As Mom used to say, do as I say, not as I do.

But in all seriousness, family relationships among Christians should also reflect this Christ-like love. Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, even cousins – when you are fellow Christians, you should love each other as Christ loved us. That is part of our witness.

But it's not always easy, is it? Some of you might be thinking right now, maybe I could witness by talking to strangers about Jesus, which would be easier than loving some of my family members.

I'm sorry; it just doesn't work that way. Yes, we should be able to speak to strangers and friends about our faith. That is also part of the witness we should bear in the world. But this business of loving each other as Christ loved us – that's a *commandment*. It's not optional.

So there you have it. Jesus said that God's timing for restoring his kingdom, or perhaps establishing it, in this world, is a secret. It's not

our business to know. Don't waste your time trying to figure it out. And my advice is to pay very, very little attention to people who seem obsessed with it.

We have power from the Holy Spirit. That power is very helpful for many different aspects of Christian living. But the main reason that God gives us the Holy Spirit is so that we can be witnesses for Jesus in this world.

And finally, one of the most important ways perhaps *the* most important way, to be a witness for Jesus, is to love each other. Love your fellow Christians as Christ loved us. That includes your spouse, other family members, other members of this church, and Christians from other churches, no matter how many things you might think they are wrong about.

Love each other as Christ loved us. It's harder than it sounds. But that is what the power of the Holy Spirit is for. Amen.