

“User’s Manual”

During these 7 weeks of Easter we are making our way through the book of Acts,
so let’s see how much we know about it...

Who wrote it? Is it a stand-alone book? What’s the complete name of the book?
What’s it about? What are some of its themes?

This week I was reading a commentary on the book on Luther Seminary’s working preacher website
and the author started off by saying that we, in mainline Protestantism, have tended to read this book as history.ⁱ
So before we go any farther, I invite you to turn to your neighbor or neighbors
and discuss whether you think of this book as history or something else or maybe something more.
So take 2 minutes & talk about how you see this book – as history or something more or something else entirely.

The writer says that while the book may include historical facts,
that is NOT the reason it is included in the Bible.

The book is not there to give us a history lesson, but to invite us into life in the Spirit.

Then he goes on to say that the Holy Spirit is not something that sits in the background of our congregation,
giving automatic approval for the things we do,
but rather the Holy Spirit is the only thing that can empower us and our ministry in this place.

And here are the words that really caught my attention:

If the church is dying, it is because the church has failed to discern and listen to the directives of the Spirit,
for without the Spirit, the church of Christ cannot grow.

Let me say that one more time:

If the church is dying, it is because the church has failed to discern and listen to the directives of the Spirit,
for without the Spirit, the church of Christ cannot grow.

Which brings us to the book of Acts – which is not a history book, but rather, a user’s manual.
Acts is there to tell us and show us how to grow the church.

So with that in mind, let’s take a closer look at today’s story.

The first thing that we are told is that there was worship, prayer, fasting, and the laying on of hands.

Now when you picture this group of early Christians fasting and praying, what do you envision?

A committee meeting that opens and closes with a short prayer? Or something different?

I picture something more like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane –

praying for hours, trying to discern God’s will, trying to submit to God’s will,

And I must admit – I’m much more like the disciples in the garden that night –

getting distracted, losing focus, falling asleep.

My Lutheran upbringing has not trained me for such intensive prayer –

but when I look at the difference between churches that are growing and churches that are not,
there’s a huge difference in their prayer life.

2 weeks ago I visited Kingdom Life Church in Milford for a Sunday night prayer service.

I thought it started at 6:00, so I knew that going there after dinner church I’d be close to a half hour late.

As it turned out the worship had started at 5:30 so I was an hour late.

The room was large with a stage and there was a band playing and singing –

about 8 vocalists, plus people playing keyboard, guitar, bass, drums and flute.

And they were all young people – high school and college age.

There were probably about 100 people in the room, mostly young, but some older and some younger.

Some were kneeling, some were dancing, some were sitting in chairs, some were prostrate on the floor.

All seemed to be praying or singing.

There were some that arrived from time to time and some that left, but mostly everyone stayed.

I stayed for about an hour, and when I left, the prayers were still going strong after 2 hours.

My friend said the service usually lasts at least 3 hours – sometimes more.

I was amazed. Here was a room full of people – the vast majority of whom were young people –
who were spending hours of their time, praying. And...their church is going strong.

The second thing in our lesson is that in the midst of the prayer and worshiping and fasting, the Holy Spirit comes to call Saul/Paul and Barnabas to embark on a missionary journey, And the third thing is that they obey.

The group lays hands on them, anointing and commissioning them and sending them off. So here we have 3 steps outlined:

1. Worship, pray and fast to discern where the Spirit is leading;
2. Expect the Spirit to show up with instructions; and
3. Do what the Spirit calls you to do.

It's what the early church did.

It's what the growing churches I visited while I was away do.

It's what churches like Kingdom Life in Milford do.

But the book of Acts is about more than the church as a whole.

It's about individual lives, like the life of the man in the next part of our text.

Paul is preaching and there is a man sitting there listening – i.e., worshiping – who had been crippled from birth. And Paul heals him.

So take 1 minute and talk with your neighbor about what you think about this story –

Did it really happen? Is this kind of miracle confined to the pages of history, to the early church?

Do these kind of miracles happen today? Should we expect them to?

I don't know about you, but I believe that such miracles can happen today –

but only when we exhibit the kind of faith and obedience that the crippled man had.

There were lots of people listening to Paul that day, and probably many that needed healing, but Paul didn't heal them all – he just healed this one man.

And the reason he healed him is because when he looked into the man's eyes he saw that this man had the faith to be healed.

This man had remarkable faith.

Just think what it would have been like to be him – to have been born without the use of your legs

and to have grown to adulthood with no hope of ever being normal.

And yet this man actually believed that he could be healed.

You have to wonder if he had his doubts.

When Paul said, "Stand up and walk",

can't you just imagine the doubts and fear that could have crossed his mind?

But apparently he didn't let any doubt or fear in – and when Paul said, Stand, he sprang up, totally healed!

This story, like all the stories in Acts, is not a work of fiction, or even of history.

This story tells us of the power of the gospel to accomplish things that we can never do on our own.

Acts makes it clear that healing, miracles, signs and wonders are a manifestation of the Spirit's power, working to transform individual lives, congregations, and the Church as a whole.

But in order for the Spirit to transform our own lives and the life of this congregation, we need to have the kind of faith that believes that miracles can really happen.

Our part is that of faith –

which you can think of as simply the power of positive thinking, the placebo effect, or the law of attraction.

As Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, either way, you are right".

But while this kind of positive thinking can be helpful, it's just the tip of the iceberg of faith.

As Christians we don't just believe in an impersonal law of attraction, we believe in the personal presence of the Spirit of the living God.

Or I hope we do.

Over the past 5 months God has changed me.

I always had faith – but now my faith is so much stronger – and I have a much greater faith in miracles. I don't believe God changed me for no reason.

I want to see miracles happen here at Salem.

But I know that the only way they are going to happen is if we do a lot more praying and fasting and submitting our hearts and lives to God in worship.

When we do that, our faith will grow, and the Spirit WILL lead, direct, and empower us.

And when we follow where the Spirit leads, miracles WILL happen.

The book of Acts is not a work of fiction, and it's not a history book; it's a user's manual.

The commentary on Acts from Luther Seminary ends with these thoughts:

We in the 21st century have relied on business and organizational models for doing mission and ministry – and they have NOT worked.

Acts shows us a different way.

What church leaders and lay people need first and foremost, is to desire and be hungry for the Holy Spirit.

Without the Holy Spirit's power, there will be no 21st century church – it will die –

but when the people of God are hungry for the Spirit,

then God will move powerfully and will accomplish miracles.

Be hungry for the Spirit. Be thirsty for God.

Pray. Fast. Worship with all your heart and soul and body and mind.

And know that the Spirit will transform your life –

No longer will your life be a mere continuation of your past –

it will be something far greater than you ever imagined.

The crippled man sprang up into a whole new life. And so will you. **Amen**

ⁱ https://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2_kamudzandu_israel