

Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, August 2, 2009

Faith Factor

“Grace”

Acts 6:8-15

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So far in our study of Acts, we have looked at the faith factors of boldness, devotion, forthrightness, confidence, courage, discernment, presence and obedience. Boldness in that followers of Jesus are to be daring.¹ Devotion in that followers of Jesus are to be singular, particular and loyal in their commitment to Jesus Christ.² Forthrightness in that followers of Jesus are to demonstrate their outspoken enthusiasm for Jesus.³ Confidence in that followers of Jesus are to believe in and rely upon Jesus Christ to accomplish his purpose for the world in and through them.⁴ Courage in that followers of Jesus are to stay the course in the midst of circumstances that beg for retreat.⁵ Discernment in that followers of Jesus are to show good judgment.⁶ Presence in that followers of Jesus are to have an uncanny calm and ability to take quick action in the face of sudden difficulty.⁷ And obedience in that followers of Jesus are to surrender to the authority of Jesus Christ.⁸ Today, we conclude the Faith Factor series by examining the faith factor of grace. Followers of Jesus have grace, the free and unearned favor of God, working on their behalf.⁹

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is about the Faith and faith. The book of the Acts of the Apostles proclaims the mighty acts of God. It is the story of the church as a community informed and formed by story; the story of God’s redemptive work and transformation of people and society.

Oh how the church has known grace, the free and unearned favor of God. The map of global Christianity our grandparents knew has been turned upside down. At the beginning of the twentieth century, only 10 percent of the world’s Christians lived in the non-Western world; nearly 90 percent of Christians worldwide lived in North

¹*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Tenth Edition (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1999), 155.

²*Ibid.*, 393.

³*Ibid.*, 558.

⁴*Ibid.*, 299.

⁵*Ibid.*, 327.

⁶*Ibid.*, 408.

⁷*Ibid.*, 1131.

⁸*Ibid.*, 981.

America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, at least 70 percent of the world's Christians live in the non-Western world. More Christians worship in Anglican churches in Nigeria each week than in all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Britain, Europe, and North America combined. There are more Baptists in the Congo than in Britain. There are more people in church every Sunday in communist China than in all of Western Europe.¹⁰

These statistics make us wonder why the Word of God spreads and grows in some places, while it remains stagnant in others. Luke, the author of Acts, is deeply interested in the spread of God's Word and the growth of the church. The Acts of the Apostles is a story of faith overcoming fear and thousands of lives changed forever. You recall: "So those who received the Word were baptized and there were added that day about 3,000 souls" (Acts 2:41); "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47); "Many of those who heard the Word believed; and the number of the men came to about 5,000" (Acts 4:4); and "More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (Acts 5:14).

Luke is concerned about growth. Interestingly, I find most of us are concerned about growth until we experience it. The initial growth we each experienced through our election and regeneration in Jesus Christ was received with great enthusiasm. The responsibility of such grace sets in and the selfishness of keeping the blessing to ourselves emerges. Think with me for a moment. We pray that our numbers will increase, but we get uncomfortable as soon as the church we love starts to grow. Growth means change and we don't like change. Growth also brings problems and those problems can be painful. Pretty soon we find ourselves longing for the good old days when everything was so simple and we knew everyone's name and they were all like us. Then, because of our discomfort, we end up sabotaging the very growth we thought we wanted.

Acts 6 relates a story from the early church about growth and a key follower of Jesus named Stephen. The growth of the church was threatened by division and distraction. There was conflict between the Hellenists (the Greek-speaking Jews) and the Hebrews (the Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking Jews). In other words, there was a cultural rift in the church, resulting in discrimination against the widows of the Hellenists. Division and distraction, both rooted in fear, threatened the early church.

Widows were especially needy in those days. It was common for widows to move to Jerusalem toward the

⁹Ibid., 614.

¹⁰Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Illinois:

end of their life, because it was thought to be good to die and be buried in the Holy Land. They would normally be taken care of by the Jewish synagogue, but if the widow was a Christian, the responsibility fell to the church.

This kind of thing happens all the time in churches. It's not uncommon for one group to feel neglected. Sometimes neglect occurs along racial lines. Sometimes the older people in a congregation feel neglected or those who are not married feel all the church's resources are directed toward couples, children and youth. Sometimes homosexuals feel alienated from the body of Christ because of their sexual orientation. Today we tend to deal with such problems by leaving: we just find another church that suits our taste better, where we get more of our needs met or where people are all like us. For some, finding a church is like choosing which supermarket you want to shop at. We evaluate our church experience as consumers; it's all about what meets my needs. Or as I mentioned in my most recent blog, it is all about preserving preferences. The early church didn't have options; there wasn't another church down the road. Instead, they had to deal with issues head on.

There was also distraction. Apparently the apostles themselves had been criticized for the inequalities in food distribution or for failing to give more hands-on time to addressing the needs of people. Either way, Luke identifies this threat as distracting those called to the ministry of the Word to leave their calling in order to serve tables. Such distraction is a major threat to the spread of the gospel. Luke's point is that the Word of God continued to spread because the apostles didn't make the strategic mistake of neglecting it. Anything that threatens the ministry of the Word, even a pressing need, is distraction. There are many forms of leadership and the early church defined two very important areas; the preaching of the Word and the serving of people.

How could the apostles do everything? While the apostles took the problem seriously, they didn't get sucked in by the temptation to fix the problem themselves. Instead, they stayed focused on their calling: to be devoted to prayer and the ministry of the Word. And they appointed others to serve the needy. It's not as if one responsibility was better than the other. Rather, the point is that Jesus called them to be apostles and that meant being devoted to prayer and to the Word.

Luke uses an interesting wordplay in response to this dual threat. He uses the verb "to serve", *diakoneo*. Leadership must serve the needy and serve the Word. In essence, Luke is saying this: instead of serving the needy, the apostles were called to serve the Word. In both cases, they were serving. The issue is simply a matter of what they were called to serve.

Someone once paid a compliment to Lee Iacocca, the former Chairman of Chrysler Corporation. "Mr. Iacocca," the man said, "I want to tell you how much I enjoy your television commercials advertising Chrysler." Iacocca replied, "Sir, I couldn't care less what you think of my commercials. What I want to know is what kind of car do you drive?" He stayed focused on what his purpose was. Similarly, the apostles were not interested in making people like them by serving the needy; they wanted to see that people were responding to the Word of God.

The apostles delegated the task of serving the needy to others. They oversaw a process in which others were given that important responsibility. They told the congregation to select seven men to oversee this work. Notice how careful the apostles were to ensure the job got done well. They established three criteria: they had to be men of good reputation, men who were full of the Spirit and men who were wise.

So they weren't looking for men who were wealthy or good looking or influential, but men who had proven their worth in the grind of life. Fear confronted the early church. But, grace won the day. It overcame fear. Both the fear of growth and distraction were overcome by grace. The church had been tested. She had passed the test by caring for the widows and guarding the Word. The faith factor of grace trumped fear.

Notice that truth as illustrated by the life of Stephen. Stephen was an ordinary believer. He had not been with Jesus or trained by Him. However, he had been recognized by others as a servant and reliable. Stephen was a man known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom and faith.

As a man of faith who used his faith to overcome fear, notice these qualities that grace, God's unmerited favor for Stephen provided. Stephen loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, body and strength. He valued the Holy Spirit. He was filled, empowered and led by the Holy Spirit. Stephen knew the facts of the faith; he could tell the story and his own story. Stephen spoke in words his listeners could understand; he tailored his story to his audience. He pointed them to Jesus. And Stephen was not afraid of the consequences; he was not a people-pleaser but a God-pleaser.

Boldness, devotion, forthrightness, confidence, courage, discernment, presence, obedience and grace are all faith factors available to followers of Jesus in order to overcome fear. Fear was a very present danger in the early church. Just like it is today. Do not forget that the Acts of the Apostles deals with issues that are always relevant in the church: questions about the relationships between followers of Jesus and other faith traditions; followers of Jesus and pagans; the Christian stance within the modern state; problems with prayer; and the purpose of preaching and teaching. The Acts of the Apostles reminds us that the church is a community informed and formed by story; the

story of God's redemptive work and transformation of people and society.

The church is the body of Christ; it is to be Jesus in the world. Remember that Jesus Christ came not to teach an interesting philosophy of life, but to call people to a new way of living and dying. Followers of Jesus are to live and demonstrate the nature and purpose of the church. We have learned what it means to be church.

Stephen became a full leader among the Greek-speaking Jews. He performed healings in Jesus' name. Stephen witnessed in the synagogue and stirred up opposition. His opponents resorted to the same tactics as with Jesus; false accusations and a trial before the Sanhedrin. God's grace was sufficient for Stephen. Faith overcame fear and he faced his accusers and his eventual death by stoning. Stephen's faith gave him strength to continue overlooking nothing or no one for the sake of bearing witness to Jesus Christ. He did not preserve his personal preferences. Growth and distraction did not faze Stephen. Grace, God's free and unearned favor triumphed in Stephen's life and kept him forging ahead for the growth of the church and avoiding the distraction of too few people doing all the ministry.

Stephen was missional and he understood that his primary purpose in life was "bearing witness" to Jesus Christ. He, like the apostles, served the world; Stephen served human need and the apostles the Word. Quoting Stephen Hayner, the newly appointed president of Columbia Theological Seminary,

Churches that are growing see the primary purpose of the church as joining God's mission in the world, rather than focusing on what happens in their clubhouses. In the old way of doing church, what church leaders wanted was for the institution to grow; for more people to do "church work," for the budget to be balanced, so that they looked successful. But in this new way of being church, leadership is helping everyone to turn their faces toward the world and to join Jesus in a lifestyle of witness, reconciliation, compassion and justice.¹¹

Faith overcame fear for Stephen. He understood grace, God's free and unearned favor for him. And so it can for us.

Let us pray!

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¹¹Jack Haberer, *The Presbyterian Outlook* (July 13, 2009), 6.