

Acts010111-041909

Bridge of Hope

April 19, 2009

## “Acts of Love: Life Lessons From the Early Church”

Introduction: Today we going to begin a study from the book of Acts and see what the story of the early church can do to help us figure out how to live the missional life. Jesus gave us a mission to fulfill and sometimes we can feel a little bit overwhelmed by the mission. In short, we have been called to make disciples who Love God, Love People, and Serve Others. What this means is that we are a sent people who have been commissioned by Jesus to pastor the community He has placed us in. And that job is way beyond any of us to do on our own, so we have to figure out how Jesus intended us to get the thing accomplished.

This is the reason we are talking about these life lessons from the early church. Their story is important, because it helps us see what Jesus might want from Christians today. Something that really struck me as I studied for this series is the whole book of Acts is about love. It is about the love Jesus has for people and about people's love for Jesus. It is about love for one another and how they had to figure out living it Jesus' way. And I noticed it is about the love that people had for those who didn't know about Jesus. So in the end we gave this series the title, “Acts of Love: Life Lessons from the Early Church.”

The book of Acts was written by Luke, who also authored the gospel of Luke as well. In fact, if you want a complete history of the birth of Christianity you need to read both books; together they give the most complete view of what took place. Acts actually picks up where the gospel of Luke left off.

Throughout history the church has taken a couple of different approaches to fulfilling the missional call to go and make disciples. And the book of Acts is all about the fulfillment of that mission. So we can gain a lot of wisdom if we understand it a little better. So I thought it would be good to discuss a few ways that the Church has historically approached being missional.

The first thing that has dominated over the years has been something called the “Master Plan Approach.” In this approach we develop new strategies to accomplish the job of making disciples. We attend the latest conference or buy the last book or even develop our own master plan. All of this in hopes that we might be successful in making some disciples of Jesus. Earl Creps said something really interesting recently. Earl said that from the start of the early Church until 1950 there were about 250 different Master Plans developed for the purpose of sending people out to make disciples. That is it, only 250 different plans. He went on to share that from 1950 until today the Church has recorded about another 1,150 different Master Plans being developed to fulfill the great commission. Now there isn't anything wrong with coming up with a strategy and trying to do what Jesus said to do. But it can get confusing when it keeps changing every three to six months.

So this brings us to another approach that is out there. It is what is referred to as “Biblical Precedent.” In this approach we study the early church and try to replicate it in our situation today. Those who do this are usually referred to as “restorationists.” People who want to restore the biblical way of making disciples so that we can fulfill the mission Jesus gave to us. It sounds pretty good at first because we think, “Why reinvent the wheel?” This has become more popular in recent years; probably because of the multitude of master plan strategies created and failed. In our effort to clarify and simplify we return to the scriptures to find our way. Not a bad idea.

Except that we have one problem: we are too often “selective restorationists.” We choose what things we want to restore and ignore the others. So when we read about something like Ananias and Saphira who were killed for lying when they came to church, or Stephen who was martyred for the gospel, or the persecution and suffering of the early disciples, well we want to leave these ideas in the past and not restore the circumstances or outcome.

This series entitled, Acts of Love: Life Lessons from the Early Church is neither an attempt to develop a master plan nor strictly follow Biblical Precedent. This series is about understanding the story of the disciples in the early church and how Jesus empowered them to fulfill their missional call. It is about being theologically conservative and culturally relevant. We are not trying to duplicate what the early disciples did, but rather discover the truth that motivated and assisted them so that we can learn from their lives. It is about trusting the Holy Spirit enough to lead us as we grow and develop in maturity to fulfill the missional calling placed upon us as disciples and as a family. We will resist the temptation to master plan every detail and strive to be directed and led by Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

Today we want to look at chapter 1 from the book of Acts and see three foundational acts of love that God demonstrated. These are acts of love upon which all the lessons contained in the story of the early church are built upon. They are about the love Jesus has for people. They are acts of love that inspire people to love Jesus, to love each other, and to love the sought of God. Let’s get started.

- **Act of Love #1** - The indisputable evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **Acts 1:1-3** (NLT) *In my first book I told you, Theophilus, about everything Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven after giving his chosen apostles further instructions through the Holy Spirit. During the forty days after his crucifixion, he appeared to the apostles from time to time, and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. And he talked to them about the Kingdom of God.*
  1. If we understand Acts as a continuation of the book of Luke then everything that happens in the gospel of Luke is summarized in this statement at the beginning of Acts.
  2. God’s act of Love is about Jesus coming and dying and being raised from the dead.
  3. This act of love was not a one time, now-we-see-and-now-we-don’t, magic act. It was about 40 days spent with Jesus after His resurrection. They were convinced that He was alive and been raised from the dead.
  4. This is the story of the early church as they experienced this act of love and how it affected them in living out acts of love for others.

- **Act of Love #2** – The promised coming of the Holy Spirit. **Acts 1:4-8** (NLT) *Once when he was eating with them, he commanded them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

*So when the apostles were with Jesus, they kept asking him, "Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?"*

*He replied, "The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

1. God's act of love is about the empowerment His disciples would need to be witnesses to the rest of the world concerning His first act of love.
  2. It is about enabling them to do something that was beyond their ability and understanding as the church would be formed in the days ahead.
  3. This act of love was one that would be experienced over and over again as disciples of Jesus would trust Him to give them what He had promised: the Holy Spirit.
  4. This is the story of the early church as they experienced this act of love and how it empowered them to fulfill the missional calling as they lived out acts of love for others.
- **Act of Love #3** – The return of Jesus Christ. **Acts 1:9-11** (NLT) *After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"*
1. God's act of love is about the hope of Jesus' return for those who believe and trust and love Jesus.
  2. It is about providing them with the hope they need to endure to the end and enjoy the days ahead as love is shared with all who would believe.
  3. This act of love would inspire love over and over again as people hope for the day in which Jesus returns for His Church, His family, His disciples.
  4. This is the story of the early church as they experienced this act of love and how it gave them hope in every circumstance as they lived out acts of love in a missional life.

Conclusion: As we work our way through the book of Acts we are going to see how these acts of love by Jesus yield acts of love in the early church. And from this story of the early church we will discover how we, too, can love and live out such acts in our lives. We will discover how we can love Jesus, love one another, and love our neighbor as we pastor this area God has placed us in. We will find how we can live out the missional call placed on us as disciples and as a family called Bridge of Hope. We believe that this is a special moment in this Mahoning Valley and God has extended a call to us. As we close we want to share something the Holy Spirit has

spoken to our leadership. They have encouraged me to share it with the church, and so today as we focus on Acts of Love I want to share with you about God's love for this place in which we live. The following is the prophecy that was given to me by the Lord on March 30, 2009.

*Do you hear me? I have called you to love this city. My call is to embrace the people that I love; to go out from the epicenter of worship and serve your neighbor. Serve them the love and truth that has been given to you. Tell them your story and listen to theirs. Give them a gift and receive the gift they give in exchange. Build friendships with those that I am calling to. I am bringing them to you. I am bringing you to them. Do you hear me?*

*Come before me with your needs and I will meet them. I do not want you to be distracted by the cares and concerns of living in this world. I want you to focus on loving one another, on loving your neighbor, on loving your God. Are you listening to Me?*

*This is a special time of deliverance. It is a time of freedom for the captive. You will see with your eyes how your God can set a person free. Come and ask for healing of the soul and watch how I set the captive free. Come before me with the sin that has kept you bound, and on this day I will set you free.*

*Speak words of life to one another, speak them to your neighbor, speak these words to your God. Speak them without hesitation. Let hope erupt from your hurt, the pains of suffering that has brought life to your soul. Allow faith to grow through your words of life and see what they will produce in you, around you, through you.*

*There was a time when I withdrew Myself. I was never far away and you were never out of sight. You had to listen and obey; you had to follow the sound of My voice. The steps were difficult; each movement hard and unsure. You didn't know I had marked the course for you to walk; You wanted to run but the darkness didn't allow for it. Well today, the darkness has been lifted. Do you see? Today you can run. Go ahead and begin to run. It will feel good to stretch your legs and be out of breath. Can you see Me in the distance? Listen to the call and follow the sound of My voice. I am no longer hidden from you.*

*Hope rises up and fear immediately comes to steal it away. But you have hidden My hope in your heart; you would not let it go; you refuse to let fear take it from you. Now listen to My voice, I want you to give My hope away. There is enough for all. The more hope you give to others the more hope you will have to give. Hope calls to you this day. Are you listening to Hope?*

*I want to love My city through you. This valley is a chosen place of My visitation. It is one of 4 that I will come to and touch. I plan to capture the heart of this state and sweep across it with My grace. Will you love this valley for me? Are you willing to embrace them with My love? It will cost you everything, but I will replenish you before you even know. Can you see what I am up to? Do you understand what I have done? You have been prepared for this moment. You are created for this time. I have planted you in this township to reach outward and touch this*

*city. My hand is outstretched. My hand reaches to you. It reaches to those around. My call has gone out. My call will go out tomorrow. My call of love and mercy has gone out to those across this valley. It has risen and gone out across this state. You heard my call. You moved by faith. And now others who do not know Me are hearing My call. And they are coming. Others who once knew Me well, they have heard My call and are coming. And some who have resisted My call, who walked with Me and knew Me well, they, too, are starting to come.*

*Come as you are and I will transform you. Come the way that you are and I will use you. Come with who you are, and I will do miracles in and through you. But you must come. It is in your coming that what I hold in my hand is given. I have come to you; I have come with My love; I have come with My grace; I have come with My forgiveness. These are in My hand and ready to be dispensed to the nations. And I want you to come and take them from My hand. Come close, Come closer. Now, come even closer still. Take them from my hand and then go and dispense them to the nations. Come and take them from Me and give them to the people around you. Do not hold them for yourselves, they are not for you. Look, in My other hand are these and much more. Come over here and see what I have. In My hand you will see what you need. What you lack I have in My right hand. Do you need love? I have it here. Do you need righteousness? I have it in My hand. Are you lacking in finances? Look what I hold. Come in close and see what I hold for you. Come in near to Me and let your sins be purged away. Come in close now, even closer still.*

*You have been named with My name. I have marked you with My seal. Your eyes have seen My vision. And now you have heard and understood My purpose. You are ready to come. You are ready to go.*

As we move from this place, may we embrace the call and to love what Jesus loves as we live out acts of love in the missional life that He has called us to.