

Not a Needy Person Among Them

When I was a religion major in college, I was assigned to write a research paper on one of Paul's letters and I wanted to use the book of Acts as one of my sources. My professor nixed the idea.

"Acts is propaganda," he told me.

His point was that the writer of Acts was far more concerned with making the early Church look really good than he was concerned with historical accuracy. Like most writers of the Bible, the author is a *storyteller*; not a historian. And the function of story is to tell a particular truth (though the facts may be a bit hazy), it's to encourage people to buy-in to that truth, and it's to lead people toward a future truth.

Acts is the shiny brochure that makes you want to join up, not the minutes of the contentious board meeting. And as such, the writer does a pretty great job. He paints this picture of the early Church choosing to hold all possessions in common, of thousands being baptized and the Church growing exponentially, of the early Christians being willing to suffer all sorts of persecutions with grace and even forgiving those hurting them just like Jesus did.

Acts has always been one of my favorite books of the Bible because the picture it paints of the Church is so inspiring to me. It describes a community that I want to be a part of, even as I doubt my own faith to follow in their footsteps. It makes faith seem like an adventure that asks everything of us and yet somehow strengthens us to the point we can rise to that challenge. But it can also be a little deflating because the Church described in Acts seems like something we could never truly live up to. It can almost feel like an impossible standard.

That's why I've come to value my professor's words more and more about Acts: "It's propaganda."

When I first heard that, it was shocking. It was a part of my journey in learning to be ok with the contradictions and inaccuracies of Scripture. But on the other side of that journey, perhaps I value Acts even more precisely because it is propaganda.

First, it means the early Christians weren't always that great either. They messed up a lot. They argued with each other a lot. When I was at Church without Walls, I would often speak to groups to fundraise and my go to tactic was to tell stories. I told the story about the woman who raised 18 foster kids. I told the story about kids who were the first ones in their family to go to college. I told the story about the single mom who was a cancer survivor, who raised a special needs daughter, and who worked three jobs so she could buy her own house.

I never told a story that wasn't true, but I selectively told the stories that made us look really, really good. I didn't tell the story about the time one of our church leaders stole the church van. I didn't tell the story about the time one of our worship services was interrupted by one member cussing out another member or the time it was interrupted because the police showed up to arrest someone. The truth is that congregation was a community like any community. We had moments of sheer beauty where we lived out the highest ideals of our faith, where we loved each other well, where we made a difference in the community. And we also had moments where we talked about each other behind their back, where we hurt each others' feelings, where we failed to live up to that which we claimed to be.

And that's true about us also. As we've entered into conversations with our friends at East Congregational Church, it's been an opportunity to reflect on our history as a congregation. Our history is one that has some amazing moments. It includes taking a leap of faith right after 9/11 when the stock market crashed and choosing to build the Centre School anyway. It includes choosing to become an Open and Affirming congregation even if it meant some of our biggest donors would leave. It includes daring to believe that we could not only survive the pandemic but that we could come out of it, in some ways, stronger than we were before.

But if we're honest, we also have our moments where we missed the mark, where we argued and bickered, where we focused on petty things instead of the vision God has laid before us. And I've come to find it as profoundly good news that, even though you wouldn't know it from reading Acts, the same was true for the early church. Jesus didn't entrust the continuation of his work to a perfect community, but rather to a sometimes broken, sometimes fragile, sometimes flailing community of people called the Church.

The truth is that all faith communities have our moments where we are living out God's calling for us in the most amazing, most beautiful of ways, and moments where we get it all wrong. That's the truth about our church, about all churches, and about the church we read about in the book of Acts.

But that didn't stop the writer of Acts from writing about his community at its very best. You see, I believe Acts is not just a piece of propaganda to make others want to be a part of the early Christian community. I also believe that the writer wanted to articulate not only a vision of what the Church is but a vision of what the Church could be. And I think we see that hope most clearly in how the writer describes the way the early Christians shared with each other. Church could be a place where we share of our resources so there's not a needy person among us.

Acts gives us a vision of church being a place where one person's needs become the need of the whole community and the whole community works together to meet that need. We could read on and hear the story of how the church organized its very first food drive to make sure that widows, some of the most vulnerable people of the time, would have enough food to eat. We could read about how people would donate their land, their fields to the church, turning individual property into community property so that it could be used for the common good rather than just for the individual. In articulating this vision, Acts is standing well within one of the most established traditions in all of Scripture, and that is, the people of God are always called to care for those who are poor.

Throughout Scripture, we see over and over again that God cares a whole lot about the poor. And Scripture talks about the poor a lot. There are over 2000 verses in the Bible about caring for the poor. In fact, it's the second most common theme in the entire Bible. Rarely do I think it's helpful for a preacher to say, "if you are Christian, you have to believe this." But this is one exception. We cannot call ourselves Christian if we don't care for the poor. The two are so closely connected that if we aren't caring for the poor, whatever else we may be, we are not Christian. The writer of Acts believed in this calling so strongly, that he felt like the church should be a place where all things were held in common so that it might be possible for no one in their community to suffer in poverty.

That calling remains 2000 years later. But we live in a very different time and place. Unlike the early Christians, we live in a society that has a social safety net. It's not solely up to us to make sure hungry people have food, homeless people have housing, and sick people have healthcare. But there are still a lot of needy people around us. In Massachusetts, more than ½ million people experience hunger with more than 100,000 of those being children. In fact, 1 in 12 children in our state experience hunger. In Boston, at any given time, we have between 1500 and 2000 people who are homeless. And we've all heard news report after report about how many refugee families are coming to our state seeking shelter – right now nearly 7500 families – and the emergency shelter shortage we have. Friends, we live in a state that has one of the strongest social safety nets of any state, and there are still a lot of needy people among us which means, that we, as a Christian Church, a descendent of the church we read about in Acts, that we have work to do.

The good news is we are already doing that work. Every month, we have people who make sandwiches for Father Bill's to share with those who are hungry. If you'd like to do that, you can sign up on our church website. In the narthex and in Huntington Hall, there are boxes where you can donate coffee or hot chocolate that we'll give to Interfaith Social Services to help them create a warm and hospitable environment to welcome their clients. Every year, we have winter coat drives. In our past, we had teams of people travel to New Orleans to help rebuild after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and we may want to think about starting up mission trips again at some point (if you're interested in helping us do that, let's talk). Our friends at East Church help organize the library and read to kids at Roosevelt Elementary School in Hyde Park on Wednesday mornings and have invited us to join them. Our church participated along with the other Milton congregations who are a part of MICA (the interfaith clergy association) to provide housing for two refugee families last year.

Friends, we are doing the work of caring for those who are in need around us, and I believe there is so much more we might be able to do together to care for those who are in need. Now I don't know right now what that might look like, but I believe that if we keep asking the question, "What can we do?" and focus not on the reasons we can't or shouldn't care for those around us, but instead start looking for ways we can serve, then we can live out the call of serving those who are needy in more and more transformative ways.

But I also want us to broaden what we mean when we say, "needy." Mother Theresa once said, "There is more hunger for love than there is for bread."

Friends, there are lonely people who are in need of companionship.

There are sick people who are in need of someone visiting them and praying for them.

There are people who experience addiction who need a shame-free community of healing.

There are people with mental health challenges who need a community where they can simply be themselves, where they don't have to try to act like they don't have mental health challenges.

There are people who are grieving who need a place of emotional support.

There are people who are part of the LGBTQ community who need a place of acceptance and affirmation.

There are people who are in the sandwich generation who are not only taking care of kids but also taking care of aging parents and are overwhelmed who need a community of friendship and support.

There are people who need the expertise that you have to offer. Steve Paxhia is fond of saying that he's never had a problem he couldn't get help with at coffee hour. We have medical professionals, legal professionals, financial professionals, educational professionals, and so many more at our church and there's a good chance that you can use your expertise to offer advice to someone who needs it.

And I could go on and on.

I have to tell you, I am so proud of this church. I am so proud that I can tell you that today, we will have a loss support group for anyone who is grieving any type of loss. I am so proud to tell you that today, we will have a panel discussion to learn how we can be more affirming to those in the trans community. I am so proud that we have small groups that offer not only opportunities to study but opportunities for friendship and support. I am so proud that we have people in this church who visit our homebound members.

There is so much good work that is already happening and if you haven't gotten involved in that yet and would like to, please talk to me after the service or send me an email. And like it is with serving those in poverty, we are already doing good work and I believe we have the possibility to do even more. You see the great vision of the church – to be a place where there is not a needy person among us– is always both descriptive and aspirational. We are already doing this but we never get to a place where we can just check it off a list and say, “Ok, that's done.” No, it's always an ongoing work. It's always an ongoing call. Because as long as there are needy people around us – regardless of the type of need – then our work is never done.

So friends, the invitation we have is to simply to be the church for each other and for the world around us trusting that God's spirit will empower us to do more than we think we can do and to be more than we think we can be. When we listen to the Spirit's lead, then we don't get bogged down in thinking about all the reasons we can't do something. Instead, we always look for reasons why we can.

That in a nutshell was the vision of the church in Acts. It wasn't that the writer gave a factual account of exactly what the early church was like. Rather, he told a story about the gathered people of God who dared to believe that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they could love and serve each other to such an extent that there would not be “a needy person among them.”

What a goal for what church could be. What a goal for us to pursue as our own.

