

“Empowered to Witness”

[Acts 1:6-8](#)

Since Pentecost Sunday last month, we have examined some of the characteristics of the early church through our “Empowered” sermon series. So far, we have learned that the first Christians constantly engaged themselves in praise and prayer. It was when they were praying that they received the Holy Spirit. Through prayer, they elected and commissioned new leaders. They prayed both individually and corporately. They prayed constantly and fervently.

The early church was a singing community. Whenever they gathered together, they praised God through singing psalms and other spiritual songs with thanksgiving. They praised God in times of both joy and sorrow, peace and trouble. It was when Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God while they were imprisoned that an earthquake shook the foundation of their prison, opened all the prison cell doors, and broke all the prisoners’ chains.

We have learned how the early church continued in Jesus’ healing ministry. They healed the sick and cast out evil in the name of Jesus. Praying for healing was normal practice for them. And last Sunday, we learned from the example of Paul and Timothy’s special relationship that the first Christian community multiplied through its ministry of recognizing, training, and supporting new leaders.

Today, we come to the last sermon of our “Empowered” series, and the word we are going to reflect on is “witness.”

When we receive new members into our church, pastor Daniel and I examine their intentions and commitments by ask them several questions, and this is the last question we ask: *“As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your **witness**?”* Members of Campbell United Methodist Church, do you remember your answer? Yes, you all said, *“I will.”* And indeed, many of you are taking your membership vow seriously, and I thank God for your devotion, faithfulness, generosity, commitment to support the ministries of our church.

However, for some of you who have been members of the church for over 10 years, you might not remember the commitment to “witness” as being part of the membership vow. Actually, it was not there when you joined the church. Originally, the Methodist Church’s membership vows included only the four commitments of prayers, presence, gifts and service as means of supporting ministries of the church. It had remained this way since 1932.

But, 10 years ago, the 2008 General Conference voted to add “witness” to the membership vow. It was a proposal submitted by the Association of the Annual Conference Lay Leaders who pointed out that the denominational membership vows were too inwardly focused.

Though the change sounded so simple, in actuality, it was quite a significant one. Suddenly, people realized that, for too long, we, the United Methodist Church had forgotten the most important part of our identity and mission as the church -- which is to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. The rationale for the addition noted as follows: "Membership vows of the United Methodist Church do not include witness, an integral part of laity's role from earliest Methodism, in members' participation in the church's life..."

However, as today's scripture reading reveals to us, witness has been an integral part of laity's role not just from the earliest days of Methodism, but from the very beginning of the Christian church. In verse 8, Jesus says to his disciples, "... *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...*"

This was Jesus' answer when his disciples had asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" You'll remember that after his resurrection, Jesus had appeared to his disciples and resumed his teaching about the kingdom of God. Things must have looked quite bright again to the disciples. They must have thought this was it! Surely, this was the time when Jesus would act as their nation's Messiah, taking back the reign of power from the hands of the Roman Empire and restoring Israel's former glory.

Echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah, who tells us that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and our ways are not God's ways (Isa. 55:8), Jesus responds by telling them, "Timing is none of your business. It's God's business." And then, listen to what Jesus has to tell them, "But *you* will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."

The disciples' concern was only the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, and they were assuming that this would be the work of Jesus. They were expecting Jesus, the Messiah to defeat the Romans with his supernatural power.

But, the kingdom Jesus was envisioning and announcing to them was much bigger than that. It was the kingdom of God, which does not have physical boundaries, a kingdom where *all* God's children can enter and are welcomed. Where all who are thirsty are led to water, all who have no money may yet come buy and eat without cost (Isa 55:1).

And, building such a kingdom on earth would be done not through Jesus himself but through his disciples, through their hands and feet, empowered by the Holy Spirit. He made it very clear to them, "*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the world.*"

The Book of Acts shows us that the early church's witness of Jesus was not done in one place. Instead, it moved from one place to another, actually, in the exact order Jesus predicted. First, it started in the city of Jerusalem. It began right where they were. And it continued there for a while until a great persecution rose up after the death of the first deacon Stephen, which is described in chapter 7 of Acts.

As the persecution drove the Christians out of Jerusalem, the witness expanded to the neighboring areas of Judea and Samaria, which is written about in chapter 8. In chapter 9, we hear about how Paul, one of the religious zealots persecuting Christians, the one who would bring the gospel of Jesus to the Gentiles, was

called. In chapter 10, we read about the conversion of Cornelius, not just a Gentile, but a Roman centurion! And by chapter 13, we discover how the Holy Spirit is sending forth the Apostles across the known world, including the start of what would be Paul's mission journey to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire.

The first Christian believers kept moving. Led by the Holy Spirit, they were a people on the move, sharing the gospel and their faith with whomever they encountered. The ever growing persecutions made their faith even stronger and their witness even more audacious. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, there was nothing that stood in the way of their witnessing. They went where they were led and simply told the gospel and the wonders that they had witnessed as they told their story. As a result, despite great persecutions, in the midst of troubles, the early church grew exponentially, spreading to larger areas and adding new believers to their community.

From its beginning, moving has been a way of life for the Christian believers, and we, the United Methodists know all about it, don't we? Through the itinerant system, pastors move from church to church periodically, and this is a season of moving. During our Annual Conference last week, all the appointments of pastors were fixed. District by district, each of the names of the churches, as well as other ministry fields, along with their appointed pastors was called. While Bishop Minerva Carcano blessed the pastors and their appointments, people surrounded them in prayer.

We heard how many of our pastors will be moving to new churches and ministry fields. I am happy to report to you that the Bishop sent pastor Daniel and me back to you. I hope this is a good news to you all. If not, don't worry because the appointment is for one year at a time. As we get ready to embark on our second year, we will dream God's dreams together and work side by side to accomplish what God wills us to do. With excitement and hope and with joy and thanksgiving, let us move into the future God is leading us into, witnessing to those we encounter about Jesus and his love.

Did you notice in our scripture passage that what Jesus said to the disciples was not a command, but a simple statement of fact? "You *will* be my witnesses....," he says. Jesus was not asking his disciples to be his witnesses. This was not a recommendation or a kind suggestion to them. Instead, he was simply telling them what was going to happen to them: "You *will* be my witnesses."

So, they became witness of Jesus Christ, when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Empowered to witness, they quickly moved to Judea and then to Samaria. They moved from local to regional, crossing cultural boundaries in the process. And, it did not stop there. They kept moving outward, led by the Holy Spirit to ever new places, ever new people, until, as Jesus had foretold, they reached the ends of the world...

Brothers and Sisters, empowered to witness by the Holy Spirit, we too will move because this is Jesus' promise to us. We will witness to all those we encounter about Jesus and his love. And like the initial disciples to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection, we will begin our witness right here in Campbell. And led by the Holy Spirit, we will move beyond our immediate surroundings to San Jose, to Santa Clara, to Sunnyvale, to Cupertino, to Milpitas, to Mountain View, to Saratoga, to Los Gatos, to Morgan Hills, and more villages and cities we can name.

And our movement will not stop there. Empowered to witness by the Holy Spirit, we will discover, as the early church did, that God will lead us farther and farther out. For as we know from the events of this week, our country is a country thirsting for the life-giving message of the Gospel. We will go, and we must go. And we will find that, as we witness, as we go forward despite setbacks, despite great persecutions, embodying the message of the Gospel to people who think, speak, and act differently from us, we will see miracles happen in our midst. Like the early church, we, too, will see the centurion fall on his knees and turn to God, and see even the persecuting religious zealot come to her senses and do marvelous things.

So let us be a people ready to move for the sake of the gospel. May we be ready for when the Holy Spirit comes to us, empowering us to witness to those we encounter about Jesus and his love!

Thanks be to God! Amen.