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Helping Hurting People

Acts 5:12-16

September 23, 2018

I'd like to begin this morning's message from Acts 5 by going back and pointing out a pattern we can see in the early part of the book of Acts. We start in chapter 2, verses 42-47. Allow me to read them for you. READ Acts 2:42-47. This summary statement is followed by the account of Peter and John healing the crippled beggar, followed by their being dragged before the Jewish authorities in chapter 4. Then we come to chapter 4:32-37. Again, let me read these verses to you. READ Acts 4:32-37.

As you may remember from a few weeks ago, this good example of Barnabas' generosity is followed directly by the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5. Are you seeing a pattern yet? The third cycle of the pattern is seen in our passage this morning, Acts 5:12-16. Again listen as I read the text. READ Acts 5:12-16. Then notice next week's passage: the disciples are arrested (again!) and dragged before the Jewish authorities.

What do we notice by way of a pattern? We read three summary passages, meaning they do not focus on an event but on a characterization of how things were in those days. This is what that earliest church was like. And the characterizations all match up. They all paint basically the same picture: the church was healthy, growing. There was unity and generosity. The church enjoyed the favor of the people. But interspersed with those characterizations were extreme trials for the early church: the leaders were arrested, arrested again, there was this bizarre and shocking striking down of phonies from within the church.

What are we to make from this characterization of things going well followed by strife, things going well followed by strife, things going well, followed by strife? Well,

I take from this that the two things are both true at the same time. In other words, the fact that incidents of strife came from outside (or even from the inside) did not negate the general state of things. Both were true at the same time: the church was healthy, growing, strong, and yet there was unrest, persecution, hardship. Indeed, I believe the structure of the book of Acts is designed to make that precise point: a healthy, growing church will probably suffer hardship, but that doesn't mean they are doing something wrong. In fact, it may come as a result of doing something right, kingdom building, possibly even miraculous. You could almost say we ought to expect such things when we are about the work of helping people. I don't think you can escape such a conclusion based on the reading of the book of Acts. Indeed, the book will end with precisely the same pattern. It is a major theme of the book. Let's just make it the main point of the morning.

Main point: Healthy, growing churches will see hurting people being helped, but not everyone will be happy about it.

I know the negative part of this point will not be seen until we get to the next section of the text next week, but we must see the connection. In other words, the summary statement before us is deliberately placed where it is to make a point, a point that is repeated throughout the book, a point that we would do well to ponder. Helping hurting people ought to be an expectation of a healthy church, but we must prepare for the results that will probably follow that make it appear as if there is trouble. In other words, the enemy will not like it when hurting people find help. He will double his efforts to shut it down, from within or from the outside. The thief, who comes only to steal, kill and destroy will not be happy when people find their freedom from him. He WILL respond! (2 parts)

I. God's hand was on His Church and the people were enjoying the benefits. vv. 12-14

In that early church, there were clear signs of God's presence among them, and the people of that church wanted to be together to enjoy it. Once more, this is a summary description of the church at this particular time. It is a characterization for us as readers to take in. This is what Luke, the author, wants us to know about the church: God was with them and the people wanted to be a part of it.

v.12- The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

As we have seen before, this book focuses its attention on the apostles, the leaders of the early church. Remember, nothing existed before this point. There was no church, there was no structure, there were no buildings, there were no job descriptions for the leaders. They were having to make it up as they went along as guided by the Holy Spirit. They had no guide book, no owner's manual, no pattern established long ago. This new entity called the Church of Jesus Christ was establishing the pattern, writing the manual, dealing with each situation from scratch. Oh yes, they had the teachings of Jesus, they had the pattern of the Jewish people from long ago. But too often the pattern of the Jews was part of the problem. It too provided a negative example for the early church. It was a shell of what God had laid out for them. The structure was corrupt, empty, entrenched in a bad way. They had two main sources of help: the teachings of Jesus and the counsel of the Holy Spirit.

I make this point so that we can see the importance of the words of this verse. It says once more here that the apostles performed MANY miraculous signs and wonders. Why would that be important? As we will see in the next verses, there were more sick people, hurting people, crippled people than they could ever hope to help. The point of these miraculous signs and wonders was not simply to solve people's problems. The purpose of the miracles was to show the presence of the power of God. Just as was true with Jesus, so it was here with His disciples. The purpose of the miracles was not to eliminate problems, nor was it to put on a show, a circus sideshow. Instead, the purpose of the miracles was to testify that God was with this group of people. These average, ordinary men spoke for God, revealed the plan of God, preached the good news about Jesus. But how could you know whether or not to believe them. They came from the

Jews, they were themselves all Jewish. But they preached something that seemed to many Jews (especially the leaders) to be opposed to the normal teaching of the Jews. Why should these men be believed?

A major reason to believe them was because they put on display the power of God. They performed miracles. They did things the “official” leaders of the Jews could not do, nor duplicate. God was with these men. God was empowering them. Everyone could see it. God was authenticating their message. And in the midst of authenticating their message, hurting people were being helped: the lame walked, the diseased were healed, the blind could see, the spiritually bound were set free. God was at work setting His people free.

As you might suspect, this would have been an exciting time to be in the church. The people gathered to see, to hear, to ponder. The church met together. No one would want to miss the gathering of the church! But where? They had no buildings, they had no structures, no place of their own. So, they met in the most logical and convenient place: the courtyards of the Jewish temple complex. It was large enough to accommodate large crowds, they saw themselves as the people of the God who worshipped at the temple, and it would provide a great opportunity to preach to their brothers and sisters. This is where the people of God had gathered for 1,000 years! They gathered in the courtyard of Solomon, the one who built the original temple! It could be important that the original temple was destroyed and replaced by a new one, which was destroyed and later replaced by this current new one. But the courtyard would not have been destroyed, it was just a platform of stones. Huh! There might be something to that.

But as you might imagine, this particular choice for a gathering place had its drawbacks, especially as the crowds gathering were growing with a corresponding shrinking of those actually entering the temple to participate in the normal Jewish proceedings. That will become clearer next week. But the point here is that this early church met in such a place and way that it would have been impossible to miss or ignore.

13 No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

This detail is actually a bit new for these summary statements. There is introduced here tension between this group and some other group which is not here identified. As

we will see in the next verse, there were still people becoming believers, so they were growing, but there is now introduced some sort of peer pressure to not be seen as joining this radical, new group. But notice the source of the tension: this new church was highly regarded by the people. The common folk saw them as good people doing good things. Their reputation was sound. So, if the people, the average Joe citizens saw them as good people, then who do you suppose opposed them? Ahh, as you might suspect and will see clearly next week, it is the group most threatened, the Jewish leaders. The powers that be, the keepers of the status quo did not see them as upstanding, sincere, dynamic believers. They saw them as a threat to their livelihood. Just as was true with Jesus, so now it was starting with Jesus' followers. And these Jewish leaders put pressure on THEIR people not to join this new group.

14 Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

As we've already mentioned, the status of the church is going to be a mixed bag, even a healthy church. God was at work, people were being helped, the church was getting visibly larger, enjoying the favor of the locals. But there were also those who did not see this as a good thing. They were opposed to these new radicals and wanted to see them shut down. They put pressure on their constituents not to associate with them. NEVERTHELESS, the church was growing. People were coming to faith, Jesus was gaining new followers. In spite of the opposition, God's Kingdom was expanding. And that is a major point of this book of Acts. NEVERTHELESS, people were coming to know their Savior, Jesus. His Church will grow in spite of such opposition, whether from within or from without. We must see this in the book of Acts. You cannot stop the work of God. No one has, no one can because it is not about us, it is not dependent on us. The Church grows as a result of the work of God, a moving of His Spirit. Again, do not miss this point, imprint it on your brain. This could easily be seen as the theme verse for the whole book. In spite of what you might fear or suspect, God's Church was growing and there were new names added to the book of Life!

Okay, so what do we do with this? Well, you might be tempted to proclaim that since we do not regularly see such miracles by our leaders, God must not be with us. But that would not be a good conclusion to draw. As we mentioned earlier in our study, we are in a different scenario in a variety of ways, from structures, history, and things like medical sciences. People receiving healing at hospitals, from doctors and nurses, surgery and medicine.

But I would also suggest that the miracles of finding freedom from satan's clutches are every bit as common and miraculous among us as it was among them. The problem is that in our culture we don't talk about such things. And those who put on shows are not credible. I wish I could tell you the miraculous things I have seen and continue to see. But most such people want their problems to be hidden, protected. And we honor that. I just want you to know as your pastor that such work goes on regularly among us, real work, spiritual work, bondage freeing work. And the results are among you, you just don't know it.

But I would also say that this passage brings up an issue for me as a result. Too many among us do not feel the compelling sense of needing to gather together as the church. Now, our tradition is better than others, who have huge membership rolls and only a fraction who attend worship. But we are only comparatively better. We still have far to go. Only about 2/3 of our people gather together each week for worship. And in the summer it is much worse. Just to let you know, that tends to drive your leaders bonkers. It is impossible to know whether people are gone, busy, or just don't care. Your fear as a leader is that there is a problem, thus the insecurity. In a smaller church, a leader might know where each family is, but in a church our size that is impossible. You are just left to wonder. There, I've said my peace. I'm just letting you in on my world, where the gathering together of the believers is a high priority.

II. Helping hurting people brings more hurting people. vv. 15-16

When people find out there is help and hope for their problems, it brings more such people and problems into your midst. Or, perhaps another way of saying it is: hurting people have friends too. There will always be a never ending line of people needing help. The only question is whether there will be people to help them.

15 As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by.

The impression left here is that word has gotten out that the power to heal was present in the apostles. As you might imagine, such word would naturally spread, as it did with Jesus. Again, it is instructive for us to remember that Jesus had spent three years healing such people. But even in this small region of land with only a limited number of people, there was an endless supply of hurting people. In fact, I believe if such a thing would take place here, there would be an endless line of such hurting people here as well. We often don't think about it because that is why we have doctors and hospitals. But I know there are bunches of people who are still hurting in spite of such advanced medical care. My point is that there will ALWAYS be such people. So, why doesn't God choose to do something here? I don't know, ask Him. And I do know that He does do such things elsewhere in the world right now. I have heard the testimonials first hand.

But as you read this verse, doesn't your heart skip a beat? Can you imagine being Peter? What must it have been like to live through those days? Or, how did he avoid the temptation to let it go to his head? Imagine if this whole community tried to guess your travel habits and strategically place themselves or loved ones so that you might heal them or even have your shadow fall on them! Imagine a line of people waiting outside your door for you to get your mail, or get in your car, or wait for you at the door of your job. We know from later in the book that these apostles had to convince people that they were just ordinary men, that the power within them was from God and not them. I just think it would be very difficult to endure such a public perception. In other words, I do not envy Peter at all in this regard. What pressure!

16 Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

Indeed, people came not just from Jerusalem, but from all over. They brought not just the ill or lame, but also those tormented by evil spirits. I could do a whole sermon series on this issue, but I will refrain for now. Let me just say that some of the

weight I carry around every day (and others in our office do as well) is that of helping people tormented by evil spirits. Such work is not fun, nor easy. It exacts a price from those involved in it. I also believe it would be better if more pastors actually were engaged in such battles with the enemy. I remember one time in my early years receiving a phone call from a long-time seasoned pastor asking if it was true that I helped people dealing with demonic problems. I remember my surprise, thinking, "Don't you? Doesn't every pastor?" Sadly, many do not. They either ignore, deny, or pass off such people and their problems. And I believe the Church would be healthier if there were more helping such hurting people rather than ignoring or passing them off. There, I said my peace again!

What I want you to see here is that this empowered early church was seeing its share of hurting people, and they were doing what they could (meaning the line was never ending) to meet all the needs. But as you should begin to process this and project out, you must be aware that this model will not be sustainable. Such leaders are not going to be able to keep up with all the demand. We will address that in the next chapter.

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will see such mixtures of success and strife as normal in a healthy church.
- 2) We will not forsake the gathering together of believers.
- 3) We will pray for and support those who are engaged in the hard work of helping hurting people.
- 4) We will see the never ending stream of hurting people as not a hindrance but possible future advertisements for the power of the gospel.