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April 18, 2021 – Easter 3
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Last week I asked the question, “What does the resurrection of Jesus make possible?” And I said that we would be looking at this new community being formed in the Book of Acts, the earliest church, for help in answering that question.

So let’s turn to our reading from Acts this morning. We enter into the story with Peter addressing a crowd of people saying, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this?” Only minutes before, Peter and John had encountered a man who had been lame since birth. Every day he was brought to one of the Temple gates so that he could beg. As Peter and John were passing by, he asked them for alms. And Peter answered him. “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk. And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.” (Acts 3:6-7)

The crowd who observed this miracle now stands in awe and wonder before James and Peter. Peter insists that it is only by the power of Jesus that this healing has taken place. That it was faith in Jesus and the message of reconciliation that Jesus brings that brought about this miracle.

In speaking to the crowd of these things, Peter calls them to repent and turn to God so that their sins will be forgiven. And that’s how our reading ends today—but it cuts off the end of that last sentence spoken by Peter. And that’s a shame because there’s something we need to hear at the end of that sentence.

Repent and turn to God, not just so that your sins may be forgiven, but Peter continues “so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus,²¹ who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.” (Acts 3:20-21)

The repentance that Jesus calls for is not simply contrition over one’s personal shortcomings. Repentance and turning toward God means believing in an entirely new reality—a time when we are all reconciled to God and in loving relationship with God and one another—what Peter describes here as a time of refreshing made possible by the presence of the Lord. That universal restoration that God has been speaking about through the prophets for generations and generations.

This man healed by Peter and John was leaping around and praising God. Because he could all of a sudden see this. His healing gave him a glimpse into the kind of restoration desired by God and made possible by God.

Peter, John, and those other disciples, including the mother of Jesus, who stayed in Jerusalem after his resurrection and ascension, to carry on his work—this is their

mission: building the church for times of refreshing and *universal* restoration. Universal means everyone. Jesus asked that they make the promise of this new reality known to the whole world. At the end of Luke, Jesus told them that repentance and forgiveness of sins, being reconciled in God, was to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem.

These disciples stay true to this charge. They are working to build the community that is welcoming and breaks down the barriers of gender and ethnicity and religious practices and wealth and more, a community that reflects the love of God and attracts others to join in.

But somehow, we know that this early church evolved into something that to put it mildly, lost its way. And more and more, the Church is being called to do truth-telling about that. About the sins of our past. About the ways in which the abuses of our past created the brokenness between humans and creation that persists today. About the ways we continue to perpetuate the sins of the past, sometimes unknowingly.

As the Church of the 21st century, we are still dealing with having lost our way. There are so many places in history where we can see how the church strayed from the message of Jesus or even corrupted it. Think about the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the slave trade, the Holocaust, just to name a few. But I want to share this morning, as an example of the corruption of the Christian faith, a document sanctioned by the Church in 1514.

This document was called “The Requirement.” I found it particularly relevant to our reading of Acts, because this document uses Peter, friend and follower of Jesus, and considered the first Pope of the Church, as a justifier of some pretty atrocious sins.

In 1514, Spain was busy colonizing the Americas. There were incredible resources and wealth to be mined from these lands. The Spanish conquistadors needed a defense for their subjugation of the people they encountered when they colonized a land. So this document, “The Requirement” was written and sanctioned by the Church and the monarchs of Spain. It makes the claim that because Peter was Lord and superior to all people in the world (a claim I am pretty sure Peter would never have made) and that all Popes who followed him have the same power and superiority, the Pope can give to the Christian nation of Spain the right to take for themselves any lands deemed unchristian and therefore in need of colonization and conversion. And if those being colonized resisted, the consequences would be dire. I quote from the document:

“we will enter your land against you with force and will make war in every place and by every means we can and are able, and we will then subject you to the yoke and authority of the Church and Their Highnesses. We will take you and your wives and children and make them slaves, and as such we will sell them, and will dispose of you and them as Their Highnesses order. And we will take your property and will do to you all the harm

and evil we can, as is done to vassals who will not obey their lord or who do not wish to accept him, or who resist and defy him.”¹

How, we should ask, did the liberating and life-giving message of Peter and those first disciples get transformed into this power built upon violence and subjugation in the name of God? How did the church ever justify those atrocities as measured against the love and freedom found in the Gospel of Jesus?

In the Book of Acts, as the disciples move out of Jerusalem into other cities in the Mediterranean to share the good news of Christ, the people they encountered name them as those “turning the world upside down.” Peter and the disciples offered a vision of a world that operated in an entirely different way than the exploitation of the Roman Empire. And yet, that vision would be corrupted so that Christianity itself came to promote that same exploitation. Christianity, in fact, became the Empire.

Colonization, at least the way it looked several hundred years ago, may be a thing of the past. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter. Understanding and owning our history is essential. The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church that we came from were complicit in colonization and the subjugation of indigenous peoples, even right here in Maine. We were complicit in the slave trade and in resisting the full equality of people of color in our country for generations.

We can’t ignore our history. We can’t cover it up. All we have to do is turn on the news and we see how our history of racism and white supremacy continues to hurt and degrade and even kill brothers and sisters in our communities. But maybe we can learn from our history and work toward something better.

Stephanie Spellers, Canon for Evangelism and Reconciliation in the Episcopal Church has written a new book titled, *The Church Cracked Open*. In the introduction she writes, “God is breaking open this church and pouring us out—pouring out privilege, pouring out empire, pouring out racism and human arrogance—in order to remake us and use us to serve God’s dream for the whole world. We are the broken jar. It hurts and it sucks...and I think it’s a gift.”²

When I hear those words, I think of the disciples in Acts working to build the Church. But what they built was corrupted. So now we must ask what needs to be broken down in the church?

What Stephanie Spellers is telling us is that before we can begin to build a new vision for the church, before we can create the beloved community that God calls us to, we must first be willing to be broken open.

¹ <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/requerimiento/>

² Spellers, Stephanie. *The Church Cracked Open*, 2021. Church Publishing

But even as we are being broken open and pouring out those things that corrupt our human relationships and relationship with God, we are not alone. The book of Acts shows us the power of community. And the community of Acts reminds us that God is still at work in us and in the world. Those early disciples offer us their testimony. If they could speak to us today, they would say, "See how God has changed me? See what God is doing through me? You can have this, too. You can be changed and make change. You can help bring about the restoration of all people as desired by God." May it be so. Amen.