

On Not Shrinking

Acts 20: 17 – 38

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While a number of narratives in Acts address the questions and challenges of leadership in and for the church, Acts 20 may be the most comprehensive. It is, like much of Acts, a speech. This speech is given by Paul to the elders of the Church in Ephesus. It is a succession narrative, for Paul is passing the task of leadership on to others as he departs. Paul reflects on his leadership among them, warns them of challenges they are likely to face, and charges them for the task ahead. The chapter concludes with a tearful farewell, the elders putting Paul on board ship bound for Jerusalem, but ultimately for Rome. They will not see Paul again.

One phrase, twice repeated by Paul in this text, jumped out at me. They are words that I find important and challenging, and I wonder if you might also. The phrase that grabbed my attention is but four words: “I did not shrink.” In verse 20: “I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith toward our Lord Jesus.” Then again in verse 27: “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.”

“I did not shrink.”

Have we in the church, have I as a pastor and teacher, shrunk the claims and the power of the Gospel? In the face of cultural pressures to fit in, to make sense in the world’s terms, to justify our faith and the existence of the church, have we shrunk? Do we live in the era of the amazing shrinking church? And is our shrinkage not simply a matter of numbers, but of the height and depth of the message we proclaim and the boldness and conviction with which we proclaim it?

For most of my ministry I have served congregations of people who would probably be described as highly educated and open minded. In many ways this is a blessing, but perhaps a mixed blessing. In all these congregations, along about Easter, I could count on someone coming to me to say something like: “I just have trouble with Easter.” For some, of course, this is a genuine and heartfelt, even agonized, question and deserves to be responded to with care and pastoral concern. But at least sometimes what the people that came to me meant when they said, “I have trouble with Easter” was different. It was, “Listen, I am a modern person, a scientific person, a grown-up person; some people may be able to buy that stuff about rising from the tomb and what not, but not me.” I came to believe that nestled in their reservation, their difficulty was a certain measure of false pride. In response, I would often shrink.

I would say something like, “Well, it’s a metaphor, a symbol of our various dyings and risings, of all our endings and new beginnings, don’t you think?” Some seemed vaguely interested in my attempt to shrink the great drama of the resurrection to fit, but most did not. Either way, I felt somehow ill at ease with my response, with my effort to adjust the claims of the Gospel. I felt that instead of helping us to be transformed by the claims of the Gospel, I was mostly trying to fit the Gospel into terms acceptable to our world and to us.

After some years of this, I changed my tact. When I heard the by now predictable “I just have trouble with Easter,” I girded my loins and said to the man before me, “Well, you would. I mean, being a lawyer and all, being pretty well-fixed, why would you want a God who turns the world downside up? Why would you want a God who breaks this world open? But listen, stick around; I think we can help you with this. With God all things are possible!” I don’t know if I made any more headway, but I did have more fun. Maybe I shrank a little less.

To get a better sense of what Paul meant when he said “I did not shrink,” it’s helpful to cast back from his speech to the elders in Acts 20 to the account of his ministry in Ephesus in Acts 19, the ministry upon which he reflected in Acts 20. As is true in so much of Acts, there we find Paul and his team getting into trouble, making waves, and rocking the boat. There are at least three distinct scenes and stories in the drama of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, all of which disclose a gospel and a prophet willing to take on the culture and religion.

Paul’s time in Ephesus began with him encountering some believers there. Paul asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” “No,” they answered, “we have not even heard of the Holy Spirit.” Seemingly perplexed, Paul asked, “Into what then were you baptized?” What a great question! This might be a crucial guiding question for any contemporary attempts to recover a practice of catechesis. “Into what are we attempting to initiate people?” Those Paul had encountered went on to explain that they had been baptized in the name of John, John the Baptist, and not Jesus. Paul proceeded to baptize them in the name of the Lord Jesus and as he did so, the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Paul asked, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit?” In Acts, the Holy Spirit is one of the goods shared in common in the community of believers. The gift of the Spirit is not given just to some, but to all; not just, for example, to the apostles, but to all believers. In our own time this insight may help us recover a more fulsome understanding of the church and of the Spirit empowered ministry of the church as belonging to all believers.

One mark of Christendom was that ministry was thought to be something reserved for the seminary trained or the ordained. This pattern has been enforced by modernity’s bias in favor of professionals. Only the credentialed and professional could, it was thought, do ministry. This story of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit points toward a fuller and richer faith experience for all of God’s people and their participation in the Holy Spirit and ministry. These are the common inheritance of all Christians, of everyone in the believing community.

Often enough in the church, we too encounter members of the believing community whose baptism seems somehow incomplete, truncated. Perhaps it has been a baptism into cultural Christianity? Perhaps it has been baptism to membership in the church but not to discipleship? To receive the Holy Spirit, this good held in common in the Christian community means that a person is no longer only an object of ministry, but also a subject of ministry, someone empowered to do ministry in Christ’s name as a prophet-like-Jesus.

It is analogous to the difference between being a student and becoming a teacher. We have all heard the old saw, “You never really get something until you have to teach it.” We have heard it because it is true. No longer the perpetual student, we are gifted with the Spirit and sent forth to teach the Gospel in our words and with our lives. This

text challenges one form of our shrinkage today. “Did you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?” asked the non-shrinking Paul. “No, we’ve never even heard of the Holy Spirit.”

Another way to view this early scene from Paul’s ministry in Ephesus would be to note that sometimes in the church we seem to want to keep doing John’s ministry of repentance over and over. There’s sin and forgiveness, more sin and more forgiveness. We thank Jesus for his grace and mercy. Perhaps Jesus is ready for us to get on with it? Perhaps Jesus would say, “You’re welcome; now go do something!” What we never seem to get is the move beyond justification—forgiveness of our sin—to sanctification—new life in Christ, confident following of Jesus, and even our own apostolic ministry.

In our new time, the ministry of the church cannot be reserved for or assigned to the professional or credentialed alone; it will belong to all God’s people. Increasingly, I find that congregational leaders who are doing something vital are asking that congregations entrust leadership to the called and elected leaders of the church, while these leaders challenge themselves to entrust the ministry to the people of the church.

The second scene in the rollicking nineteenth chapter and its account of Paul’s amazing non-shrinking ministry in Ephesus tells the story of the bonfire of the magicians. Well not exactly of the magicians, but of their books and the tools of their trade. Ephesus was well-known for being a center of the magic arts, of sorcery, of the occult. In one incident a group of exorcists, the seven sons of Sceva, tried to appropriate God’s power for their own ends and got beat to a pulp by a rough, but articulate demon who said, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?” After this the magicians of Ephesus came forth with their expensive books and tossed them on the bonfire, repenting of their lucrative trade.

What could this entertaining story possibly have to do with us today? Acts does not doubt the power of the miraculous. Indeed, it seems likely that one of the reasons that Acts has been held at arm’s length by much of the church and particularly mainline congregations in the modern era is that it is so full of signs and wonders, of the miraculous. The fire and wind of Pentecost give way to the story of Annanias and Sapphira falling dead at Peter’s feet, Philip carried by the Spirit to the Gaza Road, and Peter led by a dream to cross the great cultural threshold into the home of the Gentile Cornelius. Earthquakes that fling open jail cells and storms at sea with miraculous tales of survival, signs and wonders, and the miraculous figure prominently in Acts.

But Acts does distinguish between the miracles of God and human magic. The former serve God and God’s Kingdom; the latter serve human ego and human power. In his *New Interpreter’s Bible* commentary on Acts, Robert Wall poses the matter this way: “Do we make it clear in our teaching that the promise of God’s salvation-creation power is predicated on our dependence upon Jesus and not ourselves, and that it enables us to serve God’s purposes and not our own?” (NIB, V. X, pp. 274, Abingdon: Nashville, 2002)

For better or worse—some of both in my judgment—we live in a time of new interest in spirituality, new openness to mystery and magic, to forms of knowing and experiences other than reason, the single faculty modernity prized so highly. A non-shrinking faith will confront the way that some such powers and projects become tools of the human ego, tools for the subjection rather than the liberation of human beings. A non-shrinking faith may acknowledge and even appreciate the renewed interest in

spirituality, but will also be willing to challenge forms of spirituality that are more self-magnifying than God-glorifying. Perhaps a bonfire of self-help or diet books or of the seemingly countless books and tapes on how you can capture the riches of the stock market could be arranged?

This is not the conventional book burning of those who would censor the reading of others. Rather, it is the practitioners of these lucrative, but self-aggrandizing arts who themselves place what they had once so treasured and had sworn by on the literal or figurative fire. "The miraculous power brokered by Paul is not a commodity dispensed to manipulate the direction of human life; rather, it is the mark of his spiritual authority that serves the missionary purposes of his prophetic vocation" (Wall). Paul did not shrink from challenging misunderstanding and abuses of spirituality and power.

The final wild scene from Paul's non-shrinking ministry in Ephesus comes with the riot of the silversmiths. Good Jews that they are, Paul and his comrades do not observe a polite distinction between business and religion. Their religion, their gospel, has implications for business and particularly for the big business in Ephesus of making gods in silver. Paul has had the indelicacy to point out that gods made with human hands are no gods at all, and this is not good for business. So the silversmiths riot to get Paul and his friends run out of town. The evangelists are disturbing the peace. However, the silversmiths, led by Demetrius, do not couch their objection in terms of profit or even business. They present the proclamation of the Gospel as a threat to the town's way of life, which indeed it is. "There is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute," said Demetrius, "but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned" (19:27). Not only has religion become a profitable business, but business is wrapped in sacred garb! As it is sometimes put in African-American congregations, Paul is no longer preaching, now he is "meddling!" In what ways does the Gospel challenge our way of life?

We could talk about our shiny metal gods known as automobiles and their nearly sacral role in our American way of life, and that might be on target. Even more to the point may be the way that we baptize our human agendas and projects and promote these as the Gospel. The Christian Right baptizes the Republican Party platform, while other more left-leaning groups baptize an ideology of inclusion as the complete substance of the Gospel and the project of the church. But these are gods made with human hands and no gods at all. The real point of Paul's attack on the god-making business in Ephesus is our own attempts to reduce the holy, mysterious, not-made-with-human-hands nor confined-by-human-agendas God to something we can control, manipulate, or locate. In fact, the gospel does challenge our way of life. I long for a fuller, less culturally accommodated, more confident faith and gospel. I believe Acts can help us in this regard.

Sometimes, when we gird up our loins and do not shrink, we may be surprised. Last year, Sasquatch Books, a regional publisher based where I live in Seattle released my recent book, *Common Grace*. The book came about this way. The editor at Sasquatch had been reading columns I write for the op-ed pages of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. He approached me about writing a book. As he was a good secular Seattle person and Sasquatch Books had never done anything in the religious or spiritual line before, he suggested that I might write a book of "secular sermons."

I wasn't really sure what "secular sermons" might be. I feared it meant moral

admonitions and advice drained of God, which sounded to me about the most awful thing I could imagine. But with a publisher offering me a hefty cash advance, I shrank. I said I would give it a try. When I dropped off the first version of the manuscript, I was nervous, or more nervous than usual, because the essays weren't secular at all, nor were they the innocuous spiritual bromides of the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" type. After the editor had read the manuscript over, we sat down to discuss it. He began by confessing, "When I started reading, I thought, 'Oh no, this can't be; there's too much God, too much Bible . . .'" But then he said a wonderful thing. He said, "But, you know, we asked you to write in your own voice . . . This is your voice." And then he said an even more wonderful thing, "Actually, by the time I got to the third section" (on social and political issues), "I wanted more Bible, more theology." I told him he was a quick convert.

"For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."

I wonder if our problem in the church today, in the words of preacher Fleming Rutledge, is too much anthropology and not enough theology, too much about us, not enough about God. Acts, a relentlessly theo-centric book, can help. When we return to Paul's repetition of the phrase "I did not shrink" in his parting words to the elders of Ephesus, it has most of all to do with the content of his message and his teaching among them. That message is about God. "I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, *proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house . . .*" and "I did not shrink from declaring to you *the whole purpose of God.*" Most of all what Paul meant by not shrinking was that he declared fully and unflinchingly the gospel message and the whole purpose of God.

Clergy and congregations today often seem to be at a loss as to their purpose or mission. We turn to community needs assessments, listening projects, and demographic studies to tell us what to do. It is as if we just need someone in the community to identify a crying or unmet need to give us a reason to exist. While such tools may provide some helpful information, I worry about a church and church leaders who seem to have lost touch with the obvious and urgent purposes of the church, which surely include growing people of faith, being and making disciples of Christ, and proclaiming and teaching the truth of God.

We have a reason to exist which may not be socially sanctioned, but is God-given. That reason is to be the church of Jesus Christ, light to the world and salt to the earth. We are called to declare the whole purpose of God and let our lives be formed and transformed by this truth. "I did not shrink," said Paul, "from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." It is time to exchange "pre-shrunk" for "shrink resistant."