

WGUMC May 3, 2015 "Acts Out" Acts 4:23-37

My daughter, Kristen, just finished reading *Lord of the Flies* for English class. When I was in high school, I had to read that book, too, but I'm not sure why. You don't have to put adolescents on a deserted island to know that, in a group, they act like ruthless Neanderthals. All you have to do is visit middle school.

I guess that I didn't like *Lord of the Flies* because I didn't want to read a whole book about the dark heart of humanity. I didn't want to study how desperate people can destroy any vestige of community. I get enough of that in the daily news. Just look at Baltimore and Ferguson. It's not just the kids who don't know that violence isn't the answer. Too many times, our cops don't know it, either. Maybe that's because no one is teaching them that there is a force more powerful than violence when it comes to achieving justice.

I look to the Lord of Lords, not the Lord of the Flies, for the answer to all violence in our world. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and formed an alternative society where the disciples followed him by living as he lived and loving as he loved. This Jesus society didn't follow the rules. It didn't kowtow to the rulers. For Jesus showed poor people that they didn't need the patriarchy. They didn't need the monarchy. And they didn't need to fear the authorities.

Now everyone knows that that kind of talk starts revolutions. The temple priests got anxious to arrest Jesus because they were afraid of the Romans and didn't want any trouble. So what did they do? They answered their fear of violence with more violence.

They killed Jesus and they would have liked to do the same thing to his followers, too. But Peter and John were acting out of a different set of rules. They responded to the

violence of the crucifixion with acts of healing and compassion.

That's what we read in the Book of Acts.

Last week, we heard how they saw a man at the gate of temple and healed him in the name of Jesus. Everyone got so excited that the temple police came to arrest Peter and John. Like their master, the two disciples didn't resist arrest, but they refused to stop talking about Jesus. And because of the healing they did and all the people they impressed, the authorities couldn't do much more than threaten them and let them go. I say, it worked in Jerusalem. It worked in Birmingham. Why can't it work in Baltimore?

After their release, Peter and John gathered with the disciples, told them what had happened and they all prayed, God give us the courage to speak the Word with all boldness, "while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." [Acts 4:30]

And what happens when Peter and John act out this bold faith in God's holy servant Jesus? What happens when they act out of the paradigm of love rather than the paradigm of violence? The Holy Spirit comes down and shakes things up and turns their world inside out.

Most of us have been through enough to know what it's like to have our lives turned upside down, but have you ever been turned inside out? In our self-centered culture, we spend so much of our time looking in, taking our pulse, measuring our ego, worrying about what is going to happen to us, when we could be looking out, taking a read on the rest of the world, measuring its needs, and praying about what is happening to others.

We seem to forget that when things get scary for us, we can find solidarity in knowing that things are scary for others, too. When we are being harassed or feel threatened by people or problems, when our faith is being tested, we can be

strengthened by connecting with others who are going through trying times, too. So, instead of shutting the world out because we just can't handle it, why not try letting the world in? It can help us get a handle on a lot of things and put our problems in perspective.

I guess that's why I always keep up on the news. By reading about the problems in the rest of the world, I feel connected to other people in a way that makes my problems seem more manageable. I figure that if they can live with theirs, I can surely live with mine.

But it gives me strength in another way, too. It makes me feel part of a bigger community that cares. The violence in Baltimore was answered by people coming together. Clergy from different faiths lined up next to the CVS store that was burned in order to form a wall of protection for peaceful protesters Monday night. Rev. Brown, a Baptist pastor who was

pepper-sprayed by police, said, "Our best sermon right now is not anything we say but what we do."

The next day, the schools were closed, so churches—including three UMC's—opened their doors to students who had no place to go. These pastors were displaying that for which the disciples in Acts were praying: the boldness to speak the Word and act out their faith.

But how can we who are a long way from Baltimore be a part of this acting out of faith? For starters, what's going on there should open our eyes to what is happening here. It's not as if we don't have our own problems with racial discrimination. Just a few weeks ago, San Jose's Independent Police Auditor issued her final report that revealed that never in the history of the San Jose Police Department has an accusation of racial bias been sustained. When it comes to criminal justice in this country and in this city, it's time to Act Out.

And what about the poverty that is the petri dish for so many of the problems in Baltimore? It's not that we don't have those same problems here. We live in a place where billionaires collect mansions like stamps but thirty percent of the population is spending more than half of their money on housing. That means they are making choices they shouldn't have to make: pay rent or buy groceries? Get a bus pass or fill a prescription?

Two weeks from now, Evan Green from Almaden Hills will be here to talk about our Open Table program that is designed to help people plan a way out of poverty. Going in, our Open Table volunteers really had no idea how hard it is to find affordable housing in this county. But like the first Christians, the first table came together as a group with one heart and one soul and one purpose: that there not be a needy one among them.

And so what each one had, they offered. Someone had an idea, another person had a contact, another person knew how to listen and someone else knew when to speak. Someone had perspective and someone had patience. Everyone had a gift and everyone brought it to the Table and it was distributed to anyone who was in need. Week in and week out, they met their sister for more than a year. That's what I call Acting Out.

I'm proud of the work that our two tables did in the past couple of years. Watch out because the Spirit may come down and shake you up and invite you to be on a table where you, too, can learn to stop looking in and start acting out.

It often takes a crisis, ours or someone else's, to prod us to act out our faith. The crucifixion of Jesus was the crisis that created this inside out community called the church. It was Jesus taking on the sins of the world that empowered the church to take on the needs of the world. There is a world of



need in Willow Glen and I thank God because I see how you are acting out the love of God in this community.

I see you Acting Out when you teach children and counsel youth, knit prayer shawls and prepare vials of life, serve shelter meals and work at Sacred Heart, visit someone who is sick or in prison, bring food to a homeless camp and advocate for affordable housing, say your prayers and pay your pledge, or head out on a mission trip to Missouri or Mexico. When you boldly act out your faith like the first Christians in Acts, you create an alternative society called the kingdom of God and you help to make sure that there is not a needy person among us.

A preacher once said that no one gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor. [James Forbes, former pastor of Riverside Church, NYC] If you keep acting out your faith, I'll get you one.