

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Rediscover Church: Porch Talk”

Dr. Jay Howell

October 17, 2021

While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s Portico, utterly astonished. When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, 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, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you. And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be utterly rooted out of the people.’ And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days. You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”
Acts 3:11-26

Last week Pastor Mark kicked us off in a new series “Rediscover Church.” As he shared then, we’re looking at some of the early chapters (3-5) of the Book of Acts. If you’ve never read through or spent much time in the Book of Acts, the Cliff Notes are that it’s the story of the church as it spreads the good news of Jesus beyond just Jerusalem and Judea, but into the surrounding regions, and along the way, all the challenges it encounters. Now that’s easy to summarize, but one reason we’re looking at the chapters we’ll be covering is because a lot of that story sometimes doesn’t get a lot of air time, and that’s really a shame, because the whole point of this series is that as we might be discovering or rediscovering life together as a church, there’s a lot we can learn from the first few years of the church itself, things maybe we’ve overlooked or even forgotten.

Typically, the way the Book of Acts gets covered in the church is something like this: Jesus was around for a little bit at the beginning and ascends into heaven. Then the disciples wait for a little bit in Jerusalem, until suddenly the day of Pentecost comes with the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Then we skip ahead until the conversion of a man named Saul, who would come to be known as the Apostle Paul, then maybe one or two other stories mixed in, but for the most part, that tends to be what folks are familiar with in the Book of Acts, flying over a lot of the stories that shaped the earliest days, months, and years of the church.

That's what we'll be doing for the next few weeks, going through these early chapters. Mark kicked us off with a story of two disciples, Peter and John, healing a man lame from birth at the temple, and we pick up just seconds after that healing took place, still here at the temple in Jerusalem. Let's go to God's Word together.

[Read passage.] Will you pray with me? Holy God for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

In college I lived in a house for a couple of years with a few other guys, and one part of that house was a covered front porch with a bunch of rocking chairs. Never knew what kind of conversation you'd get into if you sat down in one of those rocking chairs. Could be mundane, just shooting the breeze. Could be funny, maybe even a bit crude. You especially never knew what kind of conversation you'd get into if you sat out there and worked your way with someone through a six-pack of, uh, cream soda, shall we say.

You see, cream soda, especially if you're sharing it with someone else, has that tendency of making conversation flow a little easier, or maybe that's just what I noticed. You're out there for a little bit, and maybe you laugh a little louder, or tell the stories a little better.

But sometimes, especially if it's just one on one, there can be a pause in the conversation, and there's a chance for it to take a turn, a turn in a more serious direction, a time to get to the real talk, the real stuff. I remember those pauses on the front porch of that house. When after a second or two of silence, someone says, "So, I've been meaning to ask you." It's a big step; you can't just launch into it at the start, usually. You kind of end up at it. But after that point, you really do get to know someone. You really do get into talk of life and love and God and the world and all that. That's when some pretty strong connections are made.

And I remember a few instances of taking that step there on the front porch of that house in college, but then I know there were plenty of other times when I let it pass by, and conversation just went back to the good-natured, lighthearted topics you had been on. Nothing wrong with lighthearted or good stories and funny jokes. But I wonder sometimes what would've happened if I had sat out there and said, "So, I've been meaning to ask you," just a few more times. Missed opportunities and all that.

I'm guessing all of us can imagine settings like that. Doesn't have to be a front porch. Could be something else like a campfire, a kitchen table, a seat on an airplane. But there are spaces, it seems, that lend themselves to the real stuff, to real talk, to times when we get past the mundane and toward the sacred.

There was such a place many years ago in Jerusalem. We read about it a moment ago. A place called Solomon's Portico, or another way some translations say it, Solomon's Porch. This is where Peter and John are, and as you'll remember from last week, they had just healed a man. Our text today begins in v. 11, "While [the man] clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished." You see when Peter and John healed this man, it wasn't just some isolated thing off to the side; it was right in the thick of it. Lots of people coming and going. And now folks are flocking to the men they saw as having healed him.

The way this Solomon's Portico functioned was a de facto gathering place on the edges of the temple complex. It was a covered colonnade, most thick along the eastern wall of the temple complex. It was almost like concentric rectangles. One big rectangle, with one side of it considered as Solomon's Portico, then inside that, a smaller rectangle, which was the temple itself, then inside that, an even smaller rectangle, with each step forward considered holier and holier ground, closer and closer to the tangible presence of God. Solomon's Portico, then, was where you would wait and gather as folks would go into the temple itself, a place of fellowship, a place of

interaction, sometimes a place of conflict too, and as we'll see, like a front porch or a kitchen table, it was a place where you could get into the real stuff.

Peter doesn't wait long to do that. He dives in pretty quick actually. He tells the crowd it's not by their power but by the Lord's that this man was healed. But in what probably strikes us as a bit harsh, he goes on to point out just how wrong they all were for rejecting Jesus. Hear what he says: "The God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected" (v. 13), then "But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One" (v. 14), and finally "You killed the Author of life" (v. 15). That probably doesn't sound like too smart of a strategy if guiding people to believe in Jesus was Peter's goal. Maybe not the sort of tactic that would be quite as effective today, but nevertheless, it's real talk.

And then he shares the good news: "In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, 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, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets" (vv. 18-21). Translated and shortened: he's saying, Christ is your hope, our hope, and the hope of the world, both now and in the age to come. The point is, he's sharing all of this, that real talk leading to good news, in that place on the edges of the temple, the place where people gather and connect, hoping for a glimpse of the holy.

What could we learn from that? Is this still something that we do? Though the setting might not be the same, does the message still get through? The promise that Peter declares here is "times of refreshing...from the presence of the Lord," the coming of the Christ, and universal restoration. Those are big deals, and definitely good news worth hearing. Does the church still bear witness to it? Is the time that we spend in the presence of the Lord in worship and in fellowship refreshing? Do our actions and words convey the hope that restoration is coming? And not just for a few minutes on Sunday morning when we're in the heart of a worship service, but when we're on our own porches, those places on the periphery, wherever that may be, those places for real talk and real connection, does that message bear out? Or when we get up to that point, that second or two of silence in the conversation, do we let it pass by, like I used to do on the front porch of that house?

As I've mentioned before over the past few months, we are in the middle of a longer vision and strategy process, and a Steering Team of nine people chaired by Betsy Child has been looking at the scope of our church's ministry as well as details within our own neighborhood and community. One thing that was surprising was some statistics on the community immediately around our church.

You see, there are some metrics that can anticipate, with decent enough accuracy when the scale is large enough, how a group of people will tend to engage spiritually. An individual, for example, might engage spiritually most readily through Study, that is, in learning about Scripture or theology or church history. For another, they may engage spiritually through Worship, that is, in music and singing and corporate liturgy. And those aren't the only ones.

Within any particular group, you're going to have a bunch of different ones, different ways that people engage spiritually, but on a larger scale, there are trends within a community, trends that can be measured and anticipated. And if you were to guess the way in which our community, the neighborhood around our church, primarily engages spiritually, more than any of the others, and in fact at a rate double the national average, what would you say? Some of you might say, definitely Worship: Worship is what brings us all together in powerful

music and prayer. Others might say, Study: we value a high level of study of Scripture. And no doubt there are some for whom that's the biggest way we engage spiritually. But those aren't the answer.

The primary way that our neighborhood and immediate community engages spiritually is Relational, through Connection, through Fellowship, and does so at a rate double the national average. This discovery has raised a number of questions for this Steering Team. Does this mean that Study and Worship aren't important? (That's definitely not the case.) Are we as a church engaging people in a relational way? Are we meeting people who aren't here yet where they are now? And it's opened up some fruitful and sometimes tough discussion about who we'd like to think we are and then the way we actually are. Do we as a church spend more time and energy seeking to welcome and include those who aren't here yet, or do we spend more time and energy focusing on the people already here?

It's also kickstarted conversation about our church building, and just last week at that Steering Team's recommendation, the Session approved the formation of a Facilities Update Team, tasked with looking not just at what needs fixing or updating or replacing in our building, but looking more holistically at whether our church reflects a sense of welcome and connection and relationship, and if it doesn't, how could it?

All of those are big questions, and if we're not careful, as we talk about them, we can lose sight of the purpose behind all of it, and that purpose, as Peter shows us, is the sharing of the good news of Christ, the promise of renewal in him now, and the hope of restoration in the age to come. And that was made known in this space of fellowship and connection, a space on the edges of the temple where people come and go, a place where the mundane could turn toward the sacred, a place where people huddle to catch a glimpse of the holy, a place of real talk and real connection. Are you seeking out the same on your porches?

A few months back Elizabeth and Grant Clark, whom many of you know, invited Frances and me and the boys over for dinner. Now something you have to know about dinner parties as a preacher is that sometimes folks will feel like they have to have everything perfect when the preacher comes over, and so sometimes I might go into a house, and it feels like everything is wrapped in cellophane. Everything's too perfect. And even though conversation will be pleasant enough, inside I just want to say, "You really don't have put on airs just because I'm coming over." And it's not that an orderly house is bad or that preferring everything to be in its place is a bad thing, but when it happens just to impress the preacher, it kind of defeats the purpose of why I'd want to connect with you. It's harder to do that when a home feels like a museum.

And that's one of the reasons Frances and I loved this time over at the Clarks. (I asked their permission to share this, by the way.) We walked into their home, and it felt real. The home was hospitable and orderly, but it didn't feel like we had just walked into a show house that no one lived in. They have three young kids. There were shoes by the door. There were toys by the wall. And when our boys got into the mix, those toys came away from the walls and into the middle of the floor. And conversation flowed back and forth between the mundane and the sacred. One moment we're talking about what our kids are getting into. The next talking about God and church and our own faith. Even though we never spent time on an actual front porch, it felt like that front porch from that house I lived in those years back.

A sign of the early church was that it didn't pass up the opportunities for real talk and real connection, because wherever Solomon's Porch might be for you, wherever that place is where things can go from the mundane to the sacred, that's a place where the good news of Christ could be felt in someone's heart, if you're willing to look for that moment or two of silence in the conversation, and take that next step. Take it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.