

“The Book of Action: A Church That Counts”

Acts 2: 1–18, Acts 2: 37–42

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Day of Pentecost

“The message of Pentecost – as the culmination of what Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension set in motion – is this: God’s salvation has arrived in its fullness. It has been made complete. It is certain. You can count on it.” -- Matthew L. Skinner

The film department at Yale came to Henri Nouwen. Henry was teaching a group of 15 of us in a class called “The Spirituality of Vincent Van Gogh.” It was a fascinating study. The film department heard about it and wanted to do a documentary on it. They asked the class to be “extras” in the film. We all jumped at the chance. One day of filming. I got paid \$40. I never saw the movie. I assume it is sitting in the dusty basement somewhere in the archives of Yale.

But what I experienced was the excitement of the moments leading up to the beginning of the filming. The camera would roll. They would test the sound level. Then the director would say: Action! That’s when the good stuff began. You knew: this was what counted!

Last week, in chapter 1, the book of Acts left us waiting. Learning what it meant to live in a world bathed in the light of the resurrection. We were in a hold position. This week, it all changes. Pentecost is that moment when God says: Action!

There is a basic principle of life that deep down, we all already know. You only count what you care about. How many children do you have? I bet you know the number. How much money do you have in your retirement account? I bet you have a pretty good idea. How many football games did the Minnesota Vikings win in 2017? How about the Golden Gopher’s wins last season? I know it is two, because that is 200% more than my Fighting Illini! You only count what you care about.

What you care about, you measure. If you care about something and want it to grow, so to make sure, you measure it.

Not long ago, I took a tour of a high tech Greenhouse. They are trying to grow various strains of drought resistant corn. In this greenhouse, each single kernel of corn is planted in its own 5 gallon bucket. That 5 gallon bucket sits on a serpentine belt. As each plant winds through the building, they measure the sunlight. They add their own measured additional grow lights. The serpentine belt moves past a single source, where they measure the exact amount of water and nutrients.

Once a day the belt moves each plant one at a time plants into a little room. Inside, the door closes and they do a high resolution 3-D Scan of every single plant. They take high resolution RGB photo from the top, front and side. They take an infrared photo; a fluorescent photo and a hyperspectral photo. It’s basically like each plant is getting its own MRI once a day. They can tell exactly how much it is growing. They care about measuring how well it grows in times of drought, in times of stress. What you care about, you measure.

What did the early church measure? They lived in times of stress. Can we tell how healthy the church was?

We are going to do a high speed overview of the first 13 chapters of the book of Action. Be careful you don't get whiplash. We will be traveling at a speed that will give us a perspective that we usually miss. My thesis is that the early church cared passionately about spreading the gospel and this is shown in a very particular way that we can learn from today.

The book of Action: chapter 1. Waiting around. They tell us there are 120 people in the Christian church. And because Judas had voted himself off the Island, they lost 8% of their leadership.

Book of Action: chapter 2: The Holy Spirit shows up. Remember that song Alicia Keys sang a few years ago, "This girl is on fire!?" (pronounced: "Fi-yA!") Acts 2 is saying: This church is on fire! They start speaking other languages: Which is to say: they begin connecting with other cultures. As if we started saying:

To the Mexicans: Buenos dias! To the Hmong: Nyob zoo!
To the Canadians: Bon Jure. To the Jamaicans: How you doin' mon!
To the Tennesseans: How ya'll doin? To the Californians: Was sup?!
To the Minnesotans: It's a heckofaday, youbecha.

They learn to speak in the language, and to the needs of the people around them, to share their message in the metaphor of their world. They learn to talk so people can understand why the gospel matters. With passion: Fire!

What happens? In one day, 3,000 people join the church! How do we know? THEY COUNTED! And wrote it down!

Book of Action: Chapter 4. They share the story of Christ with those who are hurting. They know the pain of the world and bring the healing and hope of the good news. And they add another 2,000 people to the church!

The book of Action: Chapter 5. The church gets inspired, even courageous, and they start including more of an outreach to women. More leadership roles for women. hashtag: #Jesustoo!

And evidently, there were too many new members to count: They just record: "More than ever" believers were added to the Lord.

Book of Action: Chapter 6. The deacons decide to reorganize so they are more empowered to do congregational care. The love of Christ inside the church grows: and the insiders are ignited in love to invite the outsiders. And the numbers keep increasing.

Book of Action Chapter 7. There is this group of people against whom they had been taught to harbor racial, cultural, prejudice. People against whom they, since childhood, had been enculturated to harbor prejudice. The Samaritans. They begin to reach out to the Samaritans.

It works: the Samaritans hear the message: and the church keeps growing!

Book of Action: chapter 8: They proclaim the gospel to a high ranking official, who was an Ethiopian Eunuch.

He's African. He's sexually ambiguous. He's a government bureaucrat! But they break down the walls, reach out. The early church says: No barriers of race, culture, sexuality or job status. God has grace enough for us all! And the church keeps growing!

The book of Action: Chapter 9. There is only 1 person in this chapter. 1 person in their new member class. In fact, he is a violent, hateful, murderous, enemy of the Church. But the Spirit of Jesus reaches him.

Then one member of the church goes to him, and helps him learn about the experience of faith in Jesus. Murderous Saul is transformed into life-giving Paul. The love of Christ finds one new voice. You think one person you might bring in has no impact? Remember: No one person has ever had a greater impact on the church than the one person in that new member class.

The book of Action: Chapter 10. A Roman Soldier is added. The church reaches out to the military. Assume: there are some folks with stress, PTSD back then too. The church has a place for people who have suffered the trauma of war.

And the church says: God has a place for you among God's people. And the church keeps growing.

The book of Action: Chapter 11. The church encounters the intellectuals. The University professors. The kind of people who listen to MPR. The church keeps growing.

The book of Action: Chapter 13. They send out some of their members to the island of Cyprus. They speak their language. By the time this small group is ready to go home, practically the whole island BEGS them NOT to leave. "The word of the Lord spread throughout their region, and they were glad..."

Message of Christ, rightly interpreted brings joy. It's the whole reason we are here. We have been included in the joy!

Friends, that is not even half of the Book of Action. Did you notice ... how many times they were counting? To count is to be accountable. It helps you tell the truth. To not be delusional. They pay attention to numbers.

I have a problem with the modern day church: Broadly speaking, we have been full of excuses. We have stopped counting.

We have a church event, and we say something like: "Well, there were not very many people who came, but those who were there had a good time." The Presbyterians can lose 2 Million members, and we just say: "Well, those who were there had a good time." The story is the same for the Methodists, the Episcopalians, and the Lutherans, the whole mainline. And it's even happening to the Baptists.

I think we need to pay attention to the Bible to get over our allergy to numbers. I think we ought to count a whole lot more. And if some programs is shrinking, or some church is shrinking, then we ought to follow those words of Jesus when he says:

If a tree is not bearing fruit, put some fertilizer on it. Dig around the roots. Water it, tend it, pay special attention to it, and see if grows. And if after a year, it does not grow: Pluck it out, and plant something else. Which is to say, try something new! Why? Because we have the life-giving gospel to share. We need to share it!

The Book of Action is a book full of numbers: because they care enough to count. To do the math. To see what is working.

The Holy Spirit brings life, vitality, passion! We are called to be a people of passion!

I like listening to tapes of great speeches at graduations. Before he passed away, Apple Computer's founder, Steve Jobs, told the graduates of Stanford about when he was fired from the company he himself had founded. Jobs said, from his being fired, he came to realize the heaviness had been replaced with the lightness of starting over again."

Sometimes in the church, we need to let the heaviness of the past go, so we can feel the lightness of starting over again. It may be time for a new day. To feel the freedom of beginning again!

The Presbyterian Church has that newness structured into its being. Its officers, its Elders, its deacons, its trustees. They are in office for only three years. Then, it's time to begin again: to open ourselves to new leaders. The early church, in Acts chapter 1, in essence, rolled the dice to choose a new leader. Sometimes I think we need to roll the dice on new leaders for us too. We trust the Holy Spirit will help us to grow the inexperienced into new leadership skills.

We need to be accountable. By the way: For the members of the House of Hope: I would like you to write down on your bulletin: Do you think the membership of this congregation is growing or is it shrinking? In the past 20 years: is it growing or shrinking. Write down your answer.

Now, if you think it is growing, by how much? Or if you think it is shrinking, by how much? Show of hands: How many people think it has grown over the past 20 years? How many people think the membership has shrunk in the past 20 years?

My job as your transitional pastor is to bring you the stark truth. The fact of the numbers is: Over the past 20 years, this congregation has grown by 140 members. I hope you can take in the realization: You are one of the rare mainline churches that is growing! How has that happened? What can we do to make it grow even more? Where is the health that has brought this church to where it is? And how can we build on that health? Where is the strength – and how can we build on that strength? What would it look like if we opened ourselves to one another more intentionally and the Holy Spirit decided to set us on fire?

Think of the love of Christ we have to share! Look at the people in everyday life around you.

Who needs the hope?
Who needs the friendship?
Who needs the compassion?
Who needs the healing?
Who needs the forgiveness?
Who needs the grace?

Because the Spirit is already at work among the people of The House of Hope! And it is time to listen for the Holy Spirit to come powerfully again upon this church -- and say: ACTION!

Amen.