

This Easter we're reading through the book of Acts as a parish.

Acts tells the story of the expansion of the church. The church starts in Jerusalem, an occupied national capital on the edge of the Roman empire. The book ends with the good news being proclaimed in the heart and center of the empire, in Rome itself.

In the beginning, Christianity is a subset of Judaism. The followers of Jesus meet together for Eucharist. But they also go to the Jewish temple to pray.

Later in the book, Christianity will begin to be an independent religion, not a subset of Judaism, but an autonomous religion.

In the beginning, you have to become a Jew if you want to be a Christian. Later, you could convert to Christianity directly, without being circumcised or converting to Judaism.

So what happens in the middle? What moves the church from being a Jewish-only movement to being a religion open to people from all tribes and languages and peoples and nations?

There are actually 3 turning points that are narrated in the book of Acts. The whole book literally hinges on these 3 important turning points.

The third turning point is in Acts chapters 10 and 11 and centers on Peter. That'll be part of our readings for next week.

But the first 2 turning points were part of our parish readings this week. And one of them was also our first lesson today. More on those in a minute.

But there's also a lead-in to these first two turning points, and so I want to start with that today.

In the early days of the Christian church and in the early chapters of Acts, on the surface everything appears to be hunky dory. There seems to be a remarkable sense of camaraderie and a common mission and purpose.

But the book of Acts is not set in some Never-neverland. And the early Christians are not 2-dimensional cardboard cutouts. And in chapter 6 we see evidence of an early disagreement and controversy. And it breaks down along some quasi-cultural fault-lines. By this time Judaism was not confined to the land the Romans called Palestine, the land we call the modern nation of Israel. Judaism in fact had spread into the Mediterranean world. By New Testament times, there were more Mediterranean Jews who spoke Greek as their native language than there were Jews who lived in what we would consider Israel.

And since the Christian movement at this time was still Jewish, there arose a complaint from the Greek-speaking Jewish-Christians that their Greek-speaking Christian widows were being overlooked. So the Apostles decide to appoint a group of 7 men, the first 7 deacons to take care of the distribution of food to all the widows.

And it's interesting. The original controversy was that the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked. And either by coincidence, or by shrewd design, all 7 of the original deacons have Greek names. And the 2 most important deacons will be Stephen and Philip.

Stephen is the focus of the rest of chapter 6 and 7 of Acts. Philip is the focus of chapter 8.

Deacon Stephen gets arrested and put on trial. And he gives the longest defense of anyone in Acts. But in the end, he is taken out and lynched. The mob stones him to death. And we're introduced to a young Jewish leader named Saul who held everyone's coats while they stoned Stephen. And Luke says point blank that Saul approved of Stephen's murder.

And then Saul leads the charge against Christians, sometimes going house to house to seek them out and imprison them.

Ironically this persecution has an unintended consequence. It causes Christians to leave Jerusalem. Up until this point, Christianity was confined to this one city. But as the Christians flee Jerusalem, they end up spreading Christianity farther and farther afield.

Jesus had predicted this. He had told his apostles that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, then Samaria, then to the ends of the earth. And this movement begins in earnest in the 8th chapter of Acts.

As I said, Deacon Philip is the main focus of this chapter. He begins to preach in Samaria. Samaritans were a quasi-Jewish group that most good Jews usually wouldn't have anything to do with. And yet Philip makes a number of converts amongst the Samaritans. This is pushing the envelope. Christianity up until this point had been a purely Jewish movement. But now it's beginning to expand just a bit into Samaria.

And then we get the first of 3 great hinge points where Christianity shifts from being a Jewish subset to being a faith open to all peoples.

It starts with Philip making a high value convert who isn't Jewish at all. Deacon Philip converts the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia. The man is attracted to Judaism, but he can't convert to Judaism because he is a eunuch.

But Philip is led by the Holy Spirit to approach this man, and then to talk to this man, and then to tell him about Jesus.

This man would never be allowed to convert to Judaism. That's because he's a eunuch. According to the Law of Moses, a eunuch is automatically disqualified from participating in temple worship. He can't ever truly become part of the people of God.

And yet, after hearing Philip talking about Jesus, he asks if anything would prevent him from being baptized as a Christian. And Philip baptizes him.

The Ethiopian eunuch then drops out of the book of Acts, and we don't hear any more about him. Yet in Ethiopia they claim that he returned to his country and proclaimed the faith himself. The church in Ethiopia looks to that Eunuch as their founder and patron saint. But Philip didn't know that would be the outcome. He was simply trying to be obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

This conversion of the Ethiopian is a hugely important turning point. For the first time Christianity explicitly expands beyond the Jewish people.

The second great turning point in Acts comes in the next chapter, ch9. It was our first reading this morning.

Saul the chief persecutor of the early church is heading to Damascus in Syria to ferret out Christians who have fled from Jerusalem. In his mind, he is trying to stop Christianity from metastasizing like some religious cancer.

But unexpectedly, Saul is thrown to the ground by an overwhelming vision. It's an overpowering sound and light show complete with the voice of Jesus himself:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Saul asks, "Who are you, Lord?"

The reply comes back, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

Saul is blinded by this vision. But he's been spiritually blind so that's appropriate. A Christian named Ananias is sent to heal him. Ananias is a bit skeptical, but is obedient.

Saul regains his sight, physically. And he begins to see things in a new way spiritually. He gets baptized. And he eventually starts preaching and teaching about Jesus in Damascus.

It's gloriously ironic. The man who originally came to Damascus to stop Christianity from spreading is now actively spreading Christianity in Damascus.

And much of the rest of Acts will focus on Saul. Saul will stop using his Jewish name, Saul, and will use his Roman name of Paulus or Paul. Saul Paulus will become the great apostle who spreads Christianity further than anyone else in Acts, tirelessly taking the good news of Jesus to non-Jewish people in what we would call Turkey, then Greece, then Italy.

Philip baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch is the first great hinge point of Acts.

Saul Paulus converting to Christianity and becoming the one who will take Christianity out into the Greco-Roman world is the second great hinge point. And next week, we'll hear about the third great hinge point—Peter having a vision and baptizing a Roman family. But we'll save that for later.

For now in our reading through Acts, Christianity is starting to leave its cradle in Jerusalem and is beginning its spread. In Jesus' words, it is spreading from Jerusalem to Samaria (and eventually) to the ends of the Earth.

We see the early Christians being attentive to the nudges and sometimes shoves of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit pushes their envelopes; it pushes their comfort zones. But they do seek to be obedient to God.

And because of their obedience, Christianity has spread. We are no longer a tiny subset of Judaism. We are the largest religious group on earth. Christianity has spread to all corners of our world.

And in some parts of our world it is still expanding rapidly. Christianity is growing wildly in Africa and southeast Asia. And it is currently exploding in China. If current trends continue, by 2030 there will be more Chinese Christians than American Christians.

And yet, in our country, Christianity is declining rapidly. A few congregations are growing here and there. But Christianity is shrinking in the United States.

In the 21st century, church membership and attendance has dropped by 25% overall. And the number of people with no religious faith has grown by 150%.

So the example of the Christians in Acts challenges us.

What are we doing to share our faith with those we encounter?

How are we being obedient to the nudges of the Holy Spirit?

Are we living our lives in such a way that the love of God shines through us?

If Christianity became illegal tomorrow, would there be enough evidence to convict us of that "crime"?

The early Christians risked everything to follow Jesus.

What are we willing to risk? What are we willing to do?