

May 28, 2017
Acts 1:1-11
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“Speak Possibility”

Good morning! It is great to be back with you. For the next five weeks I will be preaching from the Acts of the Apostles -- or the book of Acts for short. Today we're going to begin at the beginning: Chapter One, verse 1. Only this isn't really the beginning of the story; it's the beginning of Part Two. You may remember that the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same author as one continuous narrative. In Acts 1:1, the author refers to the first book -- the gospel of Luke -- and addresses the reader of the second book as Theophilus. Theophilus may have been an actual person; the name literally means “lover of God,” so I think we can take these words as being written for us, as well.

The gospel of Luke took us through Jesus' birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances -- Acts 1:1-5 summarizes this for us. And now the disciples are gathered together and ask Jesus the logical question, “What comes next? Is this the time when you restore your kingdom?” And Jesus tells them it's not for them to know the time for that, but they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. And then Jesus is lifted up into heaven and hidden by a cloud. And the disciples are left looking up in the air with their jaws hanging open.

This Sunday, when we read about Jesus being taken up into heaven and stand with the disciples asking “What next?” and wait for the power of the Holy Spirit, is called Ascension Sunday -- because of Jesus' ascent into heaven. I want to try a little twist on that today, and call this Assent Sunday: A-S-S-E-N-T, which means to agree with, or approve of. Here's how it works: I'll preach, and you agree with me. Think you can do that? I see that some of you are already

skeptical. Don't worry -- we have room for many opinions here -- if you have questions when I'm done, I'd love to hear them.

Here's a word you're going to be hearing a LOT over the next few weeks: I hope I'm not the only one saying it, because I'm encouraging all of us to make it part of our working vocabulary. The word is possibility, and I plan to use it in the sense of positive potential, good things which haven't happened yet but might happen. Possibility is *not* passivity: we're not waiting for someone else to do this for us while we stand around slack-jawed, staring upward. When the disciples did this, two men in white robes (presumably angels) showed up and said -- this is from the NRV, the New Rosanna Version -- "Hey! Why are you just standing around? This is Jesus we're talking about; he keeps his promises. He said he'd send you a Spirit of power. You'd better be ready for something big." Next week we'll talk about what happened next.

But today, the disciples are standing in a place of possibility: Jesus is risen from the dead but is no longer physically with them: the kingdom has been promised, but it is not yet here, and the disciples don't know exactly when it will arrive. It is not a coincidence that this is exactly where we're standing today: right in between Almost and Not Yet. Now, if you're a pessimist, maybe this is where you give up, and say, "it's been so long, and the world is still a mess. God's kingdom is never going to get here. Time to shut it down and go home." But when we speak the language of possibility we say, "the Holy Spirit is among us! Every day I see evidence of God's work in the people around me. How can I encourage that so the kingdom gets here sooner?" Diane Lund shared a great devotion with Worship Team this week -- again, I'm paraphrasing, but the key idea was If it isn't fantastic it's because God isn't finished yet. The thing which keeps me going as a Christian is not that my life is perfect, stress-free and fantastic. If you think your life is perfect, stress-free and fantastic, I have a good psychiatrist to recommend. No, what keeps me going is the possibility that God isn't finished yet--make that the promise that God isn't finished yet.

I want to say a little more about *speaking* specifically, because I believe what we say is powerful. And sometimes what we say is sacred. This goes both for what we say about and to God, and how we

speak to one another. Sometimes words actually bring something new into existence. Let me give you a couple examples: think back to the beginning -- the very beginning, and God's work of creation. How did God create things? Look back at Genesis chapter 1 and there are a whole string of verses -- verse 3, verse 6, verse 9, verse 11, verse 14, verse 20, verse 24, verse 26 . . . all of which start with the phrase "And God said . . ." God said let there be light; and there was light. God didn't command electrical engineers to install some lights, God spoke and it happened. Light, waters, living creatures, you name it; God created them by speaking. There are a few places where human speech creates a new reality: mostly in formal settings like courtrooms and churches. As an ordained clergy, one of the things that I am empowered to speak in very specific circumstances are the words, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," or words to that effect. I don't say these words at the wedding rehearsal; I save them for that occasion, because all the hoopla of a wedding is preliminary to or a celebration of the completion of that new identity -- two separate people who have committed to one single relationship. The purpose of a wedding is so the couple will be married. This probably sounds obvious to you, but it's one of the reasons that discussions about the role of clergy in weddings is such a big deal.

There isn't anything magical about this process. Even though I'm a pastor, if I walk into a dark room and say, "Let there be light!" nothing happens. At least not until I turn around and flip the switch. But words have power: especially when we commit ourselves to speaking the truth. Which truth we speak depends on what we're focused on. A common approach to any organization -- whether it's a softball team, a business, or a church -- is to ask, "What's wrong here? How can we stop it?" But it is just as valid to ask "What's right here? How can we encourage it?"

In the late 1987, Case Western Reserve University's department of organizational studies published an article co-authored by David Cooperrider. His approach grew into an organizational consulting approach called Appreciative Inquiry. I am a newcomer to Appreciative Inquiry, but I'm going to be asking you to learn about it with me over the next few weeks, and practice it with me here at Creekside. Here's the academic definition: Appreciative Inquiry advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is, in order to

imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur. In other words, when we work toward a shared vision of what is possible, we don't have to twist anyone's arm in order to get them to come along.

Here's another way to think of it: I know this is a bunch of words -- a cloud of words -- but they're all grouped around the idea of possibility. I don't know if Marita had fun mashing these words together, but I had fun thinking of words which express blessing, appreciation, and possibility. I even got to sneak an exclamation point in there. Yes! I can think of people in this congregation who use words like these and embody concepts like these on a regular basis. They are people I like to talk to; they are people who make me feel like I am doing a good job -- *even when* they are expressing a concern about my work or something at Creekside. These are people who allow for the possibility that if it isn't fantastic, it's because God isn't finished yet. Read through these words -- they're out in the Gathering Area, too -- and see how many of them you can use in your speaking about Creekside and to other people at Creekside in the coming weeks. You can probably think of some great words which I did not include here.

We'll be talking about some other aspects of Appreciative Inquiry through the month of June, but our future begins with how we *talk about* our future. What we say determines what we focus on; what we focus on determines what we imagine, what we imagine determines what we do; what we do determines our future. I am inspired by how neatly these ideas dovetail with the Acts of the Apostles: those men and women who were so inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit that they couldn't keep quiet even when their lives depended on it. I hope you'll join me in speaking possibility. I know I'm going out on a limb here, but I invite you to hold me accountable when I fall short in my speaking or in my listening. I believe that the power of the Holy Spirit is among us and already working within us. If we aren't fantastic, it's because God isn't finished yet. Amen?