

“Scattered But Not Shattered”

Acts 8:1b-8

Series: Living Outside the Box Week 6. Living Outside Rejection

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The Woodside Church

It was over. The experts said it wouldn't last. Like a failed dot-com business, it grew too big too fast. But what a wild ride! From a fiery explosion it launched like a rocket and expanded rapidly. First hundreds then thousands joined the movement. It seized the entire city. In the early days, the powers that be dismissed it as another fad. 'Don't give it a thought,' they said with a wave of their hands. 'It will collapse the same as all those other fanatics.' Yet like a nuclear chain reaction it continued to mushroom beyond all proportion. Now there was no choice. The authorities had to step in and stop it. First they threatened the leaders. Next they flogged them. Finally, they made an example of the most radical outspoken one by killing him. This was the first strike in their mission to root out the dangerous rebels.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:1b-3).

Those who remained in the city were rounded up and thrown into jail by the Sanhedrin's attack dog Saul. The rebel leaders went into hiding. The rest scattered. 'They are just rats running from the light,' the leaders joked. 'We've seen this happen so many times before. Once we jail the main agitators and disrupt their organization the whole thing will disappear. Trust me, no one will ever remember the name of Jesus of Nazareth.'

But they were wrong. On that day the Church of Jesus was scattered but not shattered. If you took a snapshot of the Church at that instant you would be severely depressed. Death, destruction, defeat defined the movement in that moment. Stephen is dead, the Church is destroyed, the Gospel is defeated. If you were there you might be tempted to give up and go back to fishing. Yet there's a funny truth to wildfires. As you try to stomp out one hot spot, the wind blows it to twenty others. If the apostles were the ones who manufactured and fueled this movement it would have died long ago. But this was a Holy Spirit thing. The Spirit ignited the fire. The Spirit fueled the fire. The Spirit blew on the fire. The Spirit scattered the fire. Jesus even predicted this, though no one at the time expected it to happen in this way. Before He ascended Jesus said,

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8).

The Jerusalem phase was established. Now comes the second wave in the spread of the Gospel – Judea and Samaria.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8:4-8).

Talk about a frying pan to fire experience. Philip was a Jew. Samaritans hated Jews and Jews hated Samaritans. To the Jews there was no such thing as a 'Good Samaritan.' It was an ancient feud. Each went miles out of their way to avoid walking through the other's territory. The Samaritans defiled the Jewish Temple. The Jews destroyed the Samaritan Temple. Yet they claimed to worship the same God and follow the same Law of Moses. When Jesus tried to walk through Samaria on His way to Jerusalem for the Passover, a Samaritan village refused to welcome Him.

When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village. (Luke 9:54-56).

Philip did not let this prejudice stop him. The Spirit sent him to preach among the bitter enemies of his people and the result? The old walls came tumblin' down. For the first time in hundreds of years Jews and Samaritans were united as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. In fact, the explosion of the Church was so powerful in Samaria a few of the Apostles who were protecting the persecuted flock in Jerusalem took a risk, came out of hiding, crossed into enemy Samaritan territory and witnessed the wildfire of faith, hope and love spreading among their former adversaries.

And one of those Apostles was John – the man who previously volunteered to call fire down on a Samaritan village. I think Jesus looked down from heaven and purposely chose John to go, lay hands on his new Samaritan siblings and pray for them to receive a different fire from heaven – the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit, however, had more work for Philip. Breaking ethnic barriers was not good enough for God – He smashed racial prejudice as well. Next He sent Philip out on a desert road in the noon day heat to meet a high official from Ethiopia. Through a divinely arranged appointment, Philip shared the Good News and baptized this influential African. As a result, the Gospel spread to another continent. Philip was only one of the many missionaries who scattered the seed of God's Word as they scattered out from Jerusalem.

You were scattered today. Instead of sitting in this building this morning you led worship for former prisoners. You raked leaves, cleaned gutters, fixed and painted homes for seniors, single moms and people who are sick. You cleaned up our roads. You made meals for shut-ins, gathered canned goods for food pantries, helped out at homeless camps in Bucks County and served food to people without homes in Philadelphia. You read stories to children in the hospital, visited those who are in hospice and cleaned up a nature center. You made corsages for residents of nursing homes and led a worship service for them. Today the Church left the building and scattered to do God's work. Today you didn't **GO** to church. Today you **WERE** the church. And from this day

forward my prayer is that you will **BE** the church. I don't want today to just be a gimmick, a stunt or a fad. My hope and prayer is that this is a new beginning – if you will – a new birth for Woodside.

The Church is only Alive if it is Scattered. The old idea was an “alive” church had a lot of activities going on in the building. Our Scripture today tells us the opposite is true. You only receive life if you go out and give it away. That does not mean we can't come together in the building. The people of God have always gathered in a Temple, a synagogue or a sanctuary to worship God. But why only the building? I hope you are starting to see you can have a Bible study at Einsteins or McCaffrey's, you can pray in school or work, you can even worship in Borders, Barnes and Noble or your home.

I hope you are also discovering that gathering in a worship service or a Growth Group is not enough. If you and your Growth Group are not scattering to share Good News and do Good Deeds, you are missing the most important point. Imagine a football team that came together just to stand out on the field and huddle. It does no good to hang out in the holy huddle. You must break the huddle and play the game. I challenge every disciple of Jesus and every Growth Group to find and commit to a mission where you can share the Good News and do Good Deeds. Imagine if all our forty to fifty Growth Groups engaged in mission once a quarter – that's a 160 to 200 opportunities to bring joy to someone's world. Woodside would be blessing our community 3 to 4 times every week of the year.

The Best Way to Kill a Church is Keep it in the Building. Do you know what used to be the number one industry in this area called Edgewood or Woodside? Green houses. Joseph Heacock owned much of the land and buildings and grew roses over in the area now called Rose Hollow. Nearly every resident of this community worked in some part of the operation at some point in their lives. Green houses are a wonderful, climate controlled environment to grow plants for floral arrangements. Yet the same end always comes to cut flowers – they die. For plants to grow and spread they must be rooted in soil and face the elements. We can grow lovely Christian lives in the hothouse of this building. But if we keep the faith hidden in here, it will die. The seeds of the Gospel must be scattered out in the world for them to spread.

Now I do not wish or pray for persecution. But you only have to look around the world to discover that the Church is rapidly increasing in the developing world where it faces poverty, pressure and persecution while it is rapidly dying in Europe and North America where we enjoy freedom, plenty of resources and mostly indifference. Too many churches are just green houses producing climate controlled hot house Christians who come, sit in a building and then go home. God wants to scatter us to bless lives with His grace and love everyday.

Opposition can come in many forms. It's not always persecution. In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast many church buildings were devastated. Reverend Michael Mille pastored one of those churches, White Dove Fellowship International Outreach Center. Before the storm the average church attendance in their

services was 3,000. But at the first service after the hurricane Pastor Mille preached to 300 people. As you can imagine, it was an emotional sermon. Yet Pastor Mille told the congregation that a scattered church is not a shattered church. He said, "We have successfully planted people all over the U.S. We used to sing Jesus is all we need...now he's all we've got."¹ Opposition cannot kill the Church. Apathy will.

The Good News is: **When the Church Scatters it Meets the Holy Spirit.** When Philip left Jerusalem and went down to Samaria, the Holy Spirit was already there preparing the way. When Philip met the official from Ethiopia the Spirit set up the interview. I hope you are noticing as you read Acts that the Apostles are always running to catch up with the Holy Spirit as He smashes one barrier after another. It should not be called the Acts of the Apostles. It's the Acts of the Holy Spirit. I hope, as you went to nursing homes, hospices and hospitals, as you went to homeless camps and cold cement street corners, as you went to parks and soccer fields, as you went through neighborhoods asking for canned goods, as you gave away corsages to seniors, did odd jobs for single moms and sang praise songs with former prisons you felt the Holy Spirit with you. And if you didn't, then you need to go out and do it again and again.

The Holy Spirit scatters His people so they can shatter the walls, the barriers, the boxes our world wants to put us in. Today we learned the Church is not a building – it is a people. Today we learned we don't go to Church, we are the Church wherever we go. Today we learned the Holy Spirit is shattering the boxes of ethnic difference, the boxes of racial prejudice, the boxes of economic disparity, the boxes of school cliques, the boxes of work conflict and family feuds. The Spirit is helping us live outside those boxes so that the one thing which unites us is faith in Jesus Christ. The Spirit is scattering us so we can share the love of Jesus with those who are shattered.

One of the most shattered places on earth in 1945 was the city of Nagasaki in Japan. Imagine being a U.S. Marine stationed among the rubble of a city that was decimated in an instant by the second atomic bomb. Buckner Fanning was assigned to that detail three weeks after the bomb was dropped. As Max Lucado describes it:

Can you imagine a young American soldier amid the rubble and wreckage of the demolished city? Radiation burned victims wandering the streets. Atomic fallout showering on the city. Survivors shuffling through the streets, searching for family, food and hope. The conquering soldier, feeling not victory but grief for the suffering around him. Instead of anger and revenge, Buckner found an oasis of grace.

At one severely damaged building Buckner spied a sign in English which read: Methodist Church. Returning the next Sunday he was not sure how they would hold a worship service in this structure which looked like it was about to collapse.

Windows, shattered. Walls, buckled. The young marine stepped through the rubble, unsure how he would be received. Fifteen or so Japanese were setting up chairs and

¹ Lolly Bowean, "Ministers Look to Rebuild Lost Flocks," Chicago Tribune (9-19-05).

removing debris. When the uniformed American entered their midst, they stopped and turned.

He knew only one word in Japanese. He heard it. *Brother*. “They welcomed me as a friend,” Buckner relates, the power of the moment still resonating more than sixty years after the events. They offered him a seat. He opened his Bible and, not understanding the sermon, sat and observed. During communion the worshippers brought him the elements. In that quiet moment the enmity of their nations and the hurt of the war was set aside as one Christian served another the body and blood of Christ.²

There are shattered people out there. The Holy Spirit wants to scatter us so we can heal them with the shattered Body and Blood of Jesus

But we won't know if we don't go.

² Max Lucado, *Out Live Your Life: You Were Made to Make a Difference*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson: 2010) 128-129.

