

“The Acts of Westminster”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Psalm 23 and Acts 2:42-47*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

You just heard an account of the earliest church. The first Christians. They weren't even Christians then. They were followers of the Way, still very Jewish.

Peter preaches his first sermon, telling the people about Jesus, how he died and how he was resurrected. And in a moment most of us preachers can only envy, three thousand people—if you believe Luke—repent their sins and are baptized.

Our passage tells us what they *do* with that baptism. They become a community, a group of people who look after each other and who share this mysterious journey of faith.

They become a *diverse* community, for people had come to Jerusalem from all over the known world, from the fertile shores of old Babylon to the rocky peaks of Persia, from modern-day Turkey to the sands of Arabia, from the islands of the Aegean to the kingdoms of Africa and the Mediterranean. They become a *learning* community, studying the Hebrew Scripture and discussing the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. They become a *worshiping* community, spending much time together in the temple. They become a *caring* community, loving especially the most vulnerable. They become a *sharing* community, in which wealth is given away so that everyone has what they need. They become a *rejoicing* community, no dour solemnity here but glad and joyful hearts. They become a *praying* community, turning everything over to God. And in all these things, they are together.

What if we had a similar account for Westminster? It just so happens that I found one, buried in the sands of Auburn. It's short, so you know I didn't write it. Well, kinda short.

Dear Theophilus, here follow the acts of the disciples of Westminster.

Founded on the cause of ending slavery, the church continued through many generations, who passed on the faith to children and grandchildren. The people heard Jesus' call to love our neighbor as ourselves and were cut to the heart, thinking of those who had been for so long excluded from that love. They decided to become a church that welcomes, affirms, and empowers everyone as a child of God. No one's race, gender, age, sexuality, family status, ability, or economic status would ever be allowed to stand in the way of their full participation in the life of the church. Questions would be valued as much as answers. Differences would become opportunities for learning and celebration, rather than things to hide or overcome. They would learn to see the face of God in each other.

God added to their number and surprised them by bringing into their community a number of very special people with disabilities. The community learned to value these

people and their differences as gifts, teaching them to see the world and God in new ways, reminding them to be joyful and more spontaneous, more creative.

The people loved to learn and discuss difficult topics together, and though they often disagreed, they did not walk away from the table, because a common love and curiosity held them there. They shared brunches and potlucks and cookouts, and of course the Lord's Supper. They ate lots of cookies, drank lots of coffee. They hiked together, watched movies, read books, prayed for each other, knit prayer shawls, sang hymns, read Scripture, worshiped outside, brought home-cooked meals to the doorsteps of the grieving, awakened the imagination of children in the Worship Center, opened a drop-in center for LGBTQ teens, chartered a Scout pack and troop, gave gifts to strangers every Christmas, played pickle ball and shared a love of art, stocked food pantries and volunteered at soup kitchens, planted flowers downtown, organized mass Days of Service, blessed dogs and cats and the occasional reptile, wrote devotions, visited the incarcerated, built beds for children, helped build a playground, met for funerals and baptisms and weddings, praised God through organ music, became a sanctuary for victims of domestic violence, provided a safe place for people recovering from addiction, distributed personal care products and coats in the winter, taught English to immigrants, and resettled refugees from Ukraine. They became family to some wonderful people in Uganda, supporting the education of their children. They took a knee when George Floyd was murdered, and they told the world that Black lives matter. When a pandemic hit, they honored the science and chose to keep people safe, finding new ways to worship and connect, including online.

In these and so many other ways, God saved them. God loved them. God grew them.

It's a good letter, isn't it? Of course, for all their togetherness, there were still some in the early church who did not share the vision of Acts. There were people who didn't want to share all their possessions. There were religious and civil authorities who didn't like the gospel the apostles were preaching. There were followers who were giving the lion's share of the food to the people of their own ethnic and religious background, neglecting others who looked, acted, and believed differently than them. There were debates about whether you had to follow the Jewish Law, and how you should interact with the government, and who should speak in church, and what kinds of food it was OK to eat, and how you should care for others, and what salvation meant.

In the same way, we may not all share the same vision. We may have different ideas about who and what this church should be.

In Acts, the early church dealt with these divisions by talking and praying, by calling councils and referring to Scripture and the teachings of Christ, and by loving each other even more fiercely. They held people accountable and demanded integrity. They noticed people's gifts, and called leaders to make sure that everyone received what they needed and was treated justly. They reminded people to whom they belonged: Jesus Christ.

Westminster tries to do the same. Surely, there are people who have disengaged from the congregation in the time I've been here, and who might re-engage when I leave. There are people

who are new to this congregation and have just begun to share their dreams. This upcoming season is a time to discuss what God's vision is for this church. The seasonal ministry teams you have created are a great way to expand leadership, share different viewpoints, and discover the vast array of gifts among you. You'll have opportunities to discuss this church's future and its priorities when you evaluate Westminster's experiment with the Holy Conversations' recommendations, and when you form the Pastor Nominating Committee and write your Ministry Information Form.

As you engage that conversation, I'd remind you of the vision suggested by Holy Conversations, crafted from many dialogues with you. They write...

Westminster—it's where you're already home. Westminster is a church that seeks to love each other and provide a welcoming home for all, where we can grow closer to each other and to God. Westminster is called to be a home to the spiritually homeless, where we share the good news of Christ, worship God with all our mind, body, and soul, cultivate inclusive belonging, and take that vision of a loving home into the community and its hurting places. We do so because God first loved us.

**Amen.**