



SERMON

May 25, 2025

# The Acts of (insert your name)

Dr. Jo Forrest



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(insert your name)  
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After Jesus ascended, God commands the early apostles to carry the gospel message far beyond their wildest imaginations: “to the ends of the earth.” For a collection of fishermen and tent builders who’d likely not traveled outside of Galilee to go “to the ends of the earth” may well have seemed like to the moon and back.

Their adventures, chronicled in The Acts of the Apostles, plot their actions, individually at first and then with another until they include more and more people so that the gospel spreads. They cross boundaries of race, nationality, and gender when the spirit leads.

Jerusalem is long in the rear-view mirror and our readings now venture into what scholars call the “we-narratives.”

Even in the early church, there is no such thing as a solo Christian. The pronouns shift from the first person “me” or “I” to the collective “we.” The writer uses “we” to emphasize the church grows not from lone-rangers.

It grows as the spirit draws an unlikely community together who act for the good of the entire church, even those people not seen or in places never imagined.

Listen to this story about Paul, Silas, and a few others.

*Dear God, thank you for the gift of sitting next to one another to worship you. The mere presence of each other reminds us that your son's church comes to life through our gathering. Send your spirit among us that this old story inspires us to respond with our lives in ways that please you. Amen.*

### **Acts 16:9-15**

<sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and *help us*."

<sup>10</sup> When Paul had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

<sup>11</sup> We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. <sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

<sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to

what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup>When she and her household were baptized, Lydia urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

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Legendary pastor, teacher, and writer Howard Thurman, who died in 1981, wrote a compelling autobiography entitled *With Head and Heart*. He might have dedicated his life’s story to any number of great luminaries who touched his head and heart such as Barbara Jordan, Alice Walker, and Martin Luther King Jr. As these young Black leaders grew in faith and scholarship, leading our church forward, we can imagine how much they learned from and depended upon one another. Or Thurman could have dedicated his autobiography to his beloved grandmother, who exerted a formidable influence in his life.

Instead, he dedicated *With Head and Heart* to an unknown man. It reads simply, “To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago.”

In 1914 the schools in Florida remained highly segregated with deplorable quality for Blacks students. At the time, Thurman was thirteen years old. His family scrapped together the means to send him to a school in Jacksonville. Once

dropped at the train station, he discovered that he needed more money to transport his trunk and tells the story this way:

I sat down on the steps of the railway station and cried my heart out. Presently I opened my eyes and saw before me a large pair of work shoes. My eyes crawled upward until I saw the man's face. He was a black man, dressed in overalls and a denim cap. As he looked down at me he rolled a cigarette and lit it. Then he said, "Boy, what in hell are you crying about?"

And I told him.

"If you're trying to get out of this damn town to get an education, the least I can do is to help you. Come with me," he said. He took me around to the agent and asked, "How much does it take to send this boy's trunk to Jacksonville?"

Then he took out his rawhide money bag and counted the money out. When the agent handed him the receipt, he handed it to me. Then, without a word, he turned and disappeared down the railroad track. I never saw him again. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Byron Jones, "Holy wild card (Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19)" *The Christian Century* June 16, 2023.



Think of all the ways people acted so that Thurman could pursue his dream. His grandmother had confidence to send him far from home. His family skimped on food so they could afford his schooling. And a complete stranger opened his heart and wallet, trusting Thurman's story and a future beyond their small town.

These are the acts of people, giving what they can. These are the acts of love. These are acts that flow from God's generosity to each one of us.

If anyone compiles a sequel to the Acts of the Apostles, Thurman's story might as easily be included as an example of the spirit compelling each of us to give.

Paul and his companions had traveled a circuitous route through Asia Minor – in and around Greece and Cyprus. Some destinations turned into nothing but dead ends. In other towns, the spirit silenced them from speaking.

By the time Paul receives a night-time vision of a man pleading with him to “come to Macedonia and *help us*,” he likely felt relieved to receive clarity of place and purpose. That dream changes the course of Paul's ministry.

We know that Paul founded the first church on European soil in the town of Philippi. The Letter to the Philippians,

enshrined in in the New Testament, declares his love for the people that church. You may know the verse: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy.” (Ph 1:3)

When Paul and his companions arrive in Philippi, they find not a man or men, but women. They trust the spirit and join their worship. Paul gives. He gives what he has to give: he preaches. He tells the story of God’s love for us, given through Jesus.

Here we meet Lydia. In a very few words, the writer describes her unique capacity to propel the church forward. She maintains her own household, unusual for a woman in the first century, and implies financial independence.

She “deals” in purple cloth. Purple cloth was rare, expensive, and highly prized by the residents of this Roman outpost. Imagine she traded in gold or jewels. This savvy woman built wealth and an ability to exercise authority in her wider community.

Even though she is a gentile, she fears God and worships God. Just like people today we can imagine that she comes to worship because she hungers for something beyond commercial success.

She hungers for more because that restless spirit, who is surely in us all before we even know it, has stirred up a holy longing in her soul. Every step of the way, the spirit prompts and calls and blesses her, then the spirit opens her heart. She influences all her household to be baptized into the faith.

Becoming a part of this fledgling church inspires her to give. The story uses verbs that convey an intensity of her offer. She *urges* them to stay with her, she *prevails* upon them.

Perhaps you've received or even made such insistent invitations. My Aunt Mary used to be one who insisted we have second helpings of lasagna. She wanted us to sing one more song, stay one more day. She piled on us bags of cookies when we left. You likely know someone like Aunt Mary or are one yourself. You know what it means to receive beyond your imagination and want to give in gratitude or even more as a part of keeping this abundance going.

On the surface, it appears as though she gave to those men the gift of hospitality, of food and shelter and the financial means for their journey. Deep down, she gave to them because she believed whole heartedly in supporting that loving spirit. Something took place between Lydia and Paul. They became caught up in and joined in the flow of God's generosity.

Paul does his part and Lydia hers; but it is God who guides all things and works in and through all things, not just for good, but for what otherwise might seem impossible.

These are the acts of people. These are the acts of love.

God gives each of us the capacity to give what we can to keep this gospel going to the ends of earth. God invites us to act.

Anyone who worships at the Bridge often sees a five-year-old girl wearing a long pink dress, with blond hair bound in pigtails. At the beginning of worship, she dances with her parents alongside the other kids. After the sermon, she races ahead of her dad to take hold of the collection basket. At this tender age she is both learning from him and teaching us that giving is fundamental to worship.

Who better to open our hearts than her bright eyes? Although my husband and I fulfill our pledge with one check and I do not carry any cash, I constantly bug him for a few dollars to place in her basket so I can receive her whispered “thank you”.

We have another member, more than fifteen times her age. At the beginning of each month he sits with a stack of bills and a checkbook. The first check he writes offers his gift to the church.

To this day, when he tells this story, his face lights with joy. He gives to the church first, not a portion of what remains but of the first fruits. Over his lifetime, regardless of where he moved or to which congregation he belonged, he gives in the same manner believing his gift is for the wider church. He gives as a way of letting God's generosity flow through him.

Too often we assume that the work of the church is for someone else to do. Someone else to give. Someone else to embody. Someone else to respond to the help in this world. However, the church depends upon each person's actions, even those who are not frequently seen or who remain unnamed.

Despite our tendency to want to identify a single leader for the church, this story in Acts and Howard Thurman's story, reminds us that God's spirit works through people.

God's spirit draws each of us to give in whatever way God equips us. The spirit will open our eyes to our neighbors and help us see people, all people, as neighbors. It pushes us to advocate in our community and voting booths. God's restless spirit provokes us to courageous witness at a time when scarcity and fear dominate.

These are the acts of people. These are acts of love. These are the acts of you and me in being the church today so little girls may grow as witnesses of faith.

God refuses to love us from a distance.

### References

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