This morning we will resume our journey through the book of Acts. Please stand and let’s read Acts 5:12-16.

Luke writes, “Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico.”

As always, let’s dig in to this text to see what we can learn, and then we’ll come back to consider how this scripture speaks to our current circumstances as individuals, families, and as a church.

First, what does Luke mean when he says that signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles? What are signs and wonders? Our answer is in the text, in vs. 15-16, where Luke reports that myriads of people who were sick and/or were afflicted with unclean spirits were healed. So at least one primary expression of “signs and wonders” in the early church was dramatic healing and exorcism that came through “the hands of the apostles.” In other words, like Jesus, the apostles were laying hands on people who were sick or harassed by evil spirits, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, people were being healed and set free. And Luke tells us this was a regular occurrence…it was happening day after day. In fact, Luke tells us that all those who were sick and harassed by evil spirits were healed…all of them. Now that might be a bit of hyperbole, but the point is clear: myriads of people were being healed and set free through the work of the Apostles who were empowered by the Holy Spirit. So much so that people from surrounding towns and villages were streaming into Jerusalem in one big parade of infirmity and returned to their homes as healed followers of Jesus. Luke tells us in vs. 14 that “more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women…”

Now…in the spirit of honesty and full disclosure, Luke also reports that it got a little weird as well! Apparently the demonstration of power was so impressive, and the word of God’s power to heal spread so far and wide, that people strategically laid their loved ones down on mats so that the shadow of the Apostle Peter would fall on them. Shadow healing is a bit weird…right? By the way, Luke isn’t saying that people got healed by Peter’s shadow…he’s simply reporting that the people’s desperation and hope for healing was so great that they went to such lengths. Again…the point is emphasis. There was POWER…inexplicable, undeniable, unprecedented POWER that was working through the Apostles, and MANY people came to the Apostles and were transformed by the power of Christ.
Now, where did all these sick people go to get healed by the apostles? That’s actually important information. Luke reports that the healing ministry happened in a particular location...Solomon’s Portico...which was a long row of covered columns inside the Temple Courts in what was known as the Court of the Gentiles. Now...remember that Luke reported earlier that the early church regularly met in Solomon’s Portico, and also remember that just a few days earlier, Peter and John had been arrested by the Jewish authorities while teaching in Solomon’s Portico. In fact, you might recall that Peter and John had been threatened by the Jewish Sanhedrin, who promised dire consequences if they continued to preach, teach, or heal people in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

So...there is tension here, right? Peter and John were warned by the most powerful people with the greatest authority in their country, who just happened to have their office in the temple courts, that there would be a whole lot of hurt coming their way if they dared minister in the name of Jesus. And yet here Luke reports that not only are they ministering in the name of Jesus, but they are doing so day after day, very publicly, everyone is talking about it, and they are practicing their ministry right in front of the Jewish authorities who had threatened them.

Is that crazy? Are they suicidal lunatics? No. Remember, after Peter and John reported the threats of the Sanhedrin to the other apostles and the church in Jerusalem, they prayed that God would give them BOLDNESS. Apparently, God did not hold back in answering that prayer!

However, not everyone in the Jerusalem church was as bold as the apostles. Luke reports that all the apostles were together in Solomon’s Portico, but “none of the rest” dared join them. In other words, the apostles are ministering with supernatural power and boldness, but many of the Jerusalem believers are not showing up at Solomon’s Portico out of fear. Fear of what? Certainly some of the Christians fear arrest and punishment from the Jewish authorities. But we might also assume that some of the Christians are also fearful of the power wielded by the apostles. They are afraid of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, who were struck dead when they lied to the apostles about their gift to the church. Perhaps some of the believers in the early church are also afraid of or uncomfortable with these dramatic healings and exorcisms.

Now I want to stop here for just a moment to make an observation. Much like those believers that Luke references in vs. 13 who dared not join the apostles in Solomon’s Portico, many of us are uncomfortable with the POWER we read about in Acts 5. In fact, supernatural signs and wonders often serve as a point of fear and division within the church. That is why, when we read church history, we might boil down Christianity into two camps: 1) Christianity with power, and 2) Christianity without power.

Christianity with power looks a lot like the early church as we have been reading about in Acts. There are signs and wonders associated with the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. There is
the use of spiritual authority. There is the expectation that God will answer prayers dramatically and with supernatural power. There is also the tendency for things to get a bit weird—for the power to be misinterpreted or misunderstood—as in people believing they can be healed by the shadow of an apostle, for example.

Christianity with power is still very common in countries like India, Iran, North Africa, and Brazil. In fact, you would be hard pressed to find many thriving examples of Christianity in those countries that do not include testimonies and stories that sound much like those stories we read here in Acts. However, we don’t see a lot of that “Christianity with power” happening in the western world. Let’s face it: many American and European Christians are uncomfortable with the whole notion of POWERFUL Christianity. And it’s not necessarily because we don’t believe God can heal…most of us actually do believe God can heal. It’s not because we don’t believe God can deliver people from evil spirits…of course He can. So if we believe God can heal people and deliver people from darkness, what is it about Christianity with power that bothers so many believers in the West?

1) First of all, most of us have no experience with God’s supernatural power to heal or deliver people from darkness, so we’re skeptical or even a bit uncomfortable when others claim to have had such experiences. After all, if power is part and parcel of the disciple’s life, what does that say about us and our faith if there is no power present in our churches?

2) Many of us are aware of and rightfully concerned about the misuse of power, and the manipulation that often accompanies those who claim to have “the healing power of God.” We’re concerned that people are faking the power of God and making it into a “show” in order to make money or bring glory to themselves.

3) Many of us are convinced that demonstrations of God’s power are unnecessary…and we are actually quite proud of that conviction. In other words, we believe “without seeing.” We believe even though we’ve never been healed or been set free from demonic activity. We believe even though we’ve never seen anybody dramatically healed. We agree with the historical claims of the New Testament, we’ve asked Jesus into our hearts, and that’s enough for us…and quite frankly, we’re pretty convinced that should be enough for everyone else, too. This is what we call Christianity without power.

Christianity without power is far more common within the western world than Christianity with power. This form of Christianity give ultimate value to propositional truth, doctrine, and correct belief. Many western, evangelical practitioners of Christianity, including pastors and seminary professors, will insist that God’s truth found in God’s Word is sufficient, and that God’s

(c) 2016 Colonial Presbyterian Church
supernatural power is no longer necessary for the advancement of the Gospel. Instead, their emphasis is on proclamation, apologetics, and the teaching of scripture.

Now, I get that…I really do. Like many of you, I was raised as a mainline, socialized Christian. I spent a great deal of my life in powerless Christianity. You can learn a lot in powerless churches; you can make great friends in those churches; and you can safely identify yourself as a Christian in those churches without worrying about things getting too weird. Powerless Christianity is not only common in America, it’s largely preferred by most people you know who call themselves Christians.

There is just one huge, hairy problem with powerless Christianity. We simply cannot reconcile “powerless Christianity” with Biblical Christianity. Where in the Bible can we find an example of powerless Christianity? It’s not there. All throughout the New Testament, and particularly in the Gospels and the book of Acts, the work of Jesus and His church is always portrayed as POWERFUL. In other words, we read in the Gospels that Jesus is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit to heal, cast out demons, and raise the dead. And then in the book of Acts, we read stories like this one, where we find the followers of Jesus wielding that same power. By the way, the promise of power and the prediction that the apostles would have access to such power is exactly what Jesus said on several occasions prior to His ascension. In John 14 Jesus says, “Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.” In Acts 1:8, Jesus specifically states, “You will receive POWER when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” So, these signs and wonders that Luke describes in chapter 5 and elsewhere in the book of Acts should come as no surprise. Jesus promises power, Jesus delivers power, and Jesus works out His power through His followers via the Holy Spirit.

So, here is the question of the day: is powerless Christianity OK even if it is not biblical? Have times changed so that we should be OK with a faith that lacks power? Should we assume that the stories of God’s miraculous, supernatural power such as here in Acts 5 were unique to the early church, but are no longer relevant in the 21st century church? Or, are we missing something? Does God still work in powerful ways in our modern world, and if so, does God still grant the power to heal and to cast out demons to followers of Jesus? What would “powerful Christianity” look like in a church like Colonial? You’re asking really good questions, by the way.

First of all, I think it is biblically and historically obvious that we need both proclamation and power within the church, and that one cannot flourish without the other. Just as Peter preached to the crowds at Pentecost and those gathered in the temple courts, so also we must preach with accuracy, conviction, and truth. But that preaching must also be accompanied by signs and

(c) 2016 Colonial Presbyterian Church
wonders, the obvious work of the Holy Spirit that brings healing and freedom to a hurting world. In fact, if you’re paying attention, the power usually comes PRIOR to the preaching; such that the apostles earn an audience by faithfully applying the POWER of the Holy Spirit prior to proclaiming the TRUTH of the Gospel.

Now before you assume I’m advocating a healing and exorcism service after our final hymn, (and I might be!)…I want you to remember that physical and spiritual healing were not the ONLY signs and wonders going on in Jerusalem. Let us not forget the signs and wonders of unity, generosity, and compassion that were also empowered by the Holy Spirit as we read about a few weeks ago in Acts 4. Remember how Luke described the early church? How they were all together and had everything in common, how they sold land and gave the proceeds to the apostles so that all those in need could be ministered to? Those stories qualify as signs and wonders as well. Why? Because the power required to accomplish unity and generosity…just like the power to heal the sick and battle demons…comes only through the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ. When people see the power of Jesus at work, they are open to learning that He is alive. Both power and proclamation bring glory to God. Power and proclamation bear witness to a watching world that the Kingdom of God is at hand!

Remember in Luke 11:20 Jesus said, “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you!”

Power, in the name of Jesus Christ, bears witness to the world that the Kingdom of God has come. What does that power look like in the 21st century? Does it look like people being healed and demons being cast out? Yes--absolutely, and that is often the expression of God’s power that we see in many places around the world. I heard story after story of physical healing and spiritual liberation when I was in India a few years ago. My personal observation is that healing and exorcism continue to be primary signs and wonders when the Gospel is advancing in hostile areas where souls are given over to false gods. But just so you know, every pastor on this church staff prays for healing for the sick and freedom for the oppressed every single week. And we all have stories of God’s dramatic healing and those who have been set free from demonic oppression. We intentionally and regularly encourage people to participate in our Soul Healing prayer ministry because we absolutely believe in the power of Jesus Christ to heal and restore people physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And we’re not alone. The prayer ministry of our church, which consists of over 200 souls, quietly calls upon the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ every day of the week, and we see God’s power working miraculously on a regular basis.

This past week I was on a canoe trip with our Senior High students. As I was just a mile or so from the end of our float down the river, I came upon one of our students who was seriously injured, now laying in a canoe that was pulled up on the bank. Apparently, this young

(c) 2016 Colonial Presbyterian Church
lady had flipped over in some very heavy current and got pinned between the canoe and a tree for about 2-3 minutes. Thanks to some quick work from one of our summer staffers, she was rescued from the crushing waters, but not before she was badly injured and very traumatized. When I got to her, the situation was very intense and very scary. She was losing all feeling and motion in her arms and legs, and we were still a mile from the outtake. So what did we do? Along with my wife and one of our youth staff, we prayed...because that’s what followers of Jesus do. We prayed and called upon the power of God in the name of Jesus Christ to heal this young lady and to help us get her down that river asap. And then we did everything in our power to get this student the help she needed. Now...let me just tell you what happened, and then you can decide what you believe. We got her back to the outtake, called 911, got her on an ambulance, and sent her on to the hospital. That whole process took about 45 minutes, and during that time, word spread among the church. Close to 100 students, staff, and camp workers began praying. After calling her parents, prayer warriors at Colonial were informed and began praying. And by the time the young lady got to the hospital some 35 minutes later, all of the feeling and motion in her limbs had returned, her x-rays came back negative, and an hour later we were eating Subway sandwiches and praising God on our way back to camp. Does that qualify as signs and wonders? I’ll let you decide what you think, but I believe God answers prayer, and I believe God’s Holy Spirit was powerfully at work in that situation.

Now, the power of the Holy Spirit and the reality of God’s Kingdom are apparent in other signs and wonders as well, many that I see happening right here in our own church.

For example: when average, normal families with jobs and kids and crazy schedules respond in obedience to God by opening their homes to foster kids, and when that happens more and more regularly in our fellowship, I would place that behavior in the category of powerful signs and wonders. When other families are quite suddenly convicted to sell their homes and move into neighborhoods predominantly occupied by Muslims to love that neighborhood to Christ, that qualifies as powerful signs and wonders in my book. When our teens risk the scorn of their peers to take a stand for Jesus in the way that they live, in the way that they date, in the way that they speak about their peers, in the way that they love the lonely and unpopular kids at their schools...I would put that in the category of signs and wonders as well. When husbands bare their souls and come clean about their battle with pornography and their wives join them in prayer, repentance, counseling, and together they decide to work through the slow and painful process of recovery...that also qualifies as powerful signs and wonders...why? Because only the power of the Holy Spirit can account for these things.

Listen: let me just come right out and say it--if you came here today thinking you were attending a church that upholds the western, mainline practice of powerless Christianity...you are sorely mistaken! I believe I can say with great confidence, on behalf of our pastors, elders, youth and leaders, and on behalf of our church membership both now and over the past 65 years, we are not
ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the POWER of GOD for salvation for all who believe! We proclaim the TRUTH of the GOSPEL, that Jesus lives and the Kingdom of God is at hand. And we bear witness to the POWER of the Holy Spirit that is alive and at work in us and through us to bring healing, freedom, hope, and reconciliation to a broken world. We accept the worldview that our King is named Jesus and we are subjects of His kingdom, which means we fight every day against the ruler of this world and his dark agenda. We agree with the Apostle Paul that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, and the cosmic powers who currently hold rule and sway over this present darkness. We agree also that Jesus did not sacrifice His life on a Roman cross so that we would have a spirit of fear, but so that we would have a spirit of power, love, and self-control.

May Colonial be known as a place where the power of God is at work, even as the proclamation of the Gospel is true. May people be encouraged to bring the sick, the oppressed, the broken and the lonely to come here…to come believing that here they may find healing and freedom in the power of God’s Holy Spirit, in the truth of the Gospel, in the name of Jesus Christ…for the glory of God. And in the same way may we go out into the world to be Christ’s ambassadors, proclaiming the Good News and ministering to the needs of hurting people with power, compassion, generosity, and grace. May it be said of us generations from now, “Many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people in that place.”

Let’s pray.