

MEDITATIONS FROM ORIOLE-YORK MILLS UNITED CHURCH



Spectator or Participant?

by Reverend Chris T. Miller
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This is one in a series of selected sermons and resources from Oriole – York Mills United Church. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith. We hope readers benefit from the insights they provide.

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Spectator or Participant?

Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-8 (The Message)

If you are a fan of the movies, then this may be a great week for you, especially living in Toronto. TIFF, The Toronto International Film Festival, is showing 335 films from 64 countries. Many fans will stand in line to ooh and ah over their favourite actors walking the red carpet into one theatre or another.

If you are fan of our hometown baseball team, the Toronto Blue Jays, it may be a little more difficult at this moment to get excited given their wins and losses record. But if you are a true-blue fan, you will keep on cheering for them no matter what, won't you, as every good fan will? Whenever her beloved Jays hit a losing streak, my mother would say, "I'm not going to watch you anymore." But the next night, there she was glued to the TV watching them play again!

If you enjoy watching football (the Canadian variety), you were probably jumping up and down in your chair last Friday evening as the Toronto Argonauts battled and finally defeated the Hamilton Tiger-Cats breaking their five-game losing streak.

If you are a fan of good theatre, you will try to see a play at Stratford or at the Shaw Festival. There is something special about sitting in comfortable seats to watch your favourite theatrical production in person. You might even get to see a famous actor in the streets

of Stratford or Niagara-on-the-Lake. When my daughter was young, we took her to the then-O'Keefe Centre on Front Street to see Hal Linden in the musical *Man of La Mancha*. She was so enthralled with the performance we waited at the stage door around the back of the theatre so she could get Linden's autograph. She wasn't disappointed! We even enrolled her in acting classes to see if her being a spectator might turn into being a participant in some way in theatre. Well, she became a public school teacher instead, as well as a part-time staff for children and youth in a Scarborough church. My educated hunch is that our investment in the acting course is standing her in good stead being a teacher in school and in church.

I have noticed that many in this congregation are great fans of the card game of bridge. But being merely a fan or spectator in bridge doesn't cut it at all. If you are passionate about the game, you will go to great lengths *to play* a game of bridge with your friends, if at all possible. Participating is the way you really connect with friends and the game you enjoy.

That illustration is an intriguing "bridge" to the Scripture reading this morning. Luke wants his readers to know that merely being a fan of Jesus isn't enough. Being a spectator and simply enjoying hearing about Jesus and his teachings isn't enough for Luke and his knowledge of how God acts in the Book of Acts.

Let me tell you some things about Luke. Luke is the writer of The Gospel of Luke and also The Acts of The Apostles. Luke was a physician (Colossians 4:14). And he is the only Gentile writer of the New Testament. “Luke was a careful historian – both by his own admission (Luke 1:1-4) and by the judgment of later history” [Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary, 1995]. I might say he was a careful investigative reporter too. We could say that we have one book in two volumes. Luke introduces the story of Jesus in volume one – The Gospel of Luke. He tells his readers as much in the opening verses of the Book of Acts: “In the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that *Jesus began to do and teach.*” And if volume one is *only the beginning* of the story, then volume two *continues the story* of what Jesus is doing and what Jesus wants us to know (his teaching). But here’s the intriguing feature: Jesus will continue his work (his mission) and will do this first and foremost through his followers – his disciples then and his followers now, including you and me. The mission or work of God doesn’t happen in any other way. So in these first verses of Acts Chapter 1, Luke begins right in the middle of the action. Luke immediately tells us about Jesus having face-to-face meetings with his disciples over meals and talking about things concerning the kingdom of God. Jesus told them they were to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come on them as he had promised. That’s why I also included the “ending” of Luke’s Gospel – volume one. It really isn’t an ending because Luke picks up the story of Jesus from there and continues it in the

Book of Acts. Over the next weeks and months, we are going to go through Acts to see what it means for us to be participants in this story and with Jesus in God's mission.

As we move through Acts, we will notice fairly quickly that Luke has no sense at all of being an arm-chair spectator and simply watching what God, by the Holy Spirit, wants to do through the people of God – and that includes us! God wants to *live* in us too through the Holy Spirit. God wants to *work* through us too. We can participate with Jesus through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to do that work of the kingdom of God.

How do we move from being merely fans of Jesus – being spectators in the grandstand (or in church pews) – to participating with Jesus through the Holy Spirit in his work in our world today? Luke gives us the way. There are three resources I see in our Scripture readings this morning – in the final verses in Luke's Gospel (volume one) and in the first verses of Acts (volume two).

First, we begin to see the Bible with the understanding that it speaks from beginning to end (even in the Old Testament) of Jesus the Messiah – the Christ – as the centre of God's plan to love and to redeem the world. Notice what Jesus said in Luke 24:44, 45: "Everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written *about me* in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms have

to be fulfilled.” And Jesus went on to open their understanding of the Bible and how to read it.

What we call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures was the Bible Jesus read and the Bible his disciples and every other Jewish person read – both the leaders and the people in the synagogue pews. Jesus opened the understanding of his disciples to what the Bible said **about him**. Amazingly, **Jesus spoke of himself as the centre** of God’s mission and action in the world – in the entire world too -- not only in their small area in the Middle East. When we consider Acts 1:8 in a few weeks, we will unpack what Jesus meant when he told his first disciples: “When the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be **my** witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.” We will uncover what Jesus means that his followers will be **his witnesses** in their hometown, in their country and also throughout the entire Earth. And that includes you and me.

Since Jesus, the one we follow, understood that the Bible spoke about him as the Messiah, we need to be open to Jesus Christ to show us how to read the Bible by his Holy Spirit. That is Luke’s heartbeat at the end of his Gospel when he told his readers that Jesus helped those early disciples understand the meaning of the Scriptures. And that understanding led to Luke wanting them (and us) to grab hold of something that is **fundamental** to everything happening in his book – both volumes. That fundamental “something” is this:

that his readers embrace with all the faith they can the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This, then, is the second resource to move us from being spectators to becoming passionate participants with Jesus in God's mission.

We look at the resurrection of Jesus Christ through Luke's eyes – really through what Jesus told his disciples -- and come to understand that Luke bases everything that happens in Acts on the fact that Jesus was really raised from the dead. All the stories we read in Acts about the disciples and the people who began to believe in and follow Jesus, all of God's actions with his people -- God's mission – are based on the fact that the body of Jesus of Nazareth did not remain dead in a grave but was resurrected to life by the power of God. One moment Jesus was really dead; the next moment he was really alive and standing before his disciples in a real transformed body that could eat and drink as well as walk and talk.

According to Luke, who is considered a careful and discerning writer, Jesus said to his disciples at the end of Luke's Gospel: "You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations—starting from here, from Jerusalem! You're the first to hear and see it. You're the witnesses."

In the first verses of Acts 1, Luke continues the theme of Jesus being alive with his disciples. Luke describes clearly that “after his death [the resurrected Jesus] presented himself alive to them in many different settings.... In face-to-face meetings, [the risen Christ] talked with them about things concerning the kingdom of God.” The physical resurrection of Jesus is the foundation for the life of the new church found throughout Acts. There would be no good news – no forgiveness – no healing – no hope – no peace – no church -- no gospel – no certainty about our life after death without the physical resurrection of Jesus. There would only have been the memories of the nice teachings from a great and kind man – a would-be Messiah -- who failed and was martyred and was no longer with them. There would be only sad memories for the distraught disciples and other followers that might be remembered for a few years. **And without the resurrection, there would be no mission of God to undertake.** Theologian N. T. Wright wrote: “The resurrection of Jesus who died under the weight of the world’s evil is the foundation of God’s new world.” This is the kind of new world Luke is describing in this first chapter of Acts. In fact, you and I wouldn’t be here in this church this morning if Jesus did not rise from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is fundamental to Luke’s understanding of God’s mission.

There is one more resource that moves people from being merely spectators of Jesus to becoming passionate participants with him in God’s mission in our world.

We must let Jesus Christ equip us with the power of his Holy Spirit. Jesus told his first disciples they “must wait for what the Father promised: the promise you heard from me.” He also said: “What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be **my witnesses** in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.”

Lloyd Ogilvie is a former minister of First Presbyterian Church in Hollywood, California, and a former chaplain of the United States Senate in Washington, D.C. Ogilvie also wrote a commentary on Acts that he titled *Drumbeat of Love*. I like that title. Ogilvie wrote in the preface:

“The drumbeat of the Master is love – his love for me, and through me to others ... [made possible by his] resurrected life ... [through] the empowering Holy Spirit.”

I wonder how many really hear the drumbeat of Jesus’ love and dare to trust his love. And I’m not necessarily referring to those outside the church. Do you recall Peggy Lee’s song with the persistent yet haunting question “Is that all there is?” Are there some in the church who also ask, “Isn’t there more to life than this?”

Lloyd Ogilvie talked about a conversation he had with a man who had been a deacon in another church for years. He had helped build a church and raise money and he

had served on many committees. But the man said to Ogilvie: “The one thing my church never gave me was a relationship with Christ that would make my life exciting. Now I have all the time in the world, but don’t know what to do that will count.”

I had a similar conversation with an old friend this past week. I’ll call him “Bill.” Bill has been retired for many years and is probably in his mid-80s. He is legally blind and doesn’t have the physical ability to do a lot these days. He was complaining to me that much of what he hears in his church has seemingly little to do with having a relationship with God. As I reflected on our conversation, I thought about this morning’s message. Bill does not want to be merely a spectator in his faith even now but an active participant in God’s life in him. So when we talk another time, I think I’ll try to engage him in conversation about the love of Jesus through the Holy Spirit who is God’s source of power to rejuvenate his being with the presence and passion of Jesus Christ in his life.

Being a spectator isn’t necessarily a bad thing. As a youngster, I became a fan of golf long before I played the game myself. I suppose I was a fan of golf – of Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus – before I participated in the game. So being a fan of Jesus isn’t a bad thing -- **but staying a spectator** isn’t beneficial either to our faith and life or to God’s mission of love for others. How passionate are we about our relationship with Jesus, with God, compared to our passion for golf,

tennis, bridge, cooking, movies, travelling ...? Luke would say our being witnesses to our experience of Jesus' love and presence in our lives is more than important. Being witnesses is fundamental to our being a part of God's mission – of participating with God in God's mission of love and message of forgiveness, hope and healing not only in our small part of the world but also to the ends of the world.

May this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller
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