Sunday, May 23, 2004
FAITHFUL PEOPLE
Acts 1:6-14

In a culture that tends to worship celebrities and superstars, it is easy to forget that most of the amazing changes for the good in this world have come about and continue to take place because of the faithfulness of ordinary people. The continued existence and ministry of the Christian church throughout history is one good example.

Here's what happened according to the book of Acts. Several weeks after the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, Jesus turned over the movement he had started to a small group of faithful followers. He told them, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Then, a few verses later, the names of some of these faithful people to whom he entrusted this task are listed: "Peter and John, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James, son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."

The lessons to be learned from this story are astounding. The story highlights several important principles as to how God works in the world through ordinary faithful people. It reveals the joy that comes from being a participant in the works of God and how important it is for people to work with each other.

The energy of God can be found working through faithful people who never make the headlines. Many people are doing this work behind the scenes. They fulfill a supportive role. They carry out their assignments not for any praise they might receive but find an inner satisfaction that comes from a job well done.

You can see this principle at work in the large number of people who, through the use of their musical gifts, help lead us in worship, and this Sunday we are showing our appreciation to them. Their faithfulness in the use of their musical gifts adds so much to all of our lives. The same is true of the many volunteers who work in the Sunday Church School and the numerous other activities that take place in Christian education and youth ministry. It's also true of the people who do the ushering and greeting as part of the worship services.

The same principle was illustrated to me one evening at a concert. The featured soloist was a soprano, twenty-seven years old. She had a remarkable talent for her age and was outstanding. But it was also her accompanist who captured my imagination and admiration. She was an unassuming young woman, but highly talented. She had mastered the skill of being the unobtrusive supporter of another's artistic talent. She was sensitive to the singer's phrasing, accent, and timing. It was her supportive role that helped make the evening so delightful. She succeeded to the degree that she was forgotten.

But she did not go unnoticed. The singer invited her on stage with her for curtain calls and, stepping aside, pointed to her in gratitude. The generous applause that followed gave evidence that the audience was not unaware of the important role she played.

It is reassuring to know that a person does not have to be in the spotlight to make an important contribution and to find meaning and purpose in life. Providing the support that enables others to succeed is one of the finest expressions of humility, love, and unselfishness.

One of my professors at Yale Divinity School, Dr. Halford Luccock, loved to tell the story of a college commencement in which a young woman graduated with high honors. In the audience was a great musician — her mother. For years, she had sacrificed her own time and energy by playing a variety of instruments — piano, washboard, and typewriter — the melodious accompaniment which made her daughter's education possible.

A researcher who made a study of National Merit Scholarship winners discovered that behind every one of those high school young people there was an individual, a mother, father, teacher, coach, pastor, scoutmaster, or mentor — someone who really cared, who continually encouraged them, and who was never satisfied with mediocrity.

Robert Brookfield, an actor, was mistakenly reported to have died. He had the rare experience of seeing his own obituary. It read: "Never a great actor; he was invaluable in supporting roles." Though he might not have considered that a compliment, nothing finer could be said of anyone — invaluable in supporting roles. That was certainly true of those early followers of Jesus.

Will Rogers said, "We can't all be heroes because somebody has to sit on the curb and clap as they go by."

Outstanding researchers in the sciences and in other fields of knowledge have been quick to acknowledge their indebtedness to others. Jonas Salk said the work he was able to do depended on the research of hundreds of men and women whose names remain unknown, but whose labors made possible the polio vaccine. Sir Isaac Newton said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

The Christian faith at its best has been spread around the world because of the supportive roles of countless people whose names never made the headlines. Here's one example: In the modern missionary movement, the name David Livingstone is widely known, but only a few people have ever heard of David Hogg. He was the school teacher who instilled in Livingstone the sense of self-worth and desire to serve that encouraged him to serve the needs of thousands in Africa.

Our superstar culture can be misleading and even destructive to the spirit of many people because it over-emphasizes the contributions of the exceptionally beautiful, the unusually brilliant, or the outstandingly competent. Simply because an individual is very skillful or brilliant does not mean their contribution to the betterment of the world is more significant than someone who is working behind the scenes in a supportive role.

The early followers of Jesus were men and women with ordinary abilities, but extraordinary commitment. Most of us will never be famous or widely known, but it is heartening to know that you can encourage and enable others to realize their best. This congregation is what it is today because of countless people who have and continue to support it in a variety of ways.

This leads to another principle which is embedded in this story of Jesus turning over his ministry to a group of faithful followers. That second principle is that we are members of one another and we need each other. He did not entrust the ministry of living and spreading God's unconditional love to an individual but to a community of followers.

Years ago, a telephone operator in a small Cape Cod town received a daily call from a man who asked the exact time. This went on for weeks. Finally, the operator asked the man why he called every day requesting the right time. "Because," he said, "I am the man responsible for

blowing the whistle at noon each day." "That's strange," said the operator, "because every day, exactly at noon, I set my clock by your whistle."

A simple story but an accurate parable of how interdependent we are, and each life has far-reaching effects on the lives of others, more than we can ever realize. The early leaders of the church knew this because the book of Acts reports, "All these were constantly together, devoting themselves to prayer."

A third principle contained in this story, where Jesus turns over his ministry to a community of faithful people, is that he did this knowing we all have our individual strengths and weaknesses.

The Apostle Paul had what he called his "thorn in the flesh," some kind of weakness or handicap which he never described fully. Peter had his temper and impulsiveness. We do not know all the specific strengths and weaknesses of these early followers of Jesus, but you can be sure each one had his or her specific strengths and weaknesses. No one was perfect.

The same is true today in every community of people. One person has the gift of leadership, another the gift of being supportive. Some of you have beautiful singing voices, others have to be content with making a "joyful noise to the Lord." Some have the gift of teaching, others the gift of being a compassionate listener.

In this church congregation and in every community, there are those who quietly bear their burdens and infirmities without dramatizing them. They deal with their predicament in creative and courageous ways, turning a minus into a plus and a disadvantage into an advantage. They are the ones who keep on keeping on, despite the hardships they face. Their faithfulness inspires others to do the same.

Dean Briggs of Harvard had such people in mind when he responded to a freshman student who came to his office to explain his tardiness in completing an assignment. "I'm sorry," said the student, "but I was not feeling very well." "Young man," replied Dean Briggs, "please bear in mind that the greater part of the world's work is carried on by people who are not feeling very well."

Thus far, I have mentioned three principles for living a life of fulfillment that are found in this story from the book of Acts.

1. God works through faithful people, not only superstars.
2. We are members of one another and need each other.
3. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, but that need not hold us back.

There is one more principle embedded in this story of Jesus entrusting the mission of spreading the love of God and neighbor to faithful people. Two of the most important days in every life are the day you were born and the day you know why you were born.

Isaac Watts once wrote: "Most people creep into the world and know no reason why they were born, except to consume the corn and fish and leave behind an empty dish."

What a pity it is if a person comes to the time when he or she must die, only to discover he or she never really lived. The most tragic kind of funeral service a minister is called upon to conduct is for the person who has never learned to live — that individual who comes to the

final hour with no friends and has contributed nothing with the time and talents entrusted to him or her.

By his life and his teachings, Jesus demonstrated that you can discover the deepest meaning in your life when you commit yourself, in company with others, to a life of serving God by serving others. Amen.