

Imitate My Heart Bible Study

Theme:

This Bible study explores key stories from the Book of Acts that teach what it means to be a church whenever it gathers and wherever it goes!

Purpose:

The goal of this Bible study is to feed the spirits—and the minds—of Christian education leaders and teachers. It invites you to reconnect with the God who is at work in and through you, making a difference in the lives of the children, youth, and adults in your congregation, for the sake of God's mission in the world. It is meant to help teachers and leaders think about and more fully embrace what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ in your own lives, so that you can help others think about and more fully embrace this in their lives, too.

Key ideas:

- The story of the Book of Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit was at work loving and blessing the whole world in and through the lives of those who answered the call to discipleship.
- To be a disciple in the life of the early church meant to:
 - ◆ Be a recipient of and a participant in God's mission to love and bless the whole world
 - ◆ Be a witness to Jesus in word and deed
 - ◆ Be in relationship with others who have answered the call to follow Jesus
 - ◆ Be ready to meet God in the face of a stranger
 - ◆ Be open to Spirit-led transformation

Diving into the Word:

Are you ready to invite, inspire, and equip the people in your congregation to *akaloo*?! *Akaloo* comes from a Greek word (*akolouthein*) that means “to follow.” When this word is used in the Bible (it appears in all four Gospels) it always means following Jesus. But following Jesus doesn't just mean skipping along behind him, watching as *he* does all the cool stuff (like sharing God's dream for the world, healing people, challenging injustice, inviting people to live in a way that honors God and serves their neighbors, and so on). On the contrary, following Jesus is about *doing* those things, too. People who imitate the heart of Christ in the Bible have received the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. But this gift has come hand in hand with a call to leave everything behind for the sake of God's mission to love and bless and save the whole world (Luke 5:11). The story of the early church (as told in the Book of Acts) tells the story of the first Christians and teaches us (at least!) four things about what it means to *akaloo* today.

GOD IS ON THE LOOSE!

A lot of people think (and/or act like) you have to “go to church” to find God. Do you think that's true? Why or why not?

Read Acts 2:1-22.

When it comes to reading the Bible and listening for what God is saying, everybody has something to offer. Remember that as you invite participants to reflect and respond to these three questions:

1. What is God doing in this story?
2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?
3. What do you hear God saying to us (as a small group, congregation, etc.) in this story?

The earliest Christians did gather together (a lot!) to share their stories, eat together, and pray for courage (we're going to look at Acts 4:23-31 in a minute). But the Holy Spirit cannot be contained in any building

or constrained by any institution. The Holy Spirit fills the **people** who have answered the call to discipleship—people of every culture, race, and social status; women and men, young and old. These people become *the church*. Through them, the Holy Spirit is at work doing all kinds of startling things...out on the street! The Spirit gives Jesus' followers the ability to dream, to speak, and to act with surprising boldness as a part of God's mission to love and bless the world.

Spend some time thinking and/or talking about these questions:

1. Where is the most surprising (non-churchy) place you've seen God at work?
2. Do you ever miss what God is doing because you can't believe God is doing it through *those* people? Who are *those* people, to you?
3. When was the last time God spoke through you?

GOD WANTS TO LOVE AND BLESS THE WHOLE WORLD!

If you were to take a poll of the people you know, how do you think they would answer this question: What in the world is God up to?

Read Acts 2:37-41.

Reflect-Respond:

1. What is God doing in this story?
2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?
3. What do you hear God saying to us (as a small group, congregation, etc.) in this story?

It would take those first Christians awhile to finally get their heads completely around this idea (in fact, they argue about it in Acts 15), but God doesn't play favorites. Through Peter, the Holy Spirit announced that God's promise of salvation, reconciliation, wholeness, and life is for *everyone!* God wants to love and bless the whole creation...and every single person in it. And God works through us to get that done. That's what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples when he said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8)!

Spend some time thinking and/or talking about these questions:

1. Couldn't God have come up with a better plan for blessing the world? Why does God insist on working through *people?!?*
2. What did you do yesterday? How was God working through you to bless the people you met along the way?
3. A "witness" is somebody who has special knowledge about or experience with something. What do you know about Jesus that you can share with others? In what ways have you experienced him at work in your life?

Suggestions for Leaders

There is more material here than can be easily done in one or two sessions. It is important that you choose portions and activities that will fit what you are trying to accomplish and your time frame.

GOD MEETS US WHENEVER WE GATHER AND WHEREVER WE GO!

Do you know anyone who says they don't need or like to go to worship? What reasons do they give? What do you think about that?

Read Acts 4:23-31.

Reflect-Respond:

1. What is God doing in this story?
2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?
3. What do you hear God saying to us (as a small group, congregation, etc.) in this story?

Those earliest Christians never “went” to church because they *were* the church wherever they went! But they *did* get together. In fact, they didn't get together just once a week. They were together every day (see Acts 2:46)! Why? Well, they couldn't wait to tell each other about all the amazing things God was doing through them “out there.” They couldn't wait to introduce each other to the new friends they were making. They couldn't wait to hear “the gospel” (*good news*) from each other—not only about what Jesus *did* but also about what Jesus was DOING, in them and through them, every single day! When they got together they shared the Lord's Supper, they prayed together, and they blessed each other as they went back out to share good news with the world.

Spend some time thinking and/or talking about these questions:

1. Is this what it looks like when your congregation gathers together? If not, is there anything you'd like to see done differently?
2. What good news do you want to share right now?

GOD ISN'T FINISHED WITH US YET!

How do you *really* feel about CHANGE? No, seriously. When was the last time you changed your hairstyle? Your address? Your mind?

Read Acts 8:26-40.

Reflect-Respond:

1. What is God doing in this story?
2. What do you hear God saying to you in this story?
3. What do you hear God saying to us (as a small group, congregation, etc.) in this story?

The Holy Spirit was always messing with those early Christians. Whenever they were tempted to get comfortable and hunker down, the Spirit chased them back out onto the highways and byways. Wherever it looked like they were going to close the doors to anybody who looked or acted different, the Spirit plopped them right down into the company of strangers. You see, God's plan was to work through those early Christians to change the world. But that's not all. God used those new experiences and those new people *to change the church!* It took, for example, being in the chariot of a guy who was as different as different could be, to help Philip understand God's mission to bless *everybody*. The same sort of thing happened to Peter, in the home of a Gentile soldier named Cornelius (see Acts 10-11). The fact is, God's not done with us yet. Being ready to follow Jesus always means being ready to change!

Spend some time thinking and/or talking about these questions:

1. Through whom and/or through what kinds of experiences has the Holy Spirit helped you—and your congregation—change in good and holy ways?
2. God works through our encounters with strangers to transform us. Do you think maybe that's why we're so afraid of strangers or so reluctant to really welcome them into our congregations?
3. What kinds of good changes do you think the Holy Spirit still has in store for you? How about for your congregation?