

Easter 4 (A) – May 15, 2011
Saint Stephen’s Church, Wimberley, TX
Acts 2:42-47
Riding Shotgun

I rode shotgun. Every third Thursday of the month, I rode shotgun, and it was not by choice, but rather by edict.

The navy blue Ford LTD with the black vinyl roof would drive up the office door, and I was expected to be waiting and jump right in. I did as I was told.

The car belonged to Mrs. Lois McDonald, aged matriarch of Christ Episcopal Church, Tyler, TX. With her hair perfectly coiffed in a French twist, her pearls set brightly upon her dark knit dress, and the engine running – I jumped into the passenger seat and rode shotgun next to her.

Lois McDonald delivered *Meals-on-Wheels* on Tuesday mornings and had done so, I thought, since the first wagon trains from Tennessee made their way into East Texas. Never was she absent on a delivery day – even organizing her holidays around those third Thursdays – and her route wove through the worst part of town. But now she had me doing the leg work, for I was riding shotgun.

I was newly ordained and thought I knew everything. That’s precisely why my boss, the rector, ordered me to accompany Lois. When I made a face signifying that I thought the assignment beneath me, he added that I was never to miss or else. As he was a former pro-quarterback with arms the size of my legs, I said, “Yes, sir,” and hopped into Lois McDonald’s navy blue Ford LTD with a forced smile that remained on my face.

My boss knew I desperately needed to ride shotgun with Lois if I was ever to become a pastor worth shooting. He knew that I would soon observe that Lois had not missed a day delivering *Meals-on-Wheels* in over 20 years. He knew that I would soon realize that she knew each one of these desperately poor people by name, knew their children’s names, knew how many grandchildren they had, and – above all – Lois knew each of their birthdays. I discovered that on my first ride with Lois, as her entire backseat was covered in triple-decker, made-from-scratch chocolate cakes – all three carefully covered with toothpicks like a porcupine to keep the *Saran* wrap from disturbing the perfect icing. If you lived on Lois McDonald’s route you received a homemade cake on your birthday. My attitude underwent a total make-over the first time I saw those people – living in cramped, dark, hot, smelly homes – light up like a six year-old the moment they saw me carrying that cake across the threshold of their front door.

That's why my boss had me riding shot-gun with Lois McDonald, so I could see what a Christian looked like and hopefully one day begin to live as one.

He knew the challenge was not whether I could learn to lead meaningful worship, preach intelligible sermons, sit through interminable vestry meetings, or find my way to the area hospitals – but whether I would become humble enough to learn to be an everyday Christian. After thirty years of ministry, he knew it was only by riding shotgun beside a mature Christian that you could do so.

This is not a new Christian strategy. After the very first mass revival held at Solomon's Portico in Jerusalem, Peter convicted the large crowd of their complicity in Jesus' death and their need for salvation and transformation. "3,000 welcomed his message and were baptized right then" (**Acts 2:41**).

But those first Christian leaders knew that "being saved" was not enough. Those drawn to the Jesus way must enter the new way of kingdom life. In order to do that, those who were baptized "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers" (**Acts 2:42**).

Note the subtlety of language here – Acts records that first 3,000 "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." They were invited to ride shotgun with those who knew Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection up close and in person. These apostles had walked with Jesus, and they could show these first converts how to walk with him, too. This apostolic teaching is not so much a rehearsal of Jesus' messages, parables, and healings – as if the apostles' job was to hand out a compendium of *Jesus' Greatest Hits*. Rather, the apostles personally show how the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus had transformed their lives and how those drawn to Jesus could effectively be re-wired, too.

Once re-wired, the baptized are to attend to *fellowship* amongst the body of believers. The joy and the electricity of Christ runs through the gathered community – just as the Holy Spirit had come upon the apostles who assembled together at Pentecost (**Acts 2:1-4**).

Thirdly, they are to *break bread* with one another. The hallmark of the kingdom community is our open-handedness. Don't be mistaken; we are not just nice people. Like the bread at the altar, Jesus' very life is broken out of love for us. In the same way, our once selfish lives are miraculously broken open in receptivity and love for those both inside and yet outside the kingdom community.

Finally, they must maintain a *rhythm of prayer* with one another. Prayer does not come naturally. Taking care of life and limb, recreating, assuaging our personal appetites – all those come naturally. Prayer must be undertaken as a discipline. The Jewish people ascribed to prayer as the sun was

coming up and when it was going down. The first Christians followed that lead in order that the life of prayer would get into their bloodstream.

But that's just another list amongst many in our *Daytimer* or *I-Phone* until we jump in the passenger seat next to a seasoned Christian or two and make the list personal. As terrifying as it may sound, we can spend our entire lives as spiritual voyeurs, simply peeking in the window of kingdom life. That's like looking at a frosty bowl of ice cream but never tasting its sweetness; admiring a shiny ebony piano, but never hearing its melodic sounds; or like watching a sparkling river roll by, yet never wading into its cool wake.

With whom can we ride shotgun in our fellowship? At *Cursillo* Reunion Groups, we can listen closely to when and where Bishop McArthur or Judy Holmes most experienced Christ during the past week and perhaps recast our vision so that we may experience Christ in that way, too. We can attend *Faithful Families* with our young children and learn which ingredients of Christian child rearing are really important and which ones really are not from the mature grandparents who sponsor that group. We can ride shotgun with Sharon East and Dot Green during our *Community of Hope* training, and see first-hand how to visit those suffering in the hospital, nursing facility, or at home. Most importantly, those two women will show us how to get out the door, climb in our cars, and make our way to those who are hurting even when we don't feel like it. Now that's spiritual maturity!

A good many things we can accomplish alone, but this most important step is not one of them. We desperately need the beacons of mature Christians to lead us into faithfulness. The car is running, the door is open, hop in, and ride shotgun!