

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
 May 7, 2017, Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As we continue our discernment journey here at St. Paul's, it's fitting that we have this short passage from Acts in our reading today which I hope, will lead us to think about what is church – what is the reason for church – and, then, how are we doing as church compared to this very early church. What implications are there for our life together? I wonder - has too much time gone by and has too much changed the world since the time of Acts for us to even make a connection?

Reading this passage again reminded me of one of my annual pilgrimages to Sturbridge, Massachusetts back when lived in Connecticut. I'd meet one of my Seminary classmates for a little time away – Sturbridge was equal distance for both of us and we'd spend about 36 hours there to catch up – and explore the antique shops, some of the outlet stores, have a wonderful dinner and stay in an old country inn. The next day we'd be on the road again, wandering through more shops, have a light lunch, and then head back home, refreshed and energized from our time away.

One year we stopped at a wonderful old New England meetinghouse in the area. We were walking around the outside of the church built in the early 1800s when the door opened and a smiling woman greeted us, “May I help you?” We were caught!

We introduced ourselves - both pastors on some R&R and had been drawn to this church and were just looking around. Turns out our host was the church secretary – she and the moderator of the church were there cleaning out a basement storage room they called the “pit.” She invited us in and we spent 45 minutes or on a tour – the lovely old worship space, the kitchen, their social room. It was great fun and very interesting to learn of their history and something about their current ministries.

In their social room there were at least a dozen cubicles separated by curtains, each with a cot. She explained that the church took a turn at opening their doors to the homeless population of the area, feeding and housing them for a week, offering the hospitality of the church. I'd never heard of IHN before this – I had no idea that such a ministry existed and Sally and I were both impressed by this outreach. But my thought process didn't stop there.

But it didn't take long before I found myself wondering what the church was doing to combat a social system that kept people homeless, deep in poverty – my thoughts went to organizing a board or committee to take this advocacy on. It wasn't enough to just house people – we needed to do more!

And the more I thought about it, the more discouraged I felt – structures of the church, insurance needs, liability issues, health codes, taking on the government to promote change – all the nuts and bolts and the “what-ifs”. I found myself “over-thinking”, and realized in my discouragement, I'd probably end up doing nothing. It was too big – it meant too much change. And then I suddenly realized – what a great way to stifle the ministry of this church.

When have we gotten stuck in that trap – of stifling a possible ministry in church? It happens everywhere at some time. Can't we make things complicated – more complicated than they need to be – in our daily lives and in the lives of our churches?

Our passage from Acts this morning takes us back to the infant church – there's such a wonderful simplicity there – and a sense of completeness and wholeness there that calls us to come and watch and learn.

Listen again to the words:

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; day by day as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Now, there's a church that's doing something right. 3,000 people were added! Without going to confirmation class. Without attending a new members class, without being voted into membership, without being asked to serve on a committee. No stewardship campaigns because they pledged all they had without being asked! And when was the last time we had awe come upon us? How does that happen?

What is it about this ancient church that makes it so special? And is that specialness in reach of the modern church, of us right here? I believe it is! There are 4 timeless marks of the church spelled out for us:

Devotion to the teachings of the apostles.

The fellowship of the church.

The breaking of bread.

Prayer.

The early church was deeply grounded in the teachings of Jesus and with it, a commitment to not only hearing the word, but also living it out. Not just on Sunday mornings either – in the whole of their beings. We know the teachings but it's sometimes hard to live them out – we can do such a good job of compartmentalizing our lives that we don't even consider the teachings we know so well. The early church in Acts shows us it can be done – being grounded in the teachings in every part of life, in every experience. How are we doing, each of us, with that mark of the church?

The fellowship of the church – the common life – knowing and growing together in faith. The early church shared their lives in the temple, in each others' homes – in fact, the early church literally had a Christian communal life. Sharing, hospitality, the common good – at the heart of their life together – no brother or sister in the faith could do without while another had in plenty. That's what God wanted from them – giving up self-centeredness to become interdependent. How counter-cultural is that!

What does true fellowship look like? It's not just being close-knit, is it. It's an openness to anyone who enters these doors, enters the gathered community in worship or any activity. Fellowship is openness, hospitality, real welcome, inclusion based simply on the fact that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. And the profound benefit is this: we'll grow in faith together, we'll build up the community in faith as we share our lives, share what Jesus has given us – a mutual love and care.

This week I re-read part of Jonathan Kozol's book, *Amazing Grace*. He's an award winning author, social activist, and educator who has spent decades calling out against the inequities for poor urban children and their families in the areas of education, housing, and health care. It is a disturbing book in so many ways but I couldn't put it down. The stories of these children will make you laugh and cry, make you angry, and at the same time, move you by their examples of life in community – exactly like the Acts reading shows us.

Dr. Kozol is walking a terribly poverty stricken Bronx neighborhood with 7 year old Cliffie. He asked Cliffie during their walk how he pictures God. Cliffie says, "He has long hair and He can walk on the deep water." To make sure Dr. Kozol understands that this is an unusual ability, he adds, "Nobody else can."

Dr. Kozol writes, "Cliffie seems to take the lessons of religion literally also. Speaking of a time his mother sent him to the store, "to get a pizza – three slices, one for my Mom, one for my Dad, and one for me" – he says he saw a homeless man who told him he was hungry. But he was too cold to move his mouth. He couldn't talk."

Kozol asked him, "How did you know he was hungry if he couldn't talk?"

"He pointed to my pizza."

"What did you do?"

"I gave him some."

"Were your parents mad at you?"

Cliffie looks surprised at this. "Why would they be mad? God told us, share!"

God tells us to share. We are called, like the earliest church, to hold all things in common, to be in true fellowship with each other.

Another mark of this fully functioning church in Acts is the breaking of bread. It's that sacred meal that provides the glue that holds us together, that gives us the strength to be as alive as was the church in Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost. Like the early church, we too gather at the table and receive the strength we need to be alive and faithful.

And prayer – as the sacred meal was the glue that held the church together and continues to do so – prayer provides the building blocks of the community. Prayer is the spiritual daily bread. Prayer is a declaration of dependence – on God! How's your prayer life? How's the prayer life of our congregation? Do we seek each other out and pray together? We maintain a prayer list – you read it each week in the bulletin, you pray the names each week here at worship. It's a powerful expression of the spiritual daily bread.

When we seek each other out to pray together, there's something profound that happens. There was a church that introduced prayer into each and every activity – the first night prayer was introduced at the choir rehearsal, some wondered what prayer had to do with learning the music, getting the tempo right. Some folks even rolled their eyes but over time music and prayer became friends.

One night right in the middle of rehearsal, one of the women stopped singing and said. "I'm having a bad chemo day. And I know I could come here and that you would pray for me and with me tonight." So they did. They gathered around their hurting friend and enclosed her in prayer. What a powerful moment. The church goes on to report that just by adding prayer to all of their committees, programs, activities – they began to experience renewal and new life.

The marks of the early church – they’re just as essential today as they were those many years ago. To experience life, abundant life, as Christ says we can, our focus has to be on the teachings of the apostles, on the fellowship, the community of believers, on the breaking of bread which is Christ’s presence in community, and on prayer. The early church had this focus and the results were tremendous. Day by day, God added to their number.

And one thing is for sure: such authentic Christian practice does impact and attract others. The early church grew, not by creating programs, forming committees, or any of the methods we immediately think of today. It grew because people wanted to be part of a life they could see that was rich in blessings, in joy. It grew because people shared of themselves and their bounty in a spirit of thankfulness and excitement. It grew because people felt a reverence, a wonder, awe, at the sense of God’s presence.

God is moving in and through each of us – may we all experience the joy and the peace that comes with that knowledge. What a wonderful vision of church for us all! Let’s share that vision! With God’s help, we can. So may it be for each of us and our congregation. Praise be to our God and to our Lord Jesus Christ, now and forever. Amen.