

SLD06.26.11 Sacred Communities Series – The Early Church in Acts
Emory Presbyterian Church
Acts 2: 41-47
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“Pursuing the Right Things”

Acts 2: 41 So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added. 42 They were devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Reverential awe came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and held everything in common, 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and distributing the proceeds to everyone, as anyone had need. 46 Every day they continued to gather together by common consent in the temple courts, breaking bread from house to house, sharing their food with glad and humble hearts, 47 praising God and having the good will of all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number every day those who were being saved.¹

As you’ll recall from last Sunday’s sermon, our plan this summer is to take a look at what I’m calling “*sacred communities*,” by which I mean groups of people over the ages organized in a variety of ways for the purpose of living more fully their discipleship of Jesus Christ. Our underlying question throughout this sermon series is simply, “What might we learn from other Christian communities?” What do they model for us? How do their practices strike us? Where does their experience inform ours, their limitations, warn us, their wisdom broaden our imagination? Some of the communities we’ll look at are ancient, some contemporary, but all are comprised of friends of Jesus and seekers of God, just as we are.

We’ll start today with that very first Christian community, the early church in Acts. But before we begin, I’d like to note that it was never Jesus’ intention to start a church, at least not what we now today a “Christian” church. His aim, rather, was to challenge and reform his own tradition, Judaism, about which, as he anticipated the imminent end of time, he felt some considerable urgency. Arguably a child of the apocalypse, Jesus

both expected and urged others to prepare for the cataclysmic closure to existence as it was known. And sure enough, the power of the religious imagination of the Jesus Movement surpassed for many that of any earthly power or principality such as the Jewish Sanhedrin or the Roman Empire, which is why Jesus was so dangerous – he had convinced enough people that the power of his Father embodied in him was greater than any of the institutional structures that organized and cohered the community.

Those whose individual identity, world view and personal largesse were dependent on these institutional structures, when they weren't laughing at the absurdity of Jesus, felt threatened by him. His death was meant to solve the problem. His resurrection, on the other hand – or the rumor thereof – represented a bit of a stick in the spokes of the wheels of business as usual.

On the other side of the temple veil after his death huddled those who had known Jesus, learned from him, been inspired by him, and, of course, had been crushed by the events at the cross. But then his resurrection! His post-resurrection appearances! His clear vocation directives to his followers: Go and make disciples of all nations – and the flame of the Holy Spirit descending on the babbling gaggle of that first Pentecost – and well, something happened – something no one expected - something that quite simply carried away everyone present, and eventually, many who heard of it.

You want to know what passionate spirituality is, it's when you're get "carried away" like they did at that first Pentecost. Not that flames or a crowd or crazy babbling is required; just an active sensed experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit lifting your spirit and carrying you...well...away.

At that first Pentecost, the disciples were quite literally “carried away” by the Holy Spirit – and *that’s* what jumpstarted the early church. And on that day, they grew from 120 souls to 3,000, in a heartbeat. Their mood was jubilant, energized, hopeful; they felt, quite palpably, “on top of the world.” On top of, and free from, a world of oppression and suffering and death. Remember, if you’re old enough, that old Carpenters song?

If I could sing, or had no pride, I’d sing it for you. But recall the refrain, and imagine singing it to Jesus (which is not a bad practice for most love songs – singing them to God instead of our various earthbound saviors)

{Refrain}

I'm on the top of the world looking down on creation
And the only explanation I can find
Is the love that I've found ever since you've been around
Your love's put me at the top of the world

Such a feelin's coming over me
There is wonder in most every thing I see
Not a cloud in the sky, got the sun in my eyes
And I won't be surprised if it's a dream

Everything I want the world to be
Is now coming true especially for me
And the reason is clear, it's because you are here
You're the nearest thing to heaven that I've seen

Something in the wind has learned my name
And it's telling me that things are not the same
In the leaves on the trees and the touch of the breeze
There's a pleasin' sense of happiness for me

Jesus’ resurrection, God’s power over death, the Holy Spirit’s present inflammation, all put those early believers in Acts 2, quite literally, on top of the world.

The thing is, of those first 3,000 tripping believers, only 120 had actually known and trusted Jesus for any period of time. The rest were all newbies, parvenus,

candidates for Alpha classes: “This community makes me feel great! I really feel at home here. Now, who again is this Jesus? Tell me again about his power, about his powers! How he healed people and blessed the miserable and kept pulling fast ones on the authorities. How he trumped death. Wait a minute, run that by me again...did you say that he *died*? On a *cross*?! Eeeuw. Tell me again why that had to happen? I gotta say, *that* part’s a little iffy for me. Let’s go back to his miracles.”

They were new believers, that first 3,000, but by golly, what they lacked in understanding and maturity, they made up for with enthusiasm, and the “church” found itself on a roll.

Remarks one scholar, “the church in Acts was not perfect but it was heading in the right direction. It was pursuing the ‘right things.’”¹ And what were those right things those members of the early church were pursuing? Well, today’s passage in Acts lists them for us.

These earliest followers of Jesus devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. They didn’t have the New Testament to turn to yet, nor millennia of commentary that followed, nor even Sunday School, so they just turned to those ordinary and uneducated (Acts 4:13) men and women who had the most understanding of, and experience with, Jesus. Our earliest example is Peter’s sermons in Acts 2-4, in which he explains why Jesus had to be rejected, crucified, buried, and raised from the dead, and proclaims his saving work as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Members of that early community in Acts devoted themselves to fellowship, to hanging out with each other and having fun. They had movie nights and book clubs and

¹ Bob Deffinbaugh, <http://bible.org/seriespage/characteristics-healthy-church-acts241-47>

porch parties and all-church retreats. There weren't any old timers yet, no founding members or pillars of the church, or installed elders, to welcome the newbies; *everybody* was new. So everybody just did what people do when they discover they have something in common – in this case, a fresh and hopeful faith in Christ Jesus - and went about getting to know each other.

They broke bread together. Nobody had much and there weren't any fellowship halls yet, so they just gathered at people's house or around the village well or at a big picnic on the Mount of Beatitudes where they'd heard Jesus had preached his thought-provoking...okay...his nutty...sermons.

"Tell me again how the poor in spirit are blessed? I really don't get that, do you?" they'd ask one another over pita and hummus.

"No, can't say that I do...unless...I don't know...is he talking about some different way of being blessed? Something different doing the blessing? Sometimes the guy messes with my mind. You know what I mean?"

And in the course of the gatherings and the studying and the hanging out, an atmosphere developed, a disposition, a shared frame of mind, in which the community began to claim one another as family, as brothers and sisters in Christ. And sort of cradling all their questions and debates and wonderings was a growing feeling that something was going on that was bigger than themselves, something fragile but sacred, and precious happening to the whole community, something to be noticed, and named, and nurtured. And as around any newborn, there was a sweet, sweet spirit surrounding this earliest body of Christ.

And what do you know but that the spirit of that Spirit carried some people away so much they started selling their stuff and sharing the proceeds, so everyone would be economically equal, so everyone would have what they needed, so the members of the body would, indeed, feel as one.

Those were the days...right?

I remember when my mother would talk about when she was little, up in Ohio, before and during the Depression. She always made it sound like life was easier then, and more fun, and much more interesting. Sometimes we latter day Christians tend to think about the early church that way – so new, so energetic, so pure of effort and intent, so aflutter with divine infatuation. And you know, maybe so at first. But not for long....

Remember, we're only in the second chapter of Acts so far. The earliest believers may have started out like new lovers entranced by one another's breathing, but it wasn't long before they started smelling the garlic. Daily gatherings got to be just a little too much of a good thing; it wasn't long before once a week was plenty. (Acts 20:7)

And, truth be told, not many people actually knew what they were talking about regarding Jesus except maybe some of the apostles and there just flat weren't enough of them to go around. The old 80:20 rule kicked in, only then it was more like the 95:5, with less than 5% of the 3,000 doing all the work. (Sound familiar?) Eventually somebody organized folks into elders and deacons who led and delegated the tasks to the people in a decent and orderly fashion, and Presbyterians were born.

Only then folks started fussing about who was doing more and who wasn't helping...you know how it goes. Who'd sold everything and given it away and who was just riding the wave. Old Barnabas may have had the best of intentions but Ananias and Sapphira sure didn't. (Acts 5:1-11)

Meanwhile, the "church" is getting bigger, spreading to other cities and even countries, and the folks in Syria and Greece would be darned if they're gonna lay everything *they* had at the feet of some apostles in Jerusalem they hadn't even met. So folks pulled back a little and started just setting aside a little money on the first day of the week to share with the other saints, as they were able. (I Cor. 16: 1-4)

Evangelism took place, of course, but mostly it was just through the apostles, and then, only to the Jews, and even then, only to the Jews in Jerusalem. Nobody had any intention whatsoever of welcoming into the fold some gentile who showed up at the Mount of Beatitudes with a BLT. It is only much later, after the death of Stephen, when the Gospel is taken to Samaria, that the "church" opens itself to anybody remotely unlike themselves. The initial "hospitality" of the church extended only to those within the boundaries of their own community; and their generosity, only to themselves.

And then, it isn't long before the Jesus movement becomes something of a nuisance to the state, which then began systematically to persecute it, which introduced a whole 'nother set of challenges – like "when is this world going to *end* already?!"

To be sure, we can learn from the freshness and vitality of the church in its "salad days," from the excitement and energy and urgency of our beginnings; that burning desire for truth and transformation; that elemental approach to community

based on sharing and learning and growing and having fun together; from that solidarity of belief and practice.

But what I didn't expect was that we might have a lesson or two for them, as well. About how it takes more than a moment of conversion to mature into a disciple; Rather, it takes a lifetime, and even then.... About how hard it is over time even to *agree* about stuff, never mind *share* it. About how much vitality and urgency gets lost when the church goes mainstream and the state stops persecuting it. Maybe even about how holding doctrine a little more loosely can lead to trusting God more, to forgiving, forbearing, even honoring different ways of understanding God; even, in some communities, to welcoming people wherever they are on their spiritual journey to join in the adventure of discipleship.

I have a feeling that none of the sacred communities we'll be exploring this summer get it *quite* right – not even the early church – but it's a testimony to the active presence of the Spirit, is it not, that we all have something to teach one another?

To the glory of God. Amen.