

Practicing Your Faith: Find a Small Group

Acts 2:43-47

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First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

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Our second Scripture comes from the book of Acts. Here's what happens just before our passage: after Jesus' resurrection and just before his ascension into heaven, he appears to the disciples in Jerusalem and tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes, what we know as the church was born; the apostle Peter stands up and gives a rousing sermon where he pronounces the good news of the gospel and that very day 3,000 people are baptized.

Our Scripture for today picks up in verse 43 of the second chapter. Listen with me to the word of God...

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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; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 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.

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Impossible.

*All who believed had all things in common;
they would sell their possessions and distribute as any had need.*

*They ate together, and prayed together, and were all friends with one another,
and the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

What an impossible vision for a community of people connected in Christ.

That's the opinion of some biblical scholars who say that this description of the earliest church is so idyllic...so perfect...that the writer of Acts doesn't intend it to be real. That this snapshot of what the earliest church looked like really just serves as a rhetorical bridge to get us from that mass-baptism that Peter performed to the a more organized form of Christianity that we see a few chapters later in the book.¹

I guess I can understand where those scholars are coming from. In this vision of the church there is no mention of conflict or difficulty. We don't hear about disagreements over how to interpret the Scriptures. There's not one word about committee meetings. It just sounds too good to be true.

But I happen to think that those biblical scholars are both cynical and wrong. I do not think that this vision of the church is impossible. I think is a true reflection of what often happens when we are together in Christian community. And I think getting clear about the mission of the church can help us to see just how possible eating together, sharing together, and praying together can actually be.

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The author Barbara Brown Taylor suggests one of the most important questions for a Christian who wants to experience...and notice...the living Christ is not "are you saved?" but, rather, "what is saving you today?"

One of the ways that Jesus saves me is by connecting me to a small group of preachers who call ourselves "The Well." There are 18 of us. We live and do ministry in different parts of the country. We get together once a year for a week for an intensive study of Scripture to help us become better preachers. The tickets for admission to our week together are two papers that we have to present on two different passages of Scripture. From 8:30 – 5:00 we read and discuss the 36 papers – many of which inform the sermons you hear from this pulpit. Each paper gets 40 minutes. That's 24 hours worth of listening to a bunch of preachers talk. Sounds like a big-time, right??

There is no question that our goal in being together is to enhance our ministry from the pulpit. But when we get together, the Holy Spirit has another agenda as well. Because when our small group gets together – this is our 9th year – we also worship, and share meals, and laugh, and stay up late refining our taste for single malt. We share – not just the joys and concerns of our work, but of our families. We have a connection – and it goes beyond getting together for a week of continuing education. Because I am a part of that small group of friends who are pastors, I am a better Christian, I am more alive in my relationship to Jesus, and I am more aware of just

¹ *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010)

what a gift this Scripture is to the church. My time with my friends at the Well is rewarding...but more than that – it is holy.

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I have a hunch many of you know what I am talking about when I describe the kind of connection I have to my small group – because you have told me how important small groups are to you. I know that the group of faithful disciples who get together on Saturday morning to make sandwiches for Friendship Trays serves a purpose that goes beyond feeding people who are hungry. I know that when the Wednesday evening Disciple Bible study gets together – no small commitment at 32 weeks in scope – the point is not to agree at all points on what the Word of God means, but to...through a faithful and prayerful study of the Scripture...allow God's Word to bring you into closer relationship with Christ and with one another. I know that the small group of men from the church who get together on Sunday evenings from time to time to share a meal and a glass and an opportunity to talk about faith and life outside the pressures of work is more than just a nice way to end a weekend – but, in fact, serves as a connection point that puts fuel in the tank for the demands of work, family, and civic responsibilities that come with territory at their particular age and stage of life.

And there are more: Thursday morning Bible study, Centering Prayer, the Choir, our indomitable youth advisors, our Stephen Ministers...these groups share more than a common purpose. They share their lives with each other. They pray together. When there is a need...they meet it together. It's called church.

Over the past few weeks you've heard me call attention to a new way of framing our work as a church through something called Ministry Teams. Ministry Teams are designed to be focused on a specific area of our church's mission – be it our partnership with Westerly Hills Academy, serving communion to the homebound in our congregation, or a new Men's Ministry group. By now you should have received a card like this in the mail that is your invitation to consider where your passion meets the church's need – and to make a commitment to serve by bringing this card to church on Easter Sunday.

The goal of Ministry Teams is to increase the already important impact of our church in the community by engaging more people in our mission. But here's a little secret. What I also hope will happen is that the Holy Spirit will have another agenda.

Because what I know – and what I have experienced – is that when you are with a few people who are focused on a specific area of ministry – God takes that effort and knits together a special bond. It is my hope that these Ministry Teams will also function as small groups that will enhance the connections and relationships of those of us whom God calls together to be First Presbyterian Church.

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T. Guthrie Speers, a long-time Presbyterian pastor from Baltimore, once said, “If Christianity means primarily believing something, you could do that by yourself. ... But if Christianity means having Christ’s character and purpose and spirit reproduced in you ... then that so plainly is something we can never do by ourselves ... for God alone can make you a Christian like that.”

Here’s the thing: I think one of the reasons we get stuck – and sometimes even frustrated in our efforts to be a Christian community – is because we assume that the point of the church is to get everybody to believe the same things.

But what if the point of the church and the Christian faith was to allow the redemptive work of God to fashion in us the life and spirit of Jesus Christ? What impact might that make on the life of this community? Or our city? Or our world?

Do you see the difference?

And my experience is that the way God fashions the life and spirit of Jesus in us is putting us into contact with other people.

That is why when they ate, they ate together.

And when they prayed, they prayed together.

And when someone had a need, they met that need together. They were friends.

And day-by-day God added to them the number that were being saved.

One of you gave me a book last year after I preached a sermon on the problem we face in a culture that is increasingly isolated from one another. The book is called *Our Kids*, by Robert Putnam. Putnam is a sociologist, and he explores what can be described in no other way as the erosion of the fabric of our community – a problem that is most acutely felt by children born into poverty who face enormous challenges when it comes to access to education, a livable wage, and self-sufficiency.

One of the studies that Putnam cites in his work examine the habits that a family has that become predictors for how successful their children will become. At the top of that list was a surprisingly theological practice: families that share meals together at the same table generally produce children who are emotionally and socially more able to succeed.

And yet, as James Davison Hunter says, for all families, rich or poor, “Community is no longer ‘natural’ [in our culture] and so it will require an intentionality that is unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable to most [of us].” Including, Hunter says, most Christians and most churches.

Why does this vision of community that the book of Acts paints seem so impossible

to us? Perhaps it is because we have gotten so used to a culture of individualism and isolation. But as disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to live in a different way.

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As part of his interrogation, Porter Halyburton was asked over and over again: “Better place, worse place?” Porter was a U.S. Navy Lieutenant who was captured in Vietnam. When Halyburton would not offer military information, his interrogations always resulted in a “worse place.” He would be transferred, usually in the dark of night, to a smaller cell — then a darker cell; then one with no bed. The last “worse place” was back where he started, but this time he had to share a cell with Major Fred Cherry.

Halyburton was a white man from up the road in Davidson. Cherry was a descendant of Virginia slaves. It was 1965. Cherry was critically wounded, and Halyburton would have to either take care of him or let him die. Either way, the Vietnamese knew enough about racism that they counted on this living arrangement being a worse place for both of them. At first it was. Conversation between them came slowly; trust even slower. But things changed. They began to care for each other and to see each other as brothers.

In a graphic moment, Halyburton tells of washing Fred Cherry’s hair. Cherry couldn’t do it himself because his arm was broken. They stood in a makeshift shower, cold water, insects, bathing for the first time in months — Halyburton washing Cherry’s hair over and over and over again trying to get him clean. They each said it was by becoming friends that they saved each other.²

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The experts say that community is unnatural in our day. The trends show that we are increasingly isolated from one another. Our politics suggest the same.

But I think you know that there are times in our lives when we realize we simply cannot be who God intends for us to be without one another.

Because at the core – the Christian faith that we all share is not an idea. It is a relationship.

It is a relationship that God has with us through Jesus Christ – and it is a relationship that we have with one another who are part of Christ’s family.

The point of faith is not to know something.

² James S. Hirsch. *Two Souls Indivisible* (2004), with thanks to the Rev. Tom Are, Jr. whose sermon on this text referenced this story.

It is to recognize that we are known.

That is why when they ate, they ate together.
And when they prayed, they prayer together.
And when someone had a need, they met that need together.

What is saving your life today?

My guess is that your answer to that question is not an idea – but that it is a person, or a small group, or a relationship.

And that sounds a lot like church to me.

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