

First Presbyterian Church
October 19, 2014
Rev. Pen Peery

What It Looks Like To Be Engaged

Acts 2:42-47

For five weeks now we have been preaching about stewardship.

Today's sermon is much less focused on encouraging you to give than it is focused on what the church looks like when it is in the practice of giving.

Most of you have your pledge cards with you – in fact, if these stickers are any indication, most of you have probably already turned them into church. At the end of the service this morning we will have a time of dedication for the commitments we have made for the sake of Christ's mission through our congregation.

Today is not about persuasion.
It is about gratitude.

So listen with me to a story from the books Acts that describes what the very first church was like – and how that church resembles our own.

Our scripture is from the second chapter of Acts – just after the miracle of Pentecost – which we consider to be the birth of this movement that we call the Church.

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They devoted themselves to the apostles' 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; 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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Wouldn't it be nice? This part of the Bible paints quite a picture of the church. Just before our passage, in the passionate wake of Pentecost, we read that Peter presided over what has to be the largest baptism ever recorded – when 3,000 people turned away from their old lives and allegiances and made a commitment to follow Christ.

It is in this part of Acts that we hear about a Church marked by awe-inspiring acts of discipleship. Where the Church is a mission-centered community that shares all they have with any who have need. It seems to be a church with no trace of discord; no mention of conflict; no discussion of disagreement (and no hint of committee meetings).

Only perfect piety. Grateful hearts. And – by the power of God – their numbers continued to grow.

Some commentators on this passage have speculated that, indeed, this vision of the church is so idyllic that the writer of Acts does not intend it to be real.¹ These commentators see this passage as a kind of bridge; to get us from the events of Pentecost to the rest of the story in Acts.

That's a pretty cynical view. Perhaps it is enough to say that on the heels of our passage the writer of Acts uses the same breath to talk about the more messy part of what it means to be Christian community. Read on a couple of chapters and you will meet a young couple in that early church, Ananias and Sapphira, who don't quite buy into the whole "share everything you have" mentality. According to the scripture, they sell a piece of land and decided to withhold some of the proceeds from the church. As a result, each of them is struck down dead. (We thought about this as our key scripture for our stewardship theme this year but decided against it...)

Not two chapters later, we hear about Stephen standing up for what he believes. He gets stoned to death. Two chapters after that, we hear of Saul persecuting those who proclaim Christ. Six chapters later, the church calls a big committee meeting in Jerusalem to settle a growing disagreement: just what to do with the Gentiles (non-Jews) who want to join the community of faith, but aren't willing to abide by all the Jewish laws.

Fast-forward 10 years and Paul (who used to be Saul) is trying to keep his churches from splitting apart at the seams over a whole host of issues.

Two hundred years later, the church gathers for a bunch of meetings where they hash out just what we mean, exactly, when we talk about the Trinity. Did the Father precede the Son? What about the Holy Spirit? They settled that (for the most part, and with no small controversy), which is why we say the Nicene Creed on communion Sundays.

Keep going about 1,000 years and you have an – all told – 300 year disagreement over where the church derives its authority. Does it come from the Pope, or the Bible? We called that time period the Protestant Reformation.

Keep walking with me through history another century to a committee meeting in London that lasted about five years where many of those Protestants hammered out their theological disagreements by drafting what we know as the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Cross the Atlantic Ocean and you can hear about the Presbyterian Church, which formed its first presbytery in Philadelphia in 1706. It took a mere 35 years before the church split over the issue of whether preachers needed a theological education before they stepped into the pulpit. Everyone kissed and made up 17 years later, only to argue (and split again) over similar issues in another 79 years.

I've skipped a lot, and I could go on. Since the Presbyterian Church floated over from the British Isles pre-American Revolution, there have been 21 splits in our family of faith. And that's just us! I read this week that – worldwide – there are over 41,000 different denominations within the Christian church. That is 41,000 different splits.

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When we take stock of all of the Church's checkered history it is easy to feel nostalgic for that time when the church was so perfect.

When everyone shared.
And prayed together.
And came to the same conclusions.
And had glad and generous hearts.

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

Today, as we navigate the pressures of a culture that demands more and more our time, and live in a world where threats seem to be multiplying, and practice our faith in an age when so many of the things we thought we could count on are changing, it is easy to hearken back to a day when the church was a steady, constant, drumbeat of stability.

Except that church never existed.

That is the fiction – that the church was ever so perfect.

But perfect is not how the book of Acts describes the church.

From the very beginning, the Church of Jesus Christ was a body that gathered amidst the backdrop of fear and threat and instability. Based on what we know of the story that precedes our scripture for today, we can assume that those who made up the earliest church were people from “every nation under heaven.” Diverse in nationality, diverse in culture, diverse in opinion.

Those who gathered together to learn, to break bread, to worship, and the share did so at their peril. Such an assembly was not sanctioned under Roman law. The culture in which the first church did its ministry was shifting faster than even we could imagine – its standards and norms and sources of authority were always in flux.

It was this group of believers who gathered with glad and generous hearts and who praised God and had the goodwill of all the people.

The beauty of the church that our scripture describes is not the absence of the things that sometime disappoint or distract or disillusion us about the church we experience today. The beauty of the church that this scripture describes is the way that those whom God gathers as Christ’s body boldly move from fear into joy as a result of their being together in community.

And that is – at the core – what God intends for those of us who make up the Church. That in our being together –

And in our devotion to what Jesus teaches

And in the fellowship that happens within the gift of this community

And in our prayer and worship life

And in our practice of sharing what we have with those in need...

...we would choose to live according to a different story than the world around us.

That instead of giving into fear and threat and worries about instability – we would instead give ourselves to the promise of One who broke into our world and was crucified and raised who said that “my grace is sufficient for you.”

About the Church, Henri Nouwen says, “We are unified by our common weaknesses, our common failures, our common disappointments and our common inconsistencies.” And, ask yourself, what else but the power of God could make that holy and useful?

When you strip away all the programs...

And the strategic plans...

And the carefully crafted communications...

The Church is a collection of imperfect people with competing interests whom God calls to a higher, common purpose: to demonstrate by our life together that there is a vision for a world that God will make new in Jesus Christ.

That is what the church was about at the beginning.

It is what the church is about today.

This decision to trust God’s promises and to live in joy instead of fear is why we can come together in this place amidst yet another political season when too much money is used to try to convince us that

it is impossible to coexist and compromise with those whose opinions and convictions are different than our own.

This decision to trust God's promises and to live in joy instead of fear is why our larger church is sending resources – both money and people – to reach out and care for people (in our country and beyond) who suffer from Ebola, rather than isolate them for the sake of feeling safe from threat.

This decision to trust God's promises and to live in joy instead of fear is why we teach our children (and youth and adults, for that matter) that a healthy resilient faith is one that dares to ask questions and to explore curiosities about the world.

This decision to trust God's promises and to live in joy instead of fear is why, week after week, carrying the weight of our own struggles and those of our neighbors, we come to sing praise and to pray "Thy kingdom come."

It is a choice that we make.

It is choice that is fueled by gratitude – the gratitude that comes from knowing that we belong – that we are saved – that we are made right – and that we are called to serve – in the name of Jesus Christ who came not only for our sake, but for the world's.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.