

Acts 2:42–47

42They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46Day 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, 47praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Living God, with joy we celebrate the presence of your risen Word. Enliven our hearts by your Holy Spirit so that we may proclaim the good news of eternal and abundant life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I'm a joiner. I don't know if you've noticed this about me, but I like to be part of things. Whether it's the church, community groups, social groups, or other organizations. It's kind of funny because I tend to go the opposite direction of my generation. Many people who are my age have given up on groups or organizations. My generation is the one that en masse started to realize that they didn't have to be part of a bunch of groups to do things. In some cases, it didn't help that these same groups and organizations also failed to make my fellow Gen X-ers feel valued, honored, or needed either.

Anyway, the reason I bring this up is that our first reading today is from the book of Acts, and it is the culmination of several weeks of readings from that book describing the beginnings of the church. We skip the Pentecost story, at least for a couple more weeks, and have delved into Peter's first sermon. He starts with about 120 people and by the end the church has grown to 3,000 people. Most pastor's would love that type of growth.

Today's scripture talks about what they did at the start. The part that most people notice is verses 44-45 "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." I'm guessing you have probably noticed that doesn't happen anymore. In fact, many of you might even equate that to something like what we call communism. But, at least at the beginning of the church that is what they did.

I'm guessing there are several reasons for this. First of all, it is likely that the disciples were used to this system. Jesus, the twelve disciples, and a host of others roamed the countryside together. The Gospels never really talk about how they all got fed. Scholars believe that people they visited with and taught provided hospitality for the group. It is also likely that some of those who followed Jesus, especially widows of independent means, may have provided money, supplies, and general help with the daily tasks of feeding, and laundering for the group, especially Jesus and the twelve. One thing is for sure, we didn't ever read anything about Jesus repairing roofs, or making furniture while he taught, and we certainly didn't hear about Peter, James, and John doing some fishing to subsidize things. The point being this system of people providing for each other is what the disciples were used to.

Another reason that this system of everyone putting funds into the pot for equal distribution worked, for a while at least, was that there was a distinct expectation that Jesus was coming back soon, like any day now, or maybe in a week or so, at most a year down the line. People are willing to work with each other and ignore their differences when they have a common goal within a limited time frame. If that time frame starts to get extended things start to

break down. People start resenting that they are putting Y amount in, while Joshua over there is only contributing X. Soon Samuel becomes upset because Alexander is a Gentile follower, and uncircumcised, and Job over there, well he's a Samaritan! Why are we letting them be part of this Jewish movement? After all, Jesus came to save the Jews.

For a modern example of this we just have to look at the stay at home restrictions. Nobody was happy about it when it started, but most understood that it was important, and even those that didn't went along with the idea because it was only supposed to be for a couple of weeks. Then it gets extended and extended. All of a sudden, some people are making noise because they "need" a haircut and to go eat at Olive Garden.

I'm guessing by the way Acts is written, and from what we know about the history of the Church, the communal living experiment did happen, but it didn't last very long. We could debate about whether a system like that would work for the church, but instead I think there are a couple of things that we should focus on from this text.

First, I think it is important to recognize that this building of the Christian Church was the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter wasn't doing it on his own with his great oratory skills he learned while fishing. The Spirit moved through Peter, and it moved through the people, encouraging them to become part of something new.

Second, verse 42 has four things that this new fledgling group did that are important for all churches to do. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Let's take a look at each of these things and see how we can relate them to our use today.

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. What did the apostles teach? Well, look at what Peter taught in his Pentecost sermon. He taught Jesus—who he was, what he did, what it all means, how he was the great and final revelation of God and God's will and God's salvation. When Jesus left this earth, he said to the apostles, "Go into all the world and make disciples, teaching them all that I have commanded you." That's what they were doing in those days after Pentecost.

In a world filled with confusion about how to live and how to be saved, about the meaning of life and the nature of ultimate reality, what an incredible gift it is to have God's clear authoritative word for us. In a world full of bad news and hopeless situations, what a gift it is to have the Good News of great joy which is for all the people. No wonder these first believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. It was simply the best thing they had ever heard, and they couldn't get enough of it.

The church today has the same obligation. Not only is it important for ministers to preach and teach the gospel, but all of us need to do it. And not just with our words, but with our actions as well. It is easy to say we are Christian; it is much harder to BE a Christian. We also need to recognize that we will fall short of our desire to be like Christ, so we need to hold ourselves and each other accountable, while at the same time try to forgive each other for our transgressions.

Second, they devoted themselves to the fellowship. The word there is *koinonia*, which is the kind of intimate fellowship you find in a marriage. It is fellowship with a purpose— not simply enjoying each other's company over coffee, but a shared commitment to an important task, the task of loving each other sacrificially. We see that demonstrated in what I earlier called communism of the early church. "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, their real estate and cars and laptops, they gave to anyone as they had need."

I have equated this to communism, but it wasn't really communism, because that is an economic and political theory that has historically been godless. This wasn't communism; it was koinonia, community centered on God in Christ and filled with a love so deep that people were willing to sacrifice their own stuff to make sure that no one in church had an unmet need.

In a world full of callousness and compassion fatigue, where everyone is watching out for themselves, it is a rare thing when people actually watch out for each other. As a church today we still need to care for each other, and not just the people in the congregation that we are really close friends with, but even the ones that we don't get along with, or don't agree with. Church is like family, and you don't always get to choose family, but we should be there for them if at all possible.

Third, they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. Nearly all scholars think that this is a reference to celebrating the Lord's Supper. They didn't just do it once in a while. Remembering Jesus' death was so central to their lives that they did it all the time. But the breaking of bread meant more than that, because verse 46 says that "they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."

They didn't just meet together in large gatherings for worship; they also had small group meetings in homes. And eating together was a key part of that, because sharing a meal creates a bond, moves us toward reconciliation, and even anticipates the heavenly banquet when we shall all eat and drink with Jesus.

Although we have not had the sacrament of communion since Ash Wednesday, we can still remember it at any time. Even meeting in small groups is not the best idea right now, but households and individuals can still take a moment during a meal to remember the sacrament.

I think the main thing for us to take from this point is that we need to keep God and the traditions of the church close to our hearts right now. It is easy, really easy to skip out on watching the service on Facebook or reading the sermon. Who would know? Well God knows, and you know. We need to try to keep God and church in the front of our minds, Now is not the time to slack off.

Finally, they devoted themselves to prayer, and to worship. "Every day they continued together in the temple courts," joining in the normal times of prayer in the Temple. Every day they worshipped God in prayer and praise. Further, says verse 43, God was obviously working in their midst. "Everyone was filled with awe and many signs and wonders were done by the apostles." Not only did they hear the Word of God every day, but they saw the hand of God regularly.

That created this sense of awe and wonder and mystery and reverence and transcendence. They weren't just going through religious motions; they were in touch with God in worship and God touched them.

Worship and prayer need to be an integral part of not only the church as a community, but of the individual members as well. We need to be open to God and the Holy Spirit. If we are paying attention it is much more likely we will see the miracles and opportunities for miracles in our daily lives.

I have one thing to wrap up with here today. This whole scripture text is about the beginnings of the church and how the Holy Spirit led them. We are in a time where we also can look at this as a new beginning. The circumstances of today with the virus and stay at home orders may seem like a limitation and restriction to the church. It certainly has changed the way we are doing things, but this is an opportunity as well. This is a chance for us to look for new ways of worship, new ways of supporting each other, new ways of having fellowship. Let's open ourselves up to the

Holy Spirit and look for new ways to be the Church. This is not the end; it is a new beginning.
Amen