

Acts 2:42-47

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.

Building Community - May 3, 2020

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Can you imagine a congregational dinner among the first believers? I mean every time we get together for a meal, whether something light after coffee hour or a full sit-down after the Christmas Eve pageant, I thank God for the Deacons and other volunteers who make it all possible.

I mean, we've all hosted big family gatherings or at least have been part of them. Twenty, thirty people or more cramming themselves into homes intended for five or six at the most. Everyone bumping into the others, squeezing past each other, trying to hear each other over all the talking.

Right now, of course, such gatherings are impossible. Do you miss them? I expect for most of us, the answer is yes.

These big events happened, and yes, they will happen again. Today's scripture describes the scene among the first followers of Jesus, who according to Acts, were numbering well over 3000 and growing daily!

I highly doubt all three thousand sat down together, there was no place in Jerusalem that could hold everybody. I expect these verses were more of a snapshot of what things were like for the first people who devoted themselves to following Jesus.

Most importantly, there was fellowship, companionship. People sat down with each other. One of the remarkable things about the early Christians was that they included people of all backgrounds, nationalities, ages, wealth levels, and gender. Slaves sat with free people. Jews not born in Israel sat with natives. Men served women. All were welcome.

The message of the apostles to first Christians was clear: Jesus the Son of God came to set things right. He came to restore God's plan for human beings to what it was supposed to be. All the artificial distinctions that had developed among people, distinctions that sadly very much exist today — all the artificial distinctions were abandoned by believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the eyes of Jesus, in the eyes of God, we are all created equally and loved equally.

You can imagine in a society which glorified wealth, power, and masculinity how different the Christian message must have sounded! Why wouldn't oppressed people want to join? Why wouldn't wealthy people who knew they had much more than they needed or even deserved — why wouldn't the wealthy with a conscience want to join?

Last week, I spoke of Christ living in all of us. I spoke of the Christ in you calling out to the Christ in me. Here among the early Christians is a living demonstration of the power of God at work in people — people who believed and experienced for themselves the new and magnificent world of community, love, and mutual support that is possible among people of faith.

The scripture speaks of signs and wonders being done among the people. It doesn't specify which ones, but it is safe to say that the fact that people were selling their possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor was an incredible sign of the power of God at work. Surely these early communities being able to find, prepare, and serve food to hundreds at once was a sign of God's presence. No doubt healings of mind, body, and spirit took place when people understood that there was a God who loved and accepted them for who they were — not as society thought they should be.

Now is this how Christians continued living together forever and ever? Obviously not. We who claim to be a Christian community do not live this way, nor do most churches. Only a few deliberately created groups live this way, and few are able to stay together very long. Even in the book of Acts, from where this portrait is drawn, community breaks down. Paul writes his letters to Christian communities he helped to start which all suffered from internal and external problems.

But just because we don't live as the way the first Christians did does not mean they were wrong or that living in community was a bad thing. Our God knows us so well. Our God knows how we live, how we are conditioned to think about each other, and how we make many of our choices based not on love, but on fear. And the Good News is that the God who knows us so well, still loves us enough to send Jesus into the world to show us a better way of life and living.

Remember that Jesus' ministry was not about creating the perfect community of perfect followers who did everything perfectly. If the disciples were perfect, then why did one betray him, another deny him, and the rest ran away? If the disciples were perfect, then why did they not trust Jesus when he was with them during the storm where they boat seemed likely to capsize? Why did they not trust Jesus when he told them to feed thousands of people with seemingly nothing? Why were they critical of Jesus when he dared talk to a Samaritan divorcee whose own community rejected her, or a woman from a different nationality in Phoenicia, or a Roman soldier, or a prostitute, or a child? Why did Jesus glorify the poor and criticize the rich? I don't need to tell you that many of the attitudes of the first century are still prevalent in the twenty-first.

So does that mean Jesus was a failure? We know that the early Christians of scripture lived in a manner very different from how we do? Does that mean the early church was a failure for not persuading others to follow their example — or we the church of 2000 years later are failures because we don't behave as the first Christians did?

It is pointless to try to draw comparisons between the world of Jesus and the first Christians and the world today — or even, for that matter, the world in which the first Christians lived. The Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke of God being the potter and we the clay God shapes as God sees fit to do. The miracle of faith — what the church offers that no secular organization can — is that God welcomes us right now, just as we are. There are no entrance examinations. There are no credit checks. There are no degrees or certificates. There are no statements of purity or quality control.

God takes clay of all kinds and shapes the clay as God wants to in order to make what God wants to. Therefore, just because Collingswood Presbyterian Church does not duplicate the church of the earliest Christians does not mean we have failed and they have succeeded. Just because we have not yet reached the point of radically welcoming accepting everyone equally does not mean we are defective followers of Jesus. The message of the potter makes it clear. You, me, everyone listening, everyone in this world — we are all merely works in progress, being shaped by the master potter — the Lord God. We are all imperfect works — but equally speaking, we are all imperfect works in progress.

God is not finished with us, not by far. What Jesus did during his earthly ministry, what the early Christians did their communities, what we look to the scriptures for is a map, a blueprint, a guide to not what the world is, but what the world can be.

Clearly the message of the Bible, the life and work of Jesus is bound up in hundreds of stories, each one giving us a glimpse of how the world is, and how the world can be. God worked with individuals, tribes, nations, and groups of all kinds in order to get the message across: this is how life could be when we choose, like the early Christians, to come together with glad and generous hearts, breaking bread and praising God in all we say and do.

Choice. Choice. I said it last week and I'll say it again. The Christ dwelling within you and within me is calling out right now and offering us a choice on how we want to live our lives and how we want to relate to each other.

Now during this time of quarantine, now can be a rare opportunity in our lives to take time — real time — the time we never seem to have in our so-called “normal” lives — the time to open ourselves up and listen to the Christ inside us. We are clay, human clay. We are sitting on God the potter's wheel. We are in an excellent position to be shaped and molded by God the potter into the women and men God desires us to be.

But God does not stop with just reshaping us as individuals. Of course God must start there, loving us, shaping us, molding us one-by-one. But God is equally interested in using us, the fruit of his potter's wheel as a community. We, us, together.

It is no coincidence the right after the apostles proclaimed the Good News to the people in Jerusalem that the story immediately jumps to what those new followers of Jesus did with themselves. Did they run back to their homes and keep their experience to themselves? No. Did they nurture a private, special relationship with God that they told nobody about? No. When they saw others who were present with them during Peter's preaching and had also decided to follow Jesus, did they avoid them in the streets of Jerusalem? No.

Then what did these believers do? Keep it to themselves? Hardly. They told everyone they met about what happened to them and how the living God crashed into their lives! Of course the community grew!

Of course more and more were added to their number every day! Of course signs and wonders appeared all over the place! Of course they had the goodwill of all the people!

When you go to a good restaurant, what do you do? You tell others. When you've seen a good movie or TV show, what do you do? You tell others. When you've experienced a life-changing, life-building event, what do you do? Keep it to yourself? No, you tell others!

That friends, that is how and that is why the early Christian community was born, and that is how they grew. And that, more than anything else, is the lesson the early Christians have for us.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, those first Christians went to be with Jesus thousands of years ago but they are our direct spiritual ancestors. Our ancestors have a challenge for us — we, the members of Collingswood Presbyterian Church.

All of you who are listening have been with the group, this community. Some for weeks, some for many years. No one is making you watch today, this is a choice you are voluntarily making. My question to you is why. Why are you here today? What has God put into your heart that makes you want to spend a hour in this particular corner of cyberspace? There must be something. There has to be a reason.

And from the example of Jesus and the example of the first Christians, that reason is clear: the Christ in you is very much alive and very much wants you, yes you, to join with the Christ living in everyone who is watching and everyone who cannot watch, and in fact everyone out there to come together. Yes, come together and build and rebuild a community — a community rooted in the love, faith, and power of Jesus Christ.

Isn't that what we are striving for? Isn't that what we desperately want? As we hear the news of how so many people are suffering — with farmers dumping milk into the sewers, with meat packing employees being forced to work in unsafe jobs which could literally make them sick and die, with hatred and venom and pure nonsense being spewed from our so-called leaders every single day — isn't it time, isn't it high time for a new way of living and being human? Isn't it time for a new, yet very old way of living and being human? Isn't it time, friends, isn't it time, for Jesus?

We, Collingswood Presbyterian Church, we may look around and say to God our potter, what, Lord, can you possibly do with us? How can we, as few as we are do anything about the disastrous mess our community, our nation, our world is currently in and has been in?

God can. God can do anything. God can take you and me, as useless as we may sometimes think we are and make something new and wonderful and life-affirming and life-giving. God can use us, Collingswood Presbyterian Church! Just like God used the early Christians, God can use us to change the world! Together, let us boldly share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.