

“The Earmarks of a Vital Religious Community”

Acts 2:42-47

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April 13, 2008

Our scripture today picks up where we left off last week, just after Peter has preached the first sermon of the new church. We had just heard that three thousand were added to church that very day. The text that follows is an idealized picture of the early church; it is a picture of faith from the eyes of the church historian, Luke. This picture of faith describes the earmarks of a vital religious community: worship, learning, celebration, and good works.

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Recently in the mail at home we received a colorful oversized postcard with a photograph of a coffee cup on it. It looked like one of those Starbucks coffee cups with the cardboard sleeve on it, only it had George's NAME on it! Next to the coffee cup were the words, "We're on a first name basis at (you fill in the blank) local Bible Church. This postcard was inviting us to visit. Here is what that church has to offer: "a place to belong, where people know your name. . . we can enjoy God. . . meet new friends, find needed encouragement." It sounded good, but I wondered. What happened to worshipping God? What happened to awe? Whatever happened to prayer? Whatever happened to giving to anyone in need?

Not too long ago I met a local anesthesiologist while visiting in the hospital. He had really excellent people skills, especially for an anesthesiologist. And I heard he is a good doctor, too. When he found out I was a pastor, he told me about his church, a large nondenominational church in the area. He said, "Do you want to know why I like it? I like it because they *help us help ourselves*. And they have a really great counseling service there."

A couple of weeks ago I was channel surfing and I happened on a channel that featured the pastor of a very famous megachurch. It was on a Saturday, so I thought I would watch him for a while. I can't watch him on Sunday morning. Here is what he had to say to his congregation and to the television audience:

The problem isn't that you aren't praying. The problem is you are not asking for enough from God. Your prayers are too small. I want you to picture yourself gone to heaven. You meet St. Peter at the pearly gates and he takes you around. What you see there is room after room after room, each one with a name on the door. Then you come to a room that has your name on it. Now you're really curious. You want to look in there. St. Peter says, 'are you sure you want to do that?' You insist on looking in this room with your name on it.

Here is what you see. Inside this room is shelf after shelf of all the things you didn't ask for in your lifetime. All the blessings God was willing to heap on you, only you never asked. God is just waiting for you to ask so he can give you everything your heart desires. That is the power of prayer. And that power is just waiting for you to tap into it.

You know what I want to see when I go to heaven and I look in that room with my name on it? I want it to be empty. Empty. Because I want every blessing God has in store for me here. You know that book you always wanted to write? God is waiting to give it to you. That business you wanted to start? There it is. That perfect spouse you never met? God has it all planned out for you. Now I've got your attention! And you pastors that are watching (oh-oh, this one's for ME, I thought), there's a Megachurch out there with your name on it, just waiting for you to start it. Yes! You just aren't thinking big enough. You aren't asking God for big enough things. God can handle anything you ask of him, because God is big!

Now I know why I pastor a small church. Because I am not praying big enough. I promise I will work on this!

Now, in all seriousness, friends, this is the world we are dealing with. This is what we often encounter. Church has become a marketplace, a provider of goods and services, and God has become an omnipotent vending machine that delivers everything your heart desires. You just have to put in the right prayer coin.

Thank God we have scripture to turn to. Scripture is a corrective to the current marketplace mentality, and today's scripture does this in large print. Our passage this morning from the book of Acts takes us

back to a picture of the early church, a snapshot of a very wonderful scene. Only in the book of Acts do we find such stories of the early church.

Last week we heard about three thousand being baptized in one day. Today we hear awe came upon everyone. They distributed their proceeds to all, as any had need. *Really?* Did they *really* do that? It sounds so wonderful, but also so unreal. Luke goes even further. He says, in so many words, the early Christians were all of one mind together. This is how we know they weren't Presbyterian. Where two or more Presbyterians are gathered, there are at least three opinions.

There are four things this story tells us about what a religious community is. These four things describe a vital church. They may look a little different than what marketing campaigns and megachurches describe. Here's what they are: worship, learning, celebration, and good works. There's nothing in Acts about personal prosperity. We won't see anything about getting our needs met. We certainly won't see anything about getting everything our hearts desire. If we continue to read in the book of Acts we encounter persecution, stoning, and martyrdom.

There is a strong Eucharistic tone to Luke's account, with his repeating the phrase, 'breaking of the bread'. And there is teaching, and probably preaching implied when he says they were devoted to the apostles' teaching. This teaching is about the Word, the good news proclaimed and studied and talked about.

People come together in remarkable, almost unbelievable ways when they live in a vital religious community. They step outside themselves in dramatic acts of giving and service. They find they can do so much more together than they would ever do alone. And there is joy.

Luke, the church historian, presents us with an idealized moment in early Christian history. This passage in Luke is probably not a straight historical account. It is rather a story of faith.

It is a story that lifted up the early church when it might have been getting bogged down. Bogged down in such things as conflict, persecution, lack of resources, struggling evangelism. It might have assured the early church when it was debating about who was in, and who was out, what true community was, and what was false.

In church today we get bogged down with similar concerns, concerns which are important **and** valid: disagreement about our mission, discontent with our situation. We also get bogged down

because we forget our purpose. We forget that what we are to be about is God---in our worship, in our learning, in our mission, and in our service.

We look for the quick and easy fix, the kind of thing that feels good. The prosperity gospel is so much more appealing than the real gospel. These things we do together---faithful worship and study, sharing our goods, taking care of those in need---these are not easy. They don't come naturally. That is why it is important we stay in community; we cannot go it alone. It is impossible to be Christian in isolation.

There is a strong element of work involved here, too. When Luke says, "they devoted themselves to teaching and to fellowship," he uses a word that means more than just **devotion**. From the Greek, it means something like 'being ready' or 'paying close attention'. The verb is often used to describe getting a boat ready to set sail. And if any of you are sailors, or ever go boating or fishing, you know there is a great deal of work involved to launch that boat, to maintain it, to sail it, and to put it up.

Because there is so much work involved and because the Christian life is often contrary to our nature, just participating in worship is not enough to form a vital community. It is a great beginning, but it is not nearly enough. Getting involved in communal study, wrestling with scripture and with our common concerns---these activities deepen our faith in ways we cannot predict. Serving in some capacity forces us to grow outside ourselves, and also provides a powerful corrective to our tendency to take care of only our own. This is why when we join the church we are asked to make a commitment to regular worship, study, service, and stewardship. And this is why we all need reminders.

We have heard some already this year about stewardship. We will dialogue much more about study, Christian Education, discipleship, and mission during the coming year. Take a look at our summer sermon series. I wouldn't recommend putting it on a marketing brochure. It isn't appealing enough to attract a lot of new people. But my prayer it is will help us all grow more deeply in our relationship to God.

It would reflect the true gospel if we were able to say, "Do you want to know why I like Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church? I like it because it challenges me to grow in my relationship with God. I like it because it does not simply capture, co-opt, and agree with the culture. I like it because I sense God's real and active presence. I like it because we are a giving church. I like it because we help people."

We don't have a big marketing campaign. We don't do mass mailings. We aren't on television. We won't ever have a coffee cup with your name printed on it. We **do** have a coffee cup here just for you.

But here's the only thing we really have: Christ.

All we have to offer is Christ crucified, Christ died, and most important, Christ risen. It is, in the eyes of the world, not much. It is not enjoyment. It is not entertainment. It is not self-help. It is not the prosperity gospel. In the eyes of the world, it is nothing. . . But to those of us who have been saved, it is the power of God. It is nothing, and it is everything.