

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**April 30, 2023**

**Acts 2:42–47**

Let us pray for inspiration from and an awareness of God's Spirit.

Almighty God, your grace is poured into our hearts as our lives are joined to Christ and by the work of your Spirit in us. Speak your word to us today, that we may not be fearful, but eagerly put your gifts to work for your kingdom in the world. Amen.

Our reading today comes from the book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles. Acts is written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke. It's a sequel if you will. The Gospel of Luke, like the other Gospels we have, is a telling of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The book of Acts tells the story of the early church.

We all like a good origin story. I like to hear about how Superman came from Krypton, or how Peter Parker became Spiderman, or what happened to Bruce Wayne that drove him to become Batman. We also want to know about beginnings. There has been the rise in popularity of services, like Ancestry.com or 23 & Me that take a sample of your DNA to help you discover your ancestors and unpack your genealogy and family tree. The first book of the Bible has a Genealogy in Genesis. The Gospel of Matthew starts with a genealogy of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke, after telling of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, and after Jesus is baptized by John, lays out the genealogy and family tree of Jesus.

The Book of Acts is like the church's genealogy. It starts with Pentecost (which we will celebrate in a few weeks) and then tells stories about the origins of the early church community. If you recall, Pentecost is a celebration where families come from all over and travel to Jerusalem to celebrate. There are people in the city who speak many different languages, the Holy Spirit comes, and the people hear their own language and can understand what is being said. When they are bewildered about this, Peter gets up to explain what is going on and offers a sermon. So many people are moved by the sermon, that 3,000 people become baptized. From there, we hear our reading for the day.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

It's a beautiful image of the church. A diversity of people gathered sharing one another's company, eating together, studying and learning together, spending time in worship and prayer with one another. Perhaps it is church at its best. It certainly has aspects that we see even now in the church.

The Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, has a deeper meaning than just hanging out together. It signifies mutuality and commonality among the new believers beyond potluck meals; it consists of building a shared reality and anticipatory future. The Greek verb describing the believers' mutual devotion is the same verb used for the disciples' commitment as

they gathered in the upper room waiting for the outpouring of God's Spirit (1:14).

If it were not for this devotion, this mutuality of concerns of these new faith members, their attention to the apostles' teaching, prayers, table fellowship and worship would be less than *koinonia*. They would be merely activities that they engage in simultaneously and in the same place.

In this example of what it is to be church, it is not enough to share space and time, but an intentional act is required. Again, the things I mentioned are those things we still do today, fellowship, prayers, teaching, sharing meals.

Did you notice what I left out?

One large challenge of the passage, however, comes in verses 44–45. The members of the community sold their possessions, held all things jointly, and distributed to others as there was need. Ought all Christians to follow this example? I don't recall hearing any of our stewardship speakers last fall make that suggestion. I know the budget and finance committee hasn't talked about this.

While it is not hard to find examples of the community's other described activities throughout the New Testament, the New Testament as a whole does not indicate that early Christians broadly lived in this radical communal fashion. We do not even find it in Acts outside of the original Jerusalem community. We certainly find concern for the poor and concern about economic oppression in places like Paul's letters, James, and Revelation (and the rest of Acts), but all other indications about Christian living, whether direct or implicit, are that Christians retained their homes and basic possessions.

Whether or not this is a strictly historical portrait is difficult to say. Many have suggested that this is an idealistic form of church, that it represents what a community ought to be, even as it isn't what it is. But, again, tending to those who have need, providing for others is certainly a central purpose of the faith community.

Maybe this hopeful vision versus the reality of what church is, even at its beginning, is helpful for us. Let's be honest – how many of us have been a part of a church that is less than its best self? My guess is that some of you have even been hurt by the church. Maybe you weren't allowed to be in leadership. Perhaps your gifts weren't utilized, your voice not listened to. Some of you may have, years ago, been denied membership or not allowed to be married. Maybe you have been mistreated by a leader in the church. Some of you may have experienced a church that was full of gossip or abuses of power. The Church is supposed to be the answer to our woundedness; but instead, many of us sit here and the Church is the reason we are wounded.

The idea of community simultaneously attracts and repels many of us. We long for the life-affirming benefits that community can bestow, but we resist the demands that community makes. There has been much ink spilled by scholars about the rise of people who are not “joiners.” We want community, but we don't always want the commitment it might take. Groucho Marks, a famous comedian from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, reportedly said something like, “I refuse to join any club that would have me as one of its members.” Community does not always live up to the ideal. It's not perfect and shiny.

*And yet. And yet. Here we are today.* The Spirit is still moving, still working...

The description given in Acts 2:42–47 suggests what the Holy Spirit can do. These verses do not lay down rules or specific structures for Christian living. In their context they indicate that the reign of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ creates the potential for mutual service that embodies God's justice. The life and work of a Christian community can reflect—even if only dimly—the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed while on earth and secured through his death, resurrection, and exaltation.

Because Peter and Paul feature so prominently in book of Acts, it might be easy to think that one of them is the primary character, the protagonist of Acts. But I heard once that the true main character of the book of Acts is the Holy Spirit, and what the Spirit can do. Jesus, and the Spirit, are not done with us, even when we feel like the Church is done with us or feel like we are done with the Church.

Like many community-based organizations, the church is struggling a little bit to recover from the last several years. The pandemic upended so many things. One of the things that was disrupted were familiar patterns and practices of church life. How and how often we gather has been impacted. Some folks have drifted away. Some come, but less often. Patterns have changed. It's been hard.

As we establish some new and some familiar patterns of community, and I would say even before the disruptions of the pandemic, congregations could easily get frustrated in their attempts to build community that functions as an authentic expression of the gospel, even if it must remain a flawed expression.

But it is an empowering thing to realize that we are not left to our own devices in creating such an environment. The ministry of God's reign that Jesus brought forth is not merely a thing of the past or a faint hope for future days; it continues, sometimes barely perceptibly, in the life of

communities of faith. It is important to underscore that Acts 2:42–47 describes a community of faith that operates in the power of God's Spirit.

The virtues of justice, worship, and mutuality are not accomplishments of extraordinary folk; they are signs of the Spirit within a community of people who understand themselves as united in purpose and identity, not a dispersed collection of individual churchgoers. This is not to say that the members of a community of faith bear no responsibility for living in a way that displays God's reconciliation. The audacious claims of a resurrection faith demand such boldness from us.

Not only are the virtues of justice, worship, and mutual love not accomplishments of extraordinary folks, these things are not always accomplished by extraordinary things. It's simple things. One person suggested in our bible study where we spend time with the scripture for Sunday, that this passage from acts tells us to just get back to the basics. Study, fellowship, worship, prayer, eating together, helping those who have need. It's a pretty solid description of what church is or should be. Those foundational things really haven't changed. When the community in Acts did those things, people wanted to be a part of it.

As I mentioned before, there is concern in the church world about what church will look like post-pandemic. If the institutional church will recover or if it just means it will die faster. There is lots of concern about how we can be attractive to the community, so that they will want to join. What new program must we try to get people to pay attention? How can we attract more families with young kids? Where are all the 20-somethings? It seems to me those might be good questions, but they often are asked with the motivation of worrying about how the church will survive. It might seem to be more about how we can recruit new volunteers to run the programs we love because some of us are tired.

But maybe our questions can be centered around the basics. How can we share the gospel in a way that people can understand it in their own language? Are we creating the space for people to feel welcomed, to find authentic and generous community? Are we doing things to make sure people are attended to and cared for? Are we intentional about listening to the Spirit and are we open to new things? Do our words match our actions? Do we see the needs of others and work to alleviate it? These seem like good gospel questions to me. These seem like questions that help create a community based on the resurrection.

The early church, and the stories in Acts anchor our deepest hopes for community, justice, generosity, and meaning specifically as a result of people coming to embrace the God who shows up, the crucified, risen, and glorified Christ as God's way to demonstrate the kingdom of God.

If there is anything I take from Acts 2 that gives me hope, that I take faith in, is that if we attend to one another, if we build on fellowship, if we attend to our faith through the study and breaking of bread, that God will be among us. If we care for one another, if we are generous and giving, if we work toward justice and the betterment for all, that God will be among us. If we measure ourselves against these marks—the basics—authentic relationships, fellowship, worship, study and deepening discipleship, and having the goodwill of all the people, I believe the rest will take care of itself, and God will do a new thing.

Amen.