

“With Glad and Generous Hearts”

June 7, 2020

Acts 2: 43-47

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

It has been a tough 3 months. We did not see coming a pandemic which would sweep across our communities and our country, leaving a path of death totaling nearly 110,000 people and 1 million infected. We thought we were immune from a disease which began in China. We never anticipated that the disease would reach us with such devastating consequences and necessitate us sheltering at home for 3 months, unable to visit family and friends, prohibiting travel and large gatherings, prohibiting worship in our sanctuaries, boarding up all but essential businesses, and putting nearly 20% of the American workforce on unemployment. And then if that was not tragic enough, we have watched in horror a man brutally murdered by police officers in Minneapolis, sparking outrage and protests in nearly every state; some of those protests have turned violent. The wounds of racism are once again staring us in the face and we recognize that it has infested all of our institutions, not just our justice system. And of course, there is plenty of finger pointing and hatred to go around. The past 3 months have brought us to our knees, individually and as a nation.

The same kind of swirling winds of tragedy provide the backdrop for the first two chapters of the New Testament Book of Acts. Acts is the story of the birth and early days of the Christian Church. The early church was born in the midst of crucifixions, Roman government oppression, fear, hatred, prejudice, riots on the streets, and economic

and social disparity. Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost; historically Pentecost was a Jewish festival of harvest which was celebrated 50 days after Passover. Thousands of people descend on Jerusalem to celebrate and worship. While the thousands are celebrating, the followers of Jesus, what is left of them, huddle behind locked doors, afraid of venturing out onto the streets of Jerusalem. It is while they are huddled in fear that the Holy Spirit begins to swirl among the disciples, just as Jesus had promised them. Peter, moved by the Holy Spirit, flings open the doors, gathers up his courage and goes forth to stand before thousands of people, delivering his first sermon. And just like that, all the gathered festival goers commit to becoming followers of Jesus Christ and his ministry. At the end of chapter two, calm begins to prevail, the howling winds of the Spirit become a gentle breeze, and there is a return to everyday living – a new normal. No more sounds of rushing winds or tongues of fire. The thousands of new converts eventually disperse; the visitors in Jerusalem go home. OK. Now what? Was it all just a momentary enthusiasm, an emotional high, a moving sermon, and a superficial response? The writer of Acts quickly gives us a snapshot of how the early church goes on to embody the Pentecost story. The passage before us is a description of how the church gets down to the business of being the church in the wounded and fractured world; a description of how those early disciples set about the daily living out of their faith.

Let's listen.....

Prayer for Understanding

Living Word, you still have many things to say to us. Speak and we will try to hear and open our hearts to what you would have us become and do. By your Word may the Spirit guide us into all truth so that our lives may glorify you.

Amen.

Scripture Reading Acts 2: 42-47

According to this passage in Acts, there were four marks of the authentic or faithful church of Jesus Christ. The question of how to identify an authentic church is a good one; a question the early church leaders grappled with and it is a good question in our culture where we seem to battle about the true meaning of the gospel.

First, they devoted themselves to “the apostles’ teachings”. The church is not to drift from one momentary emotional outburst to the next, try to resuscitate Pentecost on a weekly basis. Rather the church moves immediately to the task of teaching, keeping itself straight about what it is and what it is to be about. Doing what Jesus would have them do. We are called to dwell/live in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Teachings like the first commandment – we are to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves; not just some of them who might happen to look like us and sound like us. But all our neighbors. We are to forgive those who do us harm – not just 7 times but 70 times 7 times. We are to be patient and kind and extend mercy and love. Later, after the teachings of Jesus were recorded by the gospel writers and Paul so that we don’t have to have a preacher or a priest tell us what Jesus taught; we can read it for ourselves. Thousands of saints have sacrificed their lives down through the centuries so that you and

I might not only own and hold the Bible in our hands but we are blessed to have the ability and freedom to actually read it for ourselves. The faithful church, the early church, dwelt in the teachings of Jesus Christ. And if we want to be true to our calling as the Body of Christ, we will also dwell in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Second, the first disciples devoted themselves to “fellowship”. A mark of authenticity and vitality in a congregation, is not the size and shape and beauty of our buildings or how many people sit in the pews. The mark of the authentic church is measured by the quality of people’s relationships and their efforts to include others in those relationships, regardless of race, wealth, social status, gender, or any other dividing characteristic that makes us children of God, uniquely fashioned by our Creator’s hand. In fact, the more diverse our fellowship, the healthier we are. Agriculturalists have long ago discovered that when we create an environment which is diverse, growth increases. To plant a field with all the same plants, well, eventually that field depletes its natural nutrients and the plants die. Inclusivity and diversity. And mutuality - the early church had everything in common, taking care of those who were the “least of these” living at the margins of the community. They understood what it meant to be inter-connected. They embraced the truth that my wellbeing depends on your wellbeing. Inclusivity and mutuality are marks of the authentic church of Jesus Christ.

The third mark of an authentic church is that they devoted themselves to “the breaking of bread.” The “breaking of bread” seems to allude to the Lord’s Supper. I believe that we tend to compartmentalize the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper – celebrating Christ’s presence with us only once a month when we gather for worship. Several years ago, one of my professors at Union Seminary gave us an assignment related

to the meaning of the Lord's Supper. We were to document every meal we experienced for two weeks: who we ate with, the occasion, what kind of food. I discovered that my breakfasts were fairly boring – eating my bowl of cereal while watching the morning news, with my trusted golden retriever sitting at my feet hoping I would let him drink the leftover milk. Many times, however, I broke bread with friends and the table talk was sacramental, in a sense as we shared our mutual woes, challenges and joys. Jesus was surely present at those meals. Eating together is a mark of unity, solidarity and deep friendship, a visible sign that social barriers which plague us can be overcome. I believe the risen Lord is with us during lots of meals. When we gather to celebrate the Lord's supper here in worship, we bring those memories of shared meals around the table with us. The question becomes, do we recognize the sacramental in all those other times we gather around the table?

Fourth, the early followers of Jesus Christ devoted themselves to “prayer”. Prayer is for each of us the opportunity to connect with God. And the Lord’s Prayer is the example which Jesus left us. Jesus instructs us to not only pray for ourselves but to pray “Our father, give us, forgive us, lead us”. There is nothing singular about the Lord’s prayer. We must bring not only our individual concerns to God, but our neighbors’ concerns. It is one of the most powerful gifts we have from God. Prayer is not intended to change God’s mind, but to transform us as we consider God’s world from God’s perspective.

The second chapter of Acts ends with a rather intimate picture of the church gathered for teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. We are told that those who gathered were of one mind and heart and held all things in common. But the

writer of Acts does not leave the church there. The next chapter is an account of how this church was immediately confronted with the problems of the world. Just as Peter and John are headed to the temple to pray, they encounter a man who has been lame – brought to his knees by tragedy, we might say today - and they stop and engage with him. The path toward significant prayer is not around the needs of a hurting world, but through it. The church simply does not exist only to care for itself and its members and to focus on our ultimate individual salvation. The church, according to the book of Acts exists also to reach out and care for those for whom God loves and cares. The rest of the book of Acts is one story after another about how the early church engages with the world and community around them. How did they do that? With hope, with the certainty that the risen Christ walked with them, and “with glad and generous hearts” – gratitude for God’s blessings to them and hearts that were not only open to a new normal, but willing to share, generously of themselves and their resources.

It has been a tough 3 months. As we seek new understanding for what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in our new normal, may we recognize God’s gifts to us and have an attitude of giving, sharing, forgiving and hoping. May we embody the Spirit of the Living God.