

People my age often refer to the Good Ole Days; you know when things were a lot simpler and better. When you could buy a Coca-Cola for 10 cents and get a penny back if you returned the bottle; remember that? Gasoline was less than 50 cents a gallon. You didn't have to go to the store to get milk and eggs; you just went out to the barn and milked the cow and picked up the eggs that your chickens had laid. Back then you didn't need as many lawyers; a handshake sealed many a deal. A person's word was sacred!

A grandfather was telling his grandson about the good ole days. He said back then you could go into a store with a quarter and get a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs, a gallon of milk, and a brand-new bike. But you can't do it today, nope ... there's just way too many surveillance cameras!

Computers and smartphones did not dominate our lives. When I was growing up you could only get 3 or 4 channels on your TV and that was only if the antenna was set right. Of course, it was all black and white with static on the screen. People spent more time on their front porch and knew their neighbors by their first name and not by their car or email address. We had face to face chats, and didn't have to tolerate all those zoom meetings. One of my pet peeves today is going to a restaurant and watching an entire family focused on their smartphones throughout the meal and not saying one word to each other. You know, in a way, technology is destroying personal relationships.

Now I'm not complaining about the advances in technology; in some ways, they have made our life better. For example, computers and modern-day calculators are a lot faster and more accurate than the old K&E slide rule I used at Clemson. I still remember taking my first class in computer programming; it was during my senior year. You had to punch a card for each command in the computer program. You had a box this long with cards for one simple program and if you dropped the box, you were in trouble.

We have come a long way since then. But I must confess that my computer still drives me crazy at times. Sometimes I want to follow the example of Jethro Gibbs. He was the lead agent on my favorite TV shows NCIS. In one episode a virus had infiltrated the Pentagon's mainframe and was threatening to wipe out all the Defense Department programs and data. Jethro located the source of the virus and his computer expert Tim was trying to walk him through all the steps needed to disable the computer over the phone, but time was running out. Suddenly Tim heard gunshots; Jethro had unloaded his revolver into the computer. Have you ever wanted to do that?

The other day I experienced an example of how things have changed since I was growing up. I was picking up my grandson Logan from his band camp in my old 2005 Ford Ranger pickup truck. This was the first time Logan had ridden in my truck. As we were driving out of the

parking lot, Logan asked: "Grandpa what's this handle for," as he was winding the window down. He had never been in a vehicle without power windows. Experiences like that really make you feel old at times.

Unfortunately, in the same way the church has changed over the years. When I was growing up in the Bible Belt, it seemed that everybody went to church. If you didn't people would look at you strangely; now they look at you strangely if you go to church. The church was the center of your social life; now it's the neighborhood bar or casino. You know there are probably more people in the casinos or on the golf courses this morning than in all the churches in New Mexico!

The only excuse for not being in church back then was that you were deathly ill; now the excuses run the gamut of your imagination, such as the church is full of hypocrites. My response to that is "one more won't hurt." When I was in Socorro, I kept trying to get one of the neighbors, Carl Moore, to come to church. Carl's excuse was that if he came to church the roof would fall in. Well one Sunday, Carl walked in the church wearing a hardhat, which he later wore every Sunday he came.

Now I was always in church on Sunday morning and MYF on Sunday evening where I learned all the books of the Bible and participated in weekly Bible drills. Today I am amazed at the lack of knowledge of the Bible. I get upset when the contestants on Jeopardy can't answer the simplest biblical question. When I was growing up in the South, the Bible and the Resurrection were preached in every church; now it more of a musical performance and the prosperity gospel; you know, if you join this church, you will be wealthy!

What happened, what changed? I really don't have one single reason, but I think it's a combination of changes in our society and the decline of our moral values over the past few decades. The Church universal is at a critical junction right now. However, I do believe that we can reverse this trend by returning to our roots as Christians. For a long time, I have been interested in the Early Church. The Church was basically born at Pentecost when God released the Holy Spirit and the world has not been the same since. At Pentecost following Peter's inspiring sermon, 3,000 people accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and joined the church. The Early Church faced a lot of opposition and problems, but it still grew rapidly and spread all over the known world at that time.

As the Church faces new opposition and problems today, there is a lot we can learn from the experience of the Early Church. In the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostle Luke gives us a great description of the Early Church in verses 42-47. Over the years, I have preached on this text and subject several times because I believe it is essential that we periodically review what we can learn from the Early Church, a church that was alive and

growing, and see what we can apply today here so that High Desert will continue to grow and serve the Lord. Listen how the Apostle Luke describes this first community of believers.

Read Acts 2:42-47

In this passage, Luke lists five characteristics of the Early Church that we need to apply here at High Desert. First, it was a learning church; they devoted themselves to the teachings of the apostles which included all that Jesus Himself taught; the gospel centered on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. I like the way the Apostle Luke puts it: "they "devoted" themselves to the study of God's Word; they focused on the Word of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ." As a church are we so devoted? How much time do we commit daily to reading the Bible and to participating in a weekly Bible study? I encourage you to get involved and take advantage of the Bible studies that will begin next month. Or if you would like to start a new study, please let me know.

The Early Church was a praying church; it was their lifeline. When we fail to be a praying church, we cease to exist. These early Christians knew that they could not meet the demands and problems of everyday life by relying solely on their own strength; they needed help from God. They prayed in order to seek God's will and to ask for God's power and help. They always went to God before they went out into the world; they were able to meet the problems of daily life because they had first met with God in prayer. Their prayer life represented a dependence on the Lord. If the Church is ever to get on its feet, it must first get on its knees. Both Saint Augustine and Martin Luther understood this when they adopted this prayer: "I shall work as if everything depends on me, and I'll pray as if everything depends on God." This is why I strongly encourage each of you to set aside a daily quiet time to be alone with the Lord in prayer and Bible reading.

Did you hear what Luke said in verse 46: "Every day they continued to meet together in worship;" every day, not just when it was convenient for them, or when it fit in their busy schedule, but at least every Sunday. They never forgot to visit the Lord's house. John Wesley once said that "God knows nothing of solitary religion." There is no such thing as "Lone Ranger Christianity." Things happen when we come together. God's Spirit moves upon His worshipping people. Worship is a stairway on which there is movement in both directions; God comes to us, and we go to God.

The Early Church was also a church of fellowship; they were serious about getting together. It had what someone has called the great quality of togetherness. Now Luke is talking about more than a social get-together. He is describing a communion, a sharing between those who have something special in common. It should be noted that nowhere in the New Testament does the term "church" refer to a church building, since there were none in the first century

with Christians mostly meeting in their homes. The real Church is not a building; it's the presence of Jesus Christ in the heart and lives of people who worship there. The Church is a real church only when it's a band of brothers and sisters united in Christ.

Because the Spirit was within them, the early believers began to love one another, share their burdens, and pray together. They respected one another, helped one another, and forgave one another. They didn't judge or criticize each other, but built each other up in the love of Jesus Christ. There was a sense of community, of belonging to one another. The more you study the New Testament, the more you can see how essential fellowship was to the growth of the church and the spreading of the gospel. Now this is one of the strengths of this church that we must continue to build upon.

We live in a world that has become more and more impersonal with all the modern technology such as Facebook, twitter, email, and smartphones. People don't talk face-to-face anymore. There was a woman who made frequent trips to the local post office. One day she encountered a long line of people waiting for service from the postal clerks. She only needed stamps and a thoughtful bystander suggested that she use the stamp machine which was quicker and she would not have to wait in line. To which the woman replied: "I know, but the machine will not ask me about my arthritis."

We need contact with other people; we need to know that someone cares. I don't know how people face the problems of daily life today without the support of a community such as this church; a place where they feel at home and know that they can find help for whatever they are facing. A place like the old TV show "Cheers," where everyone knows your name!

Verse 46 states: "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." Now if that's not a potluck, I don't know what is. It appears that we Methodists did not invent the potluck meal. Did you hear about the teacher who was doing a lesson on world religions and asked each student to bring something that symbolized their religion? Well, the Jewish boy brought a Star of David; the Catholic girl brought a rosary; and the Methodist boy brought a green bean casserole.

Finally, they were a sharing church; it was a church that cared. Verse 44 says: "All the believers were together and had everything in common." In Mark 12, Jesus was asked by a lawyer what is the greatest commandment. To which Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, love God and love your neighbor. God is love, and the Early Church and every church demonstrates this by taking care of each other and those less fortunate.

It is the church's mission to extend God's love and grace to all. These early Christians took care of the needs of others; they loved their neighbors. They had a sense of responsibility for each other. A real Christian cannot bear to have too much when others have too little; that's why we give. In other words, a Christian must not be selfish, but must always think about the well-being of others. This is the agape love that Jesus wants each of us to practice; the love that always seeks the best for the other person no matter who they are. Jesus Himself said that it is more blessed to give than receive. Billy Graham said that God has given us two hands: one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not meant to be basins for hoarding, but channels for sharing. God's kingdom is built one stone at a time; one act of kindness; one act of love; one act of service. This is why I continue to emphasize our outreach and mission projects.

Wouldn't you like to be part of a church like that? This continues to be my goal and vision for High Desert. In a world where there is so much bitterness, hatred, division and protests, there is a place of refuge, hope, fellowship, and love, and that's a church returning to its roots of studying the Bible, praying, worshipping, and caring for each other. May we rediscover the enthusiasm and commitment of the Early Church as we continue to serve the Lord here in Rio Rancho. Amen