

This morning let's continue our study of the Early Church as described in the second chapter of Acts of the Apostles. The Early Church gives us an excellent example of a church that was thriving and doing God's will. While we cannot always achieve the standard of the first Christian community, it still offers a goal to which all churches should aspire. As I indicated over the past few Sundays, we can learn a lot from the Early Church: a lot about living as God wants us to; a lot about becoming the people and the church that God wants us to be; and a lot that we can apply right here at High Desert to better serve the Lord and build His kingdom. Each Sunday during Lent, we are examining a key characteristic of the Early Church. So far, we have discussed their devotion to reading and studying the Bible, worshipping and prayer. Now let's see what we can learn this week, as we listen again to how the Apostle Luke describes the Early Church in the second chapter of the Acts, verse 42 through 47.

Read Acts 2:42-47

Note verse 42: "The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship." The Early Church was a church of fellowship; they were serious about getting together. It had what someone has called the great quality of togetherness. This fellowship means more than a social get-together. It describes a communion, a sharing between those who have something special in common. The real Church is not a building; it's the presence of Christ within the hearts and lives of the people. The Church is a real church only when it is a band of brothers and sisters united in Christ.

Because of the Spirit of Christ 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. They accepted each other for who they were. 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 this fellowship was to the growth of the church and the spreading of the gospel. Now I believe that this is one of the strengths of this church that we must continue to build on.

Now let's look at verse 46: "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." If that's not a potluck, I don't know what is. It appears that we Methodist 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.

Have you ever noticed the prominent place that eating and table fellowship plays in Jesus' ministry? Some of Jesus' most memorable teachings are around a table or at a meal. Recall His feeding of the 5,000, His attending the wedding banquet at Cana, His meals at the homes of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, His request to dine with Zacchaeus, and His breaking bread with the two travelers at Emmaus. From my reading of the Bible, it appears that Jesus never passed up an opportunity to sit down and break bread with anyone. And in Revelation 3:20 the Risen Christ gives an open invitation to all of us: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." When we eat together, we share a deeper fellowship.

There was a lady 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, so a helpful bystander suggested: "Why don't you use the stamp machine? You can get all the stamps that you need and you won't have to wait in line." To which the lady replied: "I know, but the machine will not ask me about my arthritis."

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 any more. Awhile back, Judy and I were having supper in a restaurant in Albuquerque, and there was a family of four sitting at the next table. Throughout the meal they were all looking at their smartphones and no one was talking. What a shame; what a waste of quality family time. Sometime in the future, they will regret this missed opportunity as a family.

Today you can take care of almost any business transaction without ever dealing directly with another human being. You can get your lunch from a vending machine; have your blood pressure checked by a machine at Smith's; and as we found out during Covid, we can order almost anything online without ever going out of the house or to a store, or even putting on clothes. When was the last time that you had a conversation with a real, live operator? When you live in this kind of context, it's hard to find somebody who is the least bit curious about your arthritis, your health or your family. As humans, we need to know that someone cares; that we are not alone as we face the difficult times of life; and that we have somebody to talk to.

Take for example my former barber. Donna was from England and had been cutting my hair for over eight years and attended St. Stephen's UMC when I was the Associate Pastor there. As I sat down in the chair, I always asked how things are going in her life. Many times, she broke down in tears as she told me about her son who was doing drugs again, that her husband had cancer and then later that she also had cancer which eventually claimed her life. I always prayed with her before I left. Like every one of us, Donna needed someone to talk to and for

someone to care, especially since her family was far away. As Christians we are called to look out for each other, to love one another.

As Christians we need to be sensitive to the fact that people need human contact and feel that someone really cares about them. Unfortunately these times of one-on-one fellowship are becoming rare. Direct personal contact with family, friends, neighbors, and other people is becoming more difficult and less frequent. Many of us have moved away from the family home town and our extended family. In addition, with the technical advances over the past years, people are spending more time texting and chatting online than just sitting down with each other, talking and having good ole honest fellowship.

This is definitely a role that the Church is called to fulfill today, and one that our Congregational Care Team and Fellowship Committee are addressing. When I worked for the government, my agency always held an annual conference. Many of my colleagues indicated how much they enjoyed these gatherings because they really didn't have any real friends where they were stationed. Judy and I told them that we had lots of friends in Santa Fe. When asked how this was so, we told them it was at our church, and we encouraged them to get involved with a local church. Now some of you may have had similar experiences. We are all looking for a place where we can belong; where we feel that people care about us; a place where we can call home, like the old TV show *Cheers* "where everybody knows your name." The Church can and should be such a place.

In his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, our Bishop Robert Schnase tells about an older man whose wife had been brought to the hospital by ambulance. This was not how they had planned their day. They had started out the morning shopping and then going to a restaurant where his wife suffered a heart attack. A chaplain came and sat with the man. A little later the doctor came and gave him the sad news that his wife had died. The elderly gentleman was stunned with grief.

The chaplain offered to call his pastor, but the man said that they didn't go to church. He then asked if he could call some family members, co-workers or neighbors. The man said that their family was on the other side of the country; that he had retired from another city; and that they didn't know any of their neighbors. The chaplain helped the man fill out the required paperwork, gave him his wife's belongings, and watched him walk out into the dark night alone. Life is not meant to be this way! We are created for fellowship, to care and support each other; and this is the ministry of this and every Church. The Church is not meant to be a social club; we are family.

Listen to verse 46 again: "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." There was no

jealously, no criticizing; just joy and hearts full of the peace of God. The *Message* paraphrases it this way: “Every meal was a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw.” In other words they demonstrated what Jesus said in John 13:35 – “A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The Early Church grew because people saw how much its members loved, respected and cared for each other, and thus they also wanted to be included in that fellowship. Wouldn't you want to be part of such a church? Oh, you can be sure that there were some disagreements and arguments; what family doesn't have them. But they did it in love; you know the agape love that Jesus wants all of us to practice, where we always seek the best for the other person no matter what they have done or said about us. Agape is that quality of mind and heart which compels a Christian never to feel bitterness, never to feel any desire for revenge, but always to seek the highest good for every person no matter who they may be.

The Apostle Paul describes the agape love that unities us in Ephesians 4 as follows: “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

The Early Church demonstrated warm hospitality by welcoming new people, even though it might have been dangerous for them to do so; remember back then that Christians were being persecuted for their faith. However, they were following the teachings of Jesus. Hebrews 13:1-2 states: “Keep on loving each other like family. Do not forget to entertain stranger, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” The writer was most likely thinking about the time that Abraham and Sarah welcomed three visitors who foretold of the birth of their son Isaac. The point is while we may not be welcoming angels, we never know how we will touch the other person's life or how they may touch our life. We must never forget that we are all here this morning because of the hospitality of someone else. Someone once told me that they were in church because the “door was open.” This is why I continue to encourage each of us to greet and welcome everyone who comes in these doors and make them feel right at home.

A greeting prayer of the Shakers goes like this: “The Christ in me greets the Christ in thee and draws us together in love.” After the birth of their first child, an Episcopal priest wearing his clerical collar went to the hospital to visit his wife and new baby. When he entered the room, he went over and hugged and kissed his wife, and then gave her another hug and kiss as he was leaving. After he left, the wife's roommate commented: “Gee, your pastor sure is a lot friendlier than mine; what church do you go to?”

As I look back over my life and previous career with the Federal government with all the moves that Judy and I made from State to State, I found myself missing home: Mom's cooking, the familiar surroundings, the friendship of the neighborhood, the fellowship of family members, and the common beliefs and heritage. I know that you can never go back to the way things were before, and if you did, it would not be as great as you once imagined; however, I have found something that comes close, very close, and that is the fellowship of the church. The church is home to me. It is here that I find love, encouragement, acceptance, fellowship, and support to face the daily challenges of life. And I think that many of you have experienced the same feeling especially if you have had to move around during your career as we did. Like home, here you are welcomed no matter where you have come from or what you have done. The door is always open and you are always welcome.

Home is where the heart is, and I hope and pray that your heart is at home here at High Desert among this fellowship of believers. Let's us continue to be a welcoming church where the love of Christ dwells. Amen