

Sermon #31  
Acts 2:42-47  
June 7, 2020

## The Fellowship Grows

Close your eyes with me. (Breathe in breathe out). Now recall a high moment of spiritual renewal in your life. Reflect on where it was, how you felt, what you learned? Maybe it occurred out in nature where you could sense God's presence more closely. Perhaps it was a high moment in a worship or an evangelistic service. Maybe it was a camp experience. In our Wednesday night Bible study, some members spoke fondly of high spiritual moments at Lakeside summer camps. I agree, Lakeside does give a beautiful setting to meet God and become changed or renewed by him. And many other camps and outdoor settings provide the same atmosphere.

Now once again, recall that moment of a high spiritual moment. Some of you may have a harder time finding that moment, so simply recall a moment in which you felt a significant, let's say, euphoric high. Everything seemed wonderful. You can open your eyes now.

Now let's take it a step further. How did you do when you returned home? Or your life returned to some sort of normalcy? Did you find further community and spiritual support back home? Maybe so, maybe not? Some in our Wednesday night Bible study said that they had a good youth group system here to help them. Others tried to tell their friends and family that they were different, but they didn't notice.

So, when you returned to your daily routine, perhaps you had some support and perhaps not. You may have gone from a very high moment to very low one in a short time. That can often happen, as I've experienced the same in my life a number of times. That doesn't mean we've lost our faith. A low moment often happens after a high one. After the mountain comes the valley.

And how did you feel in the valley? What did you do then? Here in Acts chapter two, last week on Pentecost Sunday, we revisited the high mountain-top experience when the Holy Spirit poured his mighty wind into his obedient, prayerful disciples. Along with tongues of fire they were enabled to speak in other languages to all other groups of people from the world. Peter spoke bravely and three thousand people repented and were baptized. Thus, their numbers went from 120 to 3,120 in one single day – in one moment even.

That was a mountain top experience for sure. You would think that maybe a valley time was awaiting them, but not so. Luke follows up this euphoric moment with a summary of how the disciples continued to grow and live together in the Spirit. This part of the story should be passed, for it carries great significance in how we live out our every-day Christian lives in community. It teaches us and gives us a great example of how to be the body of Christ today.

So, today, as we look closer at this Christian community example, we ask ourselves some significant questions. What was the early church like? In what ways did they continue to grow after the high moment of Pentecost? How might their example help us today? Like the early church...

I. We must devote ourselves to Christ's way:

The Greek word for devote is a strong word that means to be faithful to someone or something as in holding fast or persevering in it with single minded fidelity. It indicates a relentless passion for that person or thing. One is so dedicated as to never give up. A good example from Scripture is that of Nehemiah who strategically organized the building of the Jerusalem walls. When opposition came against him, he stood his ground and cried: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down" (Neh. 6:3).

With this same type of single-minded devotion, the disciples devoted themselves to:

- A. the apostle's teaching
- B. fellowship
- C. the sharing of Christian meals and the Lord's Supper
- D. Prayer
- E. signs and wonders that the Holy Spirit did through the apostles.

All of these were significantly important. The teaching of God's Word is highlighted numerous times throughout the book of Acts with examples from Peter, Paul and Barnabas, Silas, Priscilla and Aquilla, and many more who taught God's word. And the early church members broke bread together in their homes, enjoying meals together and partaking in the Lord's Supper. They prayed together, just as they did even before the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost (1:14; 2:1). The pattern of devoted prayer continues all throughout the book of Acts. At least 17 moments of prayer are noted. (4:24-31; 6:4, 6; 9:40; 10:2, 4, 9, 31; 11:5; 12:5; 13:3; 14:23; 16:25; 22:17; 28:8). And signs and wonders accompanied the disciples as they stayed faithful to God, which also continue throughout the rest of the book.

Now let's look a little closer at the fellowship aspect as we highlight that aspect. The word in Greek has become a familiar one in Christian lingo today. It is the word *koinonia*. You've probably heard of or maybe have been a part of *koinonia* discipleship groups. That's because the word in Greek means a close nit fellowship with mutually inclusive, open relationships. It refers to a participation, a sharing with another, a partnership relationship. Thus, it means more than simply enjoying a nice church meal together. Sharing a meal together is certainly a part of it and a good way to start, but fellowship is so much more – so much deeper even than a meal around the table.

Besides attending church as a young man, I also experienced a deep sense of community at an interdenominational group that meet on Saturday evenings not far from our hometown. My brothers and I attended often. They had great singing, sharing of

testimonies and a good Bible lesson. We shared birthday celebrations together, encouraged each other, and grew together in the Lord.

Well, you say, but Pastor Randy it's been a little difficult doing any type of Christian fellowship during this coronavirus season. And yes, you would be right about that. I know the feeling. We have tried live-streaming of worship services, zoom meetings, phone calls, letters, cards, etc., and all of those can help during a pandemic and beyond, but there is nothing that replaces interpersonal relationships in close-knit fellowship. Soon, even next week, we hope to begin getting back to some of that, certainly by at least meeting in the sanctuary again. True Christian fellowship should occur even in public worship as we reach out to each other. And then we go from there. And think of all the ways that we will enjoy getting back to fellowship in the near future.

So, the new church devoted themselves to Christ's way, but they also devoted themselves to Christ's people – to loving and caring for them. Let's revisit that as well.

II. We must also devote ourselves to Christ's people. We see that right here.

A. The early disciples share with each other and the needy.

No one is excluded. All are accepted. No one is forgotten or considered insignificant or inconsequential.

B. They continue to meet together regularly.

Luke tells us that they met every day. Daily they meet in the temple and in their homes. They didn't have to worry about maintaining a building. This was a house church movement primarily. They did meet in the temple to worship God, but also in their homes where they ate together and observed the Lord's supper.

C. They enjoy the favor of all the people.

Everyone is invited. This is an all-inclusive church. This church began with other people from all around the world (2:5). It begins as a global church and later learns even more how to be a global church. (That especially happens in Chapter 10 when Peter goes to the home of Cornelius, the Gentile Centurion and learns that God accepts all people, even the Gentiles). Even in the initial stages of the new church, God's people are learning to love people outside their comfort zones.

That means that here in Acts 2, the church is already beginning to learn to overcome racial barriers. This church would learn to overcome all aspects of hatred, animosity, racism, taking advantage of the poor. At this point, we begin to see what Christ had in mind for his church, a united body with no walls of division. It wouldn't stay that way of course as the early church would learn many lessons along the way.

And it is their shared communal living that is so attractive to all people outside. It's what helps the church grow. Christine Pohl, author and professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, says in her book on Living Into Community, "The best testimony to the truth of the gospel is the quality of our life together." What those outside see in us, may make all the difference in how the church grows.

I am thankful for our church that truly gives to all and cares about all. I'm thankful for our ministries with the needy at Our Daily Bread, visiting the homebound, the Heifer Project, the Allentown food pantry, our help with Red Bird Mission, building water wells in Haiti, standing in prayer and solidarity with the Voice of the Martyrs ministry, and much more. Praise God for it all.

But let me ask an honest question. Are we completely there yet? Are we truly like this New Testament church example? Or are there areas where we still need to grow, attitudes to overcome, un-Christlike feelings or expressions that can hold others at arms lengths? These are serious questions that each of us must ask ourselves and of our church as well.

It's one thing to go on a short-term mission trip (which is very important and I highly recommend it). It's one thing to go and serve food at Our Daily Bread, as good and important as that is. And I strongly encourage you to do that, too. But are we willing to rub shoulders with and live next to those who are different from us – who don't look like us, don't act or talk like we do? Can we break bread together, worship together, live in proximity to each other and consider each other equal in God's sight? That's when we find out the maturity of our growth in Christ. Is my needy brother or sister just a project or a friend? Is he or she worthy of my attention and respect on a day to day basis? Do I help him or her out just to make myself feel good or look good? Can I worship with other minorities and those who are different from me and even change my form of worship sometimes for theirs?

Daniel was an exchange student from Kenya who lived with us for a semester during our pastorate in Huntington, IN. years ago. Our family enjoyed getting to know him and have him go to church with us. Many people in the church were also friendly towards him, but there were some, who looked down at him. One could tell clearly they were not happy that this very black man was becoming part of their white church. Now that's a negative example. Let's turn to one much more positive.

Yes, we've seen racism rear its ugly head in recent days, but in the midst of all the chaos, anger, and hurt feelings, you may have noticed on the news the videos of a white cop hugging a black lady who was a peaceful part of the demonstration. She was so appreciative. Maybe you noticed as well other cops standing up for the rights of minorities. Perhaps you saw the nurses in New York City, most of them white, who took a knee in their expression of solidarity with the Black lives matter. These health personnel were so grateful for people to stand up and pray for them during this health crisis. Now they get to do the same for others in need. That's how they felt about it.

They posted signs, “You clapped for us, we kneel for you.” And “racism is a public health emergency.”

So, in the face of some very dire days, we see people rising to the occasion as the early church did to see the needs of all people and help them. No, vandalism and looting are not part of the response at all. That must be condemned as well. But peaceful marches, voting in new legislation, standing up for the oppressed, speaking out against wrong, and living righteously with justice and love for all must be done on a continuous basis. That’s the example of the early church. What can we do today as a church? Think about that. Are you willing to bow together, take a knee in solidarity for the oppressed and post it on Facebook? No pressure to do so, just a thought.

The church of Pentecost grew in maturity and in numbers.

III. We must devote ourselves to Jesus and let him do his work in us as a body

Finally, the new church after Pentecost is a church of growth, not because of their own efforts, but because of their Lord and their dependence on him. The last verse tells the story of daily growth. The high point moment saw a growth of three thousand people. But in the “valley,” God continues to grow his church day by day.

*“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (v. 47b).*

They did not devote themselves to any particular strategy or human initiatives. They did their part and God did the rest, just as in 1 Cor. 3:6, Paul asserts, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” In other words, we do our part, and leave the rest to God.

Conclusion

Rachel and I have almost been here a year now at Elida Immanuel Church. We’ve grown to know you better over this year and certainly appreciate all of you and have received your love for us over and over again. So, I, we, say thankyou and we are looking forward to more time with you, as God wills. And what will determine our success as a congregation will not be any new strategy or program (although those have their places). What will determine the whole nature of our church is how well we love one another and how well we love those all around us no matter who they are. The world is looking for a loving, accepting, growing, NT expression of God’s love. Let’s be God’s fellowship for all, the fellowship that grows together.