

Embody the Gospel in Community:

Teaching, Fellowship, Breaking Bread, Praying

Acts 2:42-47
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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September 13, 2009

We probably don't look at the New Testament Book of Acts as much as we should. Most of us are really only familiar with the first part of Chapter 2, the description of that bizarre event known as Pentecost. The Holy Spirit comes like a loud rushing wind filling the rag-tag group of disciples with power and courage to spread the message of Jesus' life and ministry. As a result, the Christian church is born!

Today's biblical text, which is found later in that same chapter, informs us as to the priorities of the early church. They warrant a good close look, for perhaps we might want to consider them as priorities for the church today. And if we agree they are still important, then how could we use them to further shape our life together as a congregation? As you will soon see, we are already incorporating them, at least to one extent or another.

The author of the Book of Acts is the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke. After Luke describes the coming of the Holy Spirit, he shares a sermon that he says Peter delivered in order to interpret this event to the large crowd that had gathered. His message carried the theme of responsibility and love for fellow Christians. Peter's words were whole-heartedly embraced and the response was immediate. Luke tells us that three thousand people were added to their number that day.

That is when we read about the four-fold priorities that directed the formation of the early church. **Acts 2:42 states, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." From this we learn that the primary purpose of our common life together is to nurture Christian community.**

In our current age of individualism and consumerism, a 'what can the church do for me' approach to a life of faith, we are called back to perhaps the earliest priority of the church – to build community. And in and through that community, the gospel message, the good news of Jesus, is embodied.

Let's take a brief look at those four elements or characteristics used to build Christian community.

The first mentioned is that the community of faith devoted themselves to the apostles' **teaching**. In other words, education is vital to the growth of the church. Can I get an "Amen" from you teachers out there?

Countless studies have revealed that a majority of Christians are, for the most part, biblically illiterate. Many of us, once we got passed the point of going to Sunday school as children, have not continued to actively pursue just what it is we believe, why we believe it, or why we *don't* believe it. Too often, however, those that do emphasize teaching do so in a dogmatic fashion that seeks to tell people what they should believe. That is not our approach here at College Hill.

So in another shameless plug, I would like to encourage all of you to seriously consider attending our new adult church school class, *Living the Questions: An Introduction to Progressive Christianity*. It's model is one of open exploration, encouraging people to bring with them their long-held questions about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, the role of the church, and so forth.

In addition to this Church School class, there are other excellent learning opportunities through our new Small Group Ministry program. For instance, there is a Book Study Small Group, and the Sharing our Journey with and through Scripture Small Group.

Any form of Christian Education is an attempt of the church to reflect upon the implications and applications of the gospel within the church so that the church might continue to be faithful to its calling. And while education can certainly be an individual endeavor, there is also great benefit in leaning together in community.

The second facet of embodying the gospel as a community deals with **fellowship**. Some have remarked that the real miracle of Pentecost is to be found here – that from such a diverse group of people a unified body of believers is formed.

In numerous studies, like Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2001), social-scientists have documented how disconnected and isolated people feel today, accumulating what Putnam describes as a growing "social-capital deficit" that leaves people in our culture longing for a "more collectively caring community." **Communal caring is exactly the sort of social life that Luke describes in the Book of Acts.**

Fellowship, and by that the Bible means going beyond the bounds of conventional friendship, is a transforming experience that is vital to the life and growth of the community of faith. In other words, we as a congregation can share more than common beliefs and core values, **we can also display a profound regard for one another's spiritual, emotional and physical well-being as a community of friends.**

One of the primary goals for initiating our new Small Group Ministry program is the development of this kind of fellowship. Some of these groups will do this in different ways, whether it be, for example, through the Work Projects Small Group or the Book Club, or the Journeys With Our Aging Parents and loved ones.

The third characteristic Luke mentions concerning the embodiment of the gospel is that the church engages in "**the breaking of bread.**" Biblical scholars are not in agreement if Luke is specifically referring to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. While he may have had this in mind, most believe that Luke recalls the practice of devout Jewish families, who following temple worship would share meals together as symbolic of their social and spiritual solidarity. In good Jewish fashion, **when the blessing is said at the table, the table becomes a holy place and eating together a sacred activity.**

The early church called this the Agape meal, a Love Feast. Today, we call these Potlucks Luncheons, or like this morning, a Rally Day Breakfast. This is a reason why I am so pleased that College Hill is also re-initiating its Small Group Dinners program (formerly known as Dinners for 7 or 8). This is so important for us, because eating together is, and always has been, a mark of unity, solidarity, and deep friendship, a visible sign that social barriers are being broken down.

The fourth priority mentioned by Luke is that the church devoted itself to **prayer**. While it is true that a person can technically be a Christian in isolation, the fullness of the Christian life is found and lived in community. And perhaps the most vital element of that community comes in and through worship.

Our time of worship together is certainly central to our sense of community. And again, there are other small group opportunities that can enhance this, like the Sunday Morning Meditation Small Group, the Yoga & Meditation Small Group, and the Hispanic Ministry Prayer Group,

When you combine all four of these elements you get a lot of togetherness. A community of faith that embodies the gospel knows the importance of being and doing things together. It learns, fellowships, eats, and worships – together!

One of the primary outcomes of all this togetherness is explained in Acts 2:46-47. “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

Perhaps the converse of this reveals that if there is *no* joy and gladness in being together, then we’re doing something wrong. **While the Bible, nor I, ever claims that being a Christian is necessarily easy or without its difficulties and hard work, it nonetheless should produce a deep seated sense of joy and gladness, expressed through generous hearts and genuine care for one another.**

So like the early church itself, let us recommit and devote ourselves to the activities of teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and praying together. **Let us focus on building a nurturing community that embodies the gospel message – a community of friends filled with gladness.** For who knows, just like the early church, God may add to our number day by day.

Amen.