

## THE FIRST LITTLE BAND OF BELIEVERS

**TEXT:** Acts 2:42-47

Shortly after I arrived to serve this church nearly four years ago, Norma referred to Hoquiam UMC as “our little band of believers”. I have always liked that as it fits us so well. As I was thinking about the reading we just heard from the book of Acts, I realized that this was an account of the first little band of believers. Although they were larger in numbers than we are today, they were devoted to each other and ready to work on fulfilling the tasks that had been set for them.

Following the Resurrection there were about 100 followers of Christ, left to find their way and, more importantly, left to find out just who they were and what they should be doing. As the number grew to over 3000 they needed to formulate how they would manage the health of this new venture – the Church.

The community was characterized very much like our church community today. Congregational life today follows the same types of activities – teaching, fellowship, eating together, worship and prayer. These have been common Christian practices through the ages. They are facets of the health of the church and they are the basis and standards for our church today.

First, these early believers devoted themselves to fellowship. Since this word has the connotation of sharing in common, this is likely an allusion to the communal life described later in our reading. At the very least this included alms and care for the poor. The early Christians gathered, not simply to worship God, but to help and encourage one another. They devoted themselves to their fellowship – their community. When we think of communion we think of a relationship that is very closely knit together. The community was a communion of people.

They shared what they had and made sure that everyone was taken care of. They had everything in common; they gave to anyone as he had need. Now, I don’t want us to picture every Christian selling everything that he owned, because that wasn’t the case.

This was all voluntary giving. The community sold property, pooled resources, and distributed these funds to the poor. But let's get this straight – it was not a commune. They did not surrender all their possessions. Some of them owned houses and they still owned possessions and goods. But when a need arose, when they saw needy or hungry people among the believers, they were willing to sell their things and help each other, for the good of the community. The early Christian church was a generous church, not because they were forced to give, but because they wanted to give in response to the generosity which God had showered on them.

Scripture is clear: God expects the members of God's church to be generous with one another – in particular to those in need. Christian fellowship then, is not merely hanging around for coffee after Sunday service. The Christian fellowship that God expects from us is that we, like the early Christian church, would be a generous church.

Luke tells us that another characteristic of the early church was that they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. This was important, especially for new converts, who may not have heard Jesus teach. The apostles were witnesses passing along the things which they had seen and heard. It is entirely possible that the apostles had a common set of instructions which they regularly passed along to new converts. If this was the case, then there was a basic body of tradition within months of the death of Jesus which could be called the "teaching of the apostles". Lifelong learning has always been my strong emphasis and passion. There is always more to learn and the more we learn, the more we understand what God is calling each of us to do and to be

Without question, evangelism was a primary activity. Growth was essential to the survival of this little band and their mission was to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ as far and wide as possible. Evangelism is a word that has become less popular in our modern settings. What it truly means is the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness. There is no ministry in the church that is more vital. The last commandment that Jesus left with his followers was: "Go." We call it the Great Commission. It is evangelism, but whatever we choose to call it, Jesus instructed us to do it.

In my reading about this passage from Acts, I found the following information about evangelical Christians, always diligent defenders of the inerrancy of Scripture. What they have not been, in recent years, according to the author, is diligent defenders of the sufficiency of Scripture. He says that he hears many of his evangelical brothers and sisters caring about the Lord speaking to them with a special voice when all that we need is written down in the Bible. Then tells about the fictional “Psychiatric Hotline” at the local evangelical church. This “hotline” begins with the following message: “Hello, and welcome to the Psychiatric Hotline. If you are obsessive compulsive please press 1 repeatedly. If you are do-dependent, please ask someone to press 2 for you. If you have multiple personalities, please press 3,4,5,6. If you suffer from paranoia, don’t press anything—we know who you are and we are tracing this call”. And finally, “If you are an evangelical Christian please listen carefully and a little voice will tell you which button to press’.

Well, if there is any lesson here, it is that we do not need mystical experiences or special voices when all that is needed to do God’s will in God’s church is dependent on God’s all-sufficient Word – and our willingness to share it with others.

The disciples devoted themselves to “breaking of bread”. While this phrase can be used to describe the sharing of a meal together, it is likely that Luke is describing the community as celebrating some form of Communion. In Luke this phrase is used for the resurrected Jesus breaking bread at Emmaus as two disciples realized who he was. I think that Jesus’ practice of common meals was the foundation for this practice – they all ate and drank together as a group. They would gather for worship, both formally and informally. In the temple courts they prayed and praised, but the breaking of bread was probably done in a much more informal way than the communion as we know it. They probably took the bread and wine as part of a meal. But still, as Jesus commanded them, remembering the story of his death and resurrection, was part of a meal, and it would have been in someone’s home – in small groups.

This early band of believers gathered together for worship and prayer. They worshipped both formally and informally. In the temple courts they prayed and praised. It would not be unusual for Jewish men to go to the temple several times a day to pray. And the text indicates that the disciples met in both private homes and in the temple. Worship, especially corporate worship, was the backbone and hub of religious activity, and prayer was front and center of this worship.

This passage describes the Christian community as it began, and it is beautiful. They are doing theology, they are living together, they are eating together, they are praying together. This is a kind of community that most church leaders would give their left foot for. The new Christians are literally giving everything away and they did that so no one would be hungry or homeless. They did it with gladness and joy – and the community kept growing every single day. The story of the beginning of the Church is just glorious. This is the Church alive; the church on the move, the Church as the bride of Christ.

But let's be really honest. This is not how many have experienced the Church. When I look around at my sisters and brothers who have been cut out or left behind or excluded from the church, I can see that they haven't had these experiences of community. When we think about the Church on the move, we don't usually think about good news proclaimed to the poor or giving away all that we have. Historically, we look back at a church that has committed systematic genocide against people groups - participated in power struggles with other nations - that has wrapped itself up in the power of the state and used that power for oppression and injustice in the name of God.

Our global church today has told us that they love each one of us and then silenced our voices because of our gender or race or sexual orientation. If we are the bride of Christ, we are not wearing white. Paul says that the Church is a *body* - the body of Christ. We, the individuals in the church are the eyes and ears and hands of Christ on earth. Our diversity of roles and personalities and gifts and problems work together, moving in one direction, towards exhibiting Christ. We are one body, many parts. We are diverse, but we can be united. We are called to enter into intimate, interdependent relationships with people who are ridiculously different from us - a hand and a liver, a

kneecap and the lungs. And this also means that when the church fails to live into that unity, when the church excludes or eliminates or hurts individual people, the whole body is wounded, just like breaking an arm or having open heart surgery. One part does not suffer without the whole body suffering.

This past week we failed at living into that unity, and this failure affects every one of us. Rather than embracing the multitude of gifts and graces of Rev. Karen Oliveto and welcoming these gifts into the Episcopacy of our Church, the Council of Bishops has deemed her unworthy because of her sexual orientation. As a Reconciling Ministry of the Church, we should all be incensed at the hypocrisy that has blemished the community of that first little band of believers.

However, we as a small community, we are still moving. The Church is still moving. The Spirit is still moving. The horrible, heartbreaking failures of the modern church can't stop the Spirit from continuing to move and spread the Good News. We can show the world that our heartbreaking failures cannot stop the grace of Jesus Christ from continuing to move in and between us. We, our little band of believers, can continue to emulate that early band, working together in teaching and learning, worship and prayer, sharing what we have with others, being in fellowship with everyone whom we meet, and in the breaking of bread together in love and community.

And our good news is tremendous news. It is the best news of all, that Christ cannot be stopped by our sin and our failures, whether those sins are communal or individual. And the good news is that we are all welcome in all our messiness and diversity. This is us. This is the church. One body, different parts. And while we mourn the pain the church has caused us and others, here we are again, through Christ and in the Spirit creating a place for others and ourselves that we can serve and love in all our beautiful messiness. We were blessed with that first band of believers and even more blessed to be part of the little band of believers in our corner of God's world. Amen.