

## This is Church!

Let's do some word association for just a minute. I'm going to say a word and I want you to notice what comes into your mind. Maybe it will be more than one thing. Whatever it is, just notice it for yourself. People live streaming, feel free to drop a note in the chat with the word or words that come to mind. Ok, ready? Here's the word: church.

There's a lot of associations we might have made. When I did this, my first thought was "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and see all the people." Then I thought of all the pastors in my life who have emphasized to me that the church is the people, not the building.

I also know that some people have very negative associations with the word – people sitting in the pews right now, because they have been hurt by churches or because they associate church people with judgment and narrow-mindedness even if they don't personally know any church people.

If we pooled all of our word associations, the resulting list would likely be long and diverse, but we would probably also have several answers in common. After over 2000 years of existence, the idea of church is complicated. It is layered with good and bad connections.

Today we are looking at the Book of Acts, or Acts of the Apostles. This book includes lots of challenges, lots of joys, maybe some idealistic remembering and some realistic remembering...all from one person's perspective. that of the Gospel writer, Luke.

It wasn't written as the events were happening. It was written after the fact. Approximately 40-60 years after Jesus died. So, close enough that the people lived it, but far enough away that every single detail might not be remembered.

Our 5 verses for this morning, sound like the highlights of that time, right? The people were generously sharing and were grateful and in awe and the numbers were growing. It sounds like a party I'd want to get in on.

But before we get too idealistic about that early church, though, it would be wise to read and remember what is in the rest of Acts as well. Right after Luke says that everyone shared what they had, two people, Ananias and Sapphira, are found to have held back some of the profits on the sale of their property. In a dramatic story, each of them drops dead when confronted with what they had done. There must have been some chatter in the church that day, right?

And then there was grumbling among the Greek converts who complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. So they had a big meeting, and they decided to designate seven people to be deacons who would distribute the food fairly; that way, the apostles could continue to preach, teach and pray.

Of course, right away after that decision, one of the deacons, Stephen, starts to preach, teach and pray, the apostle's job (gasp). Nobody can convince me that that didn't hit somebody the wrong way. Because we're humans.

So, while today's passage doesn't include these controversies – it holds up for us a wonderful model, a memory and ideal for the Christians at the end of the first century and for us, too, here in the twenty first century.

When we look at the summary of the daily life of the early Christians in Jerusalem. It says that they devoted themselves to four things. Teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer.

How many of those words showed up when I said the word church. We may have called them by other names, but I bet they were probably there.

First there was teaching. The early church learned from the apostles. As they heard about Jesus, about his life and his teachings from those who had known him, their faith and understanding grew deeper.

They practiced fellowship. The Greek word is *Koinonia* which can mean sharing or solidarity. There is an intensity in that word. It didn't mean good feelings among friends. It meant common enterprise. In Luke 5:10 we are told that Peter, James and John were joint owners of a fishing boat. The word for that ownership, that partnership, is *koinonia*.

The Christians in Jerusalem counted on each other for encouragement and friendship, but also to meet physical and financial needs. They were in each other's lives on a daily basis. They were as closely connected as business partners are.

They broke bread together. This can refer to communion but remember that Jesus broke bread in all kinds of meals with all kinds of people. So sharing communion AND eating ordinary meals together were spiritual practices in the early church. And contrary to popular opinion, this is Biblical evidence that Methodists did not invent the potluck. Christians were eating meals together long before Methodists were a thing.

And the fourth thing they focused on was prayer. Luke doesn't describe it much in this passage, except to say that they praised God with glad and generous hearts.

Here's a side bar I find interesting. The early Christians primarily met in homes. That was where they shared meals and prayers. That was how they were in each other's daily lives. In the gender roles of the time, households were the sphere of women. Public places were the male domain. But women could and often were the managers of households, with administrative, financial and disciplinary responsibilities. They had authority to direct men and women within it. And so, when church activities took place within households, the role of women in leadership was not questioned.

In her book, *When Women were Priests*, Karen Jo Torjesen writes, "For more than 200 years, Christianity was essentially a religion practiced in the private space of the household. Its concerns were the domestic life of its community rather than the political life of the city."

At the beginning of the third century, there was a shift from ministry to governance. As Christianity entered the public sphere, male leaders began to demand the same subjugation of women in the churches as prevailed in society at large."

Of course, I believe that shift was harmful to women, to the church and contrary to Jesus' good news. I can't help but think that the Global Methodist movement will be moving in the direction of not ordaining women in the near future.

Church wasn't easy then. It's not easy now. We shouldn't expect it to be so. It is counter-cultural. It is messy. It requires us to work with each other, including working with people who make mistakes and need to be forgiven. It means that we will make mistakes and will need to seek forgiveness. It demands sharing and sacrifice. No, it will never be easy.

But sometimes I wonder if we have made it harder than it needs to be. Or if the things that are hard are not the most important things we should be doing.

I see this scripture as an invitation to challenge ourselves to look at when we get stuck in our capacity to dream new dreams into reality and why that happens. I think the real tension is between us and the community. Anytime we start to gather with other human beings, we inevitably experience the tension of interpersonal dynamics and we can get stuck in the heaviness of all of it. We can get stuck in our particular point of view. We can begin to say, "I'm seeing it this way. I'm experiencing it this way and so you need to be able to experience it the same way I am. In fact, you should experience it the same way. We can end up hyper-dependending on our own perspectives, our own beliefs, as a means to create the illusion of safety in the face of fear and anxiety around change and conflict.

Does all who believed were together and had all things in common mean that everyone needs to necessarily believe the same thing?

Micah J. Murray is a writer and speaker trying to make sense of faith. He has been described as your typical somewhat disillusioned but tenaciously hopeful post-evangelical millennial. He says "I want a community where we can sit on a couch together and swear about how badly we want to be loved by a god we're not even sure we believe in anymore."

What if one of the greatest gifts that we could offer to our broken and alienated society was a vision of intense social belonging like we heard about in Acts. What if our best testimony to the life of Jesus was our life together in community here at Central?

Several times in the book of Acts, Luke offers these short summaries of the early church. Some people think they're idealized. Others want more details. The Rev. Janelle Holmes pastors a church in Atlanta that is about 7 years old. She rewrote our scripture to try to make it more realistic and specific. Here is what she said:

"They learned together; new things, hard things, liberating things. They hung out with the leaders and learned from them things they didn't know and taught the leaders a few things as well. Some of the leaders were a little over-rated.

They ate together, sometimes with china and sometimes with paper plates. Some were better at cooking than others, and sometimes the kids refused people's food and it was embarrassing. But they prayed together and that helped calm their nerves and connect them with God's grace.

Cool things happened in their relationships and in their communities and they were amazed. They spent time together with like-minded individuals because they felt cared for by them and needed to know they weren't crazy.

They shared the things of their life – food, money, childcare, shelter – to anyone who needed it and it was exhausting sometimes and they had to take breaks, especially the introverts. They did it daily and the extroverts over-functioned. They sacrificed time for other things, which was hard, in order to dedicate a lot of time together in holy places, showing up for God and each other and for themselves.

They spent a lot of time together in their homes, clean homes and messy homes, eating and being happy and crying and being generous with each other because that is how God wanted their relationships to be. They were so grateful to God for all of this, although resentment occasionally sneaked in. Yet in all of this, God have them more and more friends.”

May we continue to envision a new way of doing church. One where the hungry are fed, the strangers become our friends, the immigrant has a place of sanctuary, those without a roof over their heads find a home, where we read the scripture and try to figure out how we can apply this to our lives right now, where we pray, not just for ourselves but for our siblings, and the world.

Let's envision a church where we speak truth to power, we hold legislators accountable, where the weak and the oppressed and the marginalized find their voice here.

Central, we have been here for over 200 years. Have we gotten it right every time? No. But do we realize our need to make it right? Absolutely. I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world! Yes, we are the church together. Amen.