

Acts 2:40-47

True community is elusive. At least that has been my experience. Relationships take work. We don't always want to make the commitment and put in the time and effort. It is easier to pack the bags and move on to a different marriage, church community, or workplace when things aren't to our liking. When our vision or ideal of how community life ought to be lets us down disillusionment sets in.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book "Life Together" frames it this way; "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that community itself even though their personal intentions may ever be so honest, earnest, and sacrificial".

Our Acts text this morning is a powerful reminder that it is not we who build the church. It is Christ who builds the church. Because of that, Christian community, grounded and centered on Christ, becomes, Henri Nouwen writes, "the place where the person you least want to live with always lives".

When I was going into the fifth grade my parents became dissatisfied with the Lutheran church where I had grown up, my father had been the choir director, and my grandfather had been a founder. The decision had to do with people my parents did not like for one reason or another. As I a child I never understood fully why we uprooted so quickly. All that I know is that I ended up attending the Presbyterian Church across town. But I never felt rooted there. When we moved to Denver we joined another Presbyterian Church so I stayed with the flow, choosing, when called to ministry, service in the Presbyterian Church. However, my brother, when called to ministry in midlife, went back to the family heritage in the Lutheran Church. Currently, my son who is a Presbyterian pastor, is serving a Lutheran Church in Bozeman Montana.

We all have our personal journey in finding a church community and our place within it. Certainly the community of the church today reflects little of this description of Christian community described here in Acts. Perhaps Pastor Brian McClaren makes a point in his book, "The Great Spiritual Migration". He observes that "our religions often stand for the very opposite of what their founders stood for". As the inspirer of early Christian community through the preaching of Peter lifting up and demonstrating through the scriptures that Jesus is both "Lord and Savior" and now is present and alive by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, a community became shaped by that encounter.

Through the years the person and teachings of Jesus have been preserved by the formation of a risk-averse institutional bureaucracy. That happens to the religions of the world. They often don't resemble their founders. The early church of Jesus which challenged the establishment with its counter-cultural bold moral, ethical, and spiritual vision, ultimately becomes Christendom, the establishment itself, too often obsessed with money and power.

On the flight from Atlanta to Bloomington I sat next to a bright woman in her mid- 30's from Minneapolis. We began engaging in conversation about Jesus and the church. Raised a Roman Catholic in a small North Dakota town, she described the moral and ethical failings of the priest and the church. I

asked what she thought of Jesus and if she is still pursuing her faith and trying to find a church community where she felt comfortable. She told me that she has attended some big Minneapolis mega-churches, describing them polished in presentation but seeing them as more about money and power and the pastor's ego than anything else. She was in full agreement as a millennial with a popular video produced a few years ago, entitled "Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus". Her passion is working in an outreach to fight human trafficking, which has a Christian affiliation.

Acts paints a picture of a church seeking to be true to Jesus, aligning itself with his ministry and mission. What would it look like to rediscover Jesus and Christianity "as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion...as a loving way of life?" (Homiletics, May-June, 2017, McLaren quote, pp. 8-9). The nature of renewal movements throughout the history of the church and today all share this focus on rediscovering anew the reality and presence of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit. The risen Christ still is seeking to renew and shape the vision and practice of his church, freeing it from moribund bureaucracies and practices. Often what we need saving from is the idea that God sees the world as we do.

The church Jesus calls into being is the first place in history bringing together on equal footing Jews, Gentiles, men and women, slave and free. The church by nature is multi-cultural because of who Jesus is. The qualities we observe in a healthy church described here are a profound sense of unity amidst diversity and an outward look of mission.

Paul tried to get his head around what God is doing with the church as he writes in Ephesians; "Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power...this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord..." (Ephesians 3:7-11). The church, the body of Christ, you and me who are in Christ, is God's plan to reach the world.

Staying close to the Spirit of Christ, reflecting his passion and values, living out his life in community through his compassion and grace, we have the opportunity by forming a ministry out of diverse members, to capture the attention of the world and even the supernatural world beyond. Therein lies the mystery of what God in heaven is doing on earth through Christ's church if we will only listen, respond, obey, and follow what he is inviting us to be a part of through the work of his Spirit in this world. We pray this every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer when we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". We, the church on earth, reflecting the Spirit of Christ, become a piece of the answer to that prayer.

Recently being with Luyano Presbyterian Church, our partner church, in Havana, Cuba, for eight days, highlighted this reality for me. Here we are, two highly diverse cultures, nations, and peoples, engaging as one through Christ; unity amidst diversity with a common ministry and mission, its source the same Lord. Their ministry of Christ to the community around them sharing clean water with 200 families,

feeding seniors, exercise programs, counseling, monthly concerts for the community to freely enjoy, and reaching out with generous hospitality to us and others who visit, highlight just a few ways Jesus' Spirit is moving them to embrace others for the sake of our Lord's ministry. Seeking to simply be his servants, not to focus on getting new converts or members, I asked if some of those served see Christ in them and desire to make commitment to him and join the church. They said, "Yes". As I was privileged to baptize two of the men I knew, around them stood seven or eight others who were confessing Christ and joining the church that Sunday.

As they are being faithful to living counter-culturally and being the people God is calling them to be, day by day the Lord is adding "to their number those who are being saved". Our ministry of outreach is never an end in itself. It is a means that as we center our lives around Christ, allowing him to shape us according to his purpose and will, people can see Christ in us and that is who and what they are attracted to. My friend on that flight only wanted to see a community bearing Christ's name that acted like him. And so I suspect people around us do as well. After all, the church is the Body of Christ, so what hurts the church, hurts Jesus if we choose to be inattentive and unfaithful to his word and Spirit

This text invites us this morning to look at the diversity God is bringing into our midst at FPC and ask; how do we grow to see each other, diverse and different as we are as Africans and Anglo Americans, as equals in Christ and find ways together to share ministry? This is an ongoing process and is not easy. It is messy. Here there is no ideal church we create in our image because it is a place Christ is forming his life in us. He defines us. So we have to allow him to lead.

Christ's body, the church, is always about him and what he is doing through us. In Christ we are an alternative society and culture before a watching world, the world in which we live increasingly moving toward nationalism, tribalism, and division.

Will we be willing to rediscover and embrace Christ, as we must again and again, allowing him to shape us according to his desire, purpose, and will, to be that counter-culture in this world? That is up to us. God is doing God's part. Let us respond and do ours.