

Sermon for 4th Sunday of Easter
April 13, 2008

Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47
John 10:1-10

“The Abundant Life of the Church”

What kind of a church do you long for? What kind of a church ought we seek to be? We are in an interim period of this congregation’s ministry; much has changed, and much more likely will change. We will be working together over the better part of this year to define what kind of change we want to happen, what kind of change we believe God wants for us, and what commitments, resources, and staffing we will need to achieve those changes.

As we begin this process, it might be helpful to reconsider the accounts concerning life among the earliest Christians. These texts are on the one hand most inspiring, while on the other hand not a little troubling for us.

The picture of Christians meeting together in prayer and praise, learning, and supporting each other in developing a Christian lifestyle, sharing their resources with each other, so that everyone’s needs were being met, perhaps sounds like the kind of church everyone longs for. It sounds much like the experience we might imagine Jesus and his closest disciples sharing. We certainly can recognize a great deal that would be positive in such an atmosphere.

At the same time, when we stop to really consider what such an arrangement would mean, we will likely find some things that give us pause.

The ideal nature of this depiction of early church life is a bit of an obstacle for us. We desire to faithfully hear and respond to God's Word for us, but we are realists who know that the world isn't perfect, and neither is the church. While we may want our church to be better than it is, we really don't expect it to be perfect, and some of the description we read from Acts a few moments ago, sound too good to be true, at least for us.

There are also cultural realities and particularities that we must acknowledge. It is rarely possible to easily paste the practices of a particular culture onto a different cultural setting. First century Christianity operated in a very foreign culture from middle class American lifestyle in 2008. Here again we must recognize some realities if we are to hear an authentic Word of God.

That early church's experience and practice is summarized in what is generally taken to be a listing that sets a standard for the church of all time: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." How that gets specifically expressed and fleshed out will be different in different times and places, but it provides the basic framework for the church of all times and places.

There is a seriousness about that depiction; a sense of orderliness and discipline. It is a rather sober statement that does not reflect the exuberance of the almost utopian scene that the following verses describe of communal living.

We probably find ourselves to be more comfortable with the summary than we are with the description of its early expression. That communal lifestyle is too at odds with our love of individualism; the holding of property in common runs up against our belief in the right and goodness of private ownership. These are a couple of the differences in the culture of our time and place that we need to acknowledge and take into account as we listen for God's word coming from that first century church.

As we think about what it is we want our church to be, we need to hold that summary before ourselves. We need to evaluate the life of our church as it is, and as we long for it to be, in the light of that summary: devotion to the apostles' teaching (study of and respect for scripture), fellowship, breaking of bread (both sacrament and sharing resources), and praying. These are the standard practices, and their effectiveness should be evaluated in every Christian community.

There is a communal nature to the true church. Such a standard may not mandate the abandonment of our embrace of individualism, but it certainly sets limits on our expression of that affinity. The church does not and cannot exist to meet my needs alone. The church does not and cannot exist to respond to my every whim or desire. The church is a community with responsibility for each other and a shared commitment to each other. If, for instance, we approach our involvement in and with the church as being solely dependent upon our needs and our schedule, we will surely miss coming very near to the standard held before us. The needs and schedule of the community as a whole must play a role in each member's involvement. Sometimes I will be inconvenienced.

On the other hand, our love of individualism is often expressed in terms of a model of self-sufficiency. We want to be able to take care of ourselves. The fellowship that is the standard for the Christian community requires our being willing to not only care about the neighbor's need, but to admit our own need, and accept the neighbor's help and care. That may be even more difficult for us in our culture, than a willingness to help the other in need. Our love of privacy, and our goal of self-sufficiency can stand in the way of our entering into community in mutual giving and receiving of care.

Stewardship comes into play in this summary in Acts as well. The breaking of bread is not solely referring to the sacrament. There is the matter of shared resources, as that idealized, utopian description of everyone holding all property in common, recognizes. Giving and receiving the basic needs of human life are caught up in that phrase, “the breaking of bread.” Here again, we are not mandated to give up private ownership, but limits are set. The need of the neighbor must remain a consideration; it must be given a value that exceeds the value of private ownership. The Bible has much to say about the dangers of wealth and the inclination of the wealthy to ignore the plight of the poor; here again our cultural norms may be challenged by this standard for life as the church. As we share in prayer, we need also share in bread. These are standard for the church that no culture should be allowed to overrule.

Study and proclamation of scripture and prayers are the further standard. Paul later fleshes this out by including the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. These are part of both the proclamation of scripture and prayer. That is the purpose of our hymnody – faithfulness to scripture, and a participation in prayer for ourselves, one another, and the world.

There are all kinds of trends abroad in the American church, which may or may not be of use to our congregation. There is new music in style and theme. There is the expanded use of media. Screens are replacing crosses at the front of sanctuaries (or auditoriums) all across our land. Images, pictures, scripture and hymn words are displayed on these screens for worshipers to interact with as the worship unfolds. We are very used to interacting with screens in much of the rest of our experience, and there is no reason why it is intrinsically inappropriate to do so in worship as well. Screens may become as common a tool in the front of the church, as the board displaying the hymn numbers has been. To the extent that such changes can be used to build up and realize more nearly the

standard given here in Acts, they are worth the consideration of any congregation. Change is neither necessarily bad nor good; it needs to be judged by these basic standards for the church.

Being the church we are called to be involves much more than filling our pews, or accommodating ourselves to the latest trends. It involves challenging ourselves, stretching ourselves to love and care for each other, to be loved and cared for, to attend faithfully to God's often challenging and unnerving word to us, and to be faithful in prayer (worship) that connects with the real life of each other and our world. To the extent that we do those things, God will bless us in God's ways. To the extent we miss the mark in those things, no matter how successful we may look on the surface, we will not be the church God wants us to be, or (hopefully) the church we want to be.