

Rev. Lisa Schrott
November 13, 2022
Acts 2:42-47
Together for Joy

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2. The beginning of this chapter is the traditional scripture for Pentecost Sunday – the Sunday we celebrate the birth of church through the power and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This morning we hear from the end of Acts 2. The apostle of Peter has just finished preaching to the astonished crowds –each of whom could hear him in their native tongue. Peter ends his sermon with a theological summation, “Therefore, let all Israel know beyond question that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Now when the crowd heard Peter’s words, they were cut to the heart and asked what they should do. Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls.” Those who welcomed Peter’s message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

The story picks up here in verse 42. Hear now these words from Acts chapter 2:

They (that is the newly formed community of believers) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 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. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the apostle Peter this morning. It was only a few weeks before our story that Peter was sitting around the table with Jesus at the Last Supper. As a disciple, Peter was willing, but weak; committed but also confused; faithful and fearful. Jesus invited him to the table, and yet after Jesus was arrested, Peter denied knowing him. After Jesus’ death when Mary Magdalene told him that the tomb was empty, Peter was in disbelief and had to see for himself. In the Gospel of John, we hear that Peter and the other disciples had returned to their life of fishing after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus appears to them and tells Peter that if he loves him, he will tend his lambs and feed his sheep; that this is what it means to follow him. Here we are just a few weeks later and the power of the Holy Spirit comes over Peter and the other apostles and he gets up and preaches a whopper of a sermon – a message about who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do, and that Jesus message of love and grace was meant for all people – it was to be shared with everyone. All are invited to repent, be baptized, study the word, fellowship, be in prayer, and break bread. And 3000 people were baptized into this message.

Put yourselves in the place of Peter and the other disciples. They could have hunkered down – after all they didn’t always get the messages that Jesus told them, so they might have dismissed the command to bring Jesus’ message to Jerusalem, Samaria and the ends of

world. When we are uncertain of the future, we often dig in, building walls to protect ourselves, separating ourselves from the community.

While the apostles did that at first, gathering in an upper room to regain their bearings after the resurrection, then they reached out. They shared the message of God's unending love through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus with many. They invited the community to the table. They lived together with joy. Or at least they aspired to.

One of the challenges for us in reading scripture is remembering that the books of the Bible were not written contemporaneously with the events they depict. The Book of Acts was written by Luke, the writer of the Gospel, as the second volume of a narrative sharing the story of Jesus and the early church. These books were written around 85 CE (AD), give or take 5 – 10 years, so well after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. This was the temple rebuilt after the Israelites returned from exile. So, the story we hear this morning occurred about 50 years before it was written. A lot had happened in those 50 years.

The original disciples, along with new converts like the Apostle Paul, had spread the message of Jesus far beyond Jerusalem – far beyond this group who heard the word of God through Peter, who were touched by the Holy Spirit, who came together in community – let's be real - in a bit of a utopian vision of Christian community. Throughout history, this morning's passage has been lifted as the posterchild of what the early church was like. Except that we know from the remainder of the book of Acts, as well as Paul's letters to various churches founded in the early years of the spread of Christianity, we know that everything was not rainbows and unicorns. There were a lot of challenges facing the early church. Challenges as to who is welcome and what laws need to be followed; financial challenges – Paul spends a lot of time raising funds to send back to Jerusalem to support the home church; challenges in leadership; challenges as to how the church can be faithful to Jesus' teaching in cultures that reflect very different values than those Jesus espoused. When Luke was writing these words describing the earliest days of the church, he was writing at a time when the church no longer looked like that community, looked like the community where "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 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."

Was Luke simply nostalgic for the good old days? Nostalgic for the good old days when the followers of Jesus were more alike each other than different, and when everyone showed up for the Bible study and the fellowship time? Days when everyone was praising God and full of goodwill? Or was Luke aspirational? Writing in a time when the world was a bit topsy-turvy and it was not clear if this growing body of believers would solidify into what we know as "the church" or would remain disparate groups of believers, to spread out and too different to form a cohesive community.

I think it is the latter. I think that by identifying these attributes and the sense of commitment to each other, Luke was presenting a model of what each church – The Church – the body of Christ should aspire to. Because when things get hard, we need that push, that light to follow.

I appreciate the way Professor and Lutheran Pastor Karoline Lewis calls us out on this. She says, "The ethical and moral implications of the community described in these last verses of

Acts 2 seem far beyond the possibility, given our contextual circumstances and expectations of acceptable living and social norms. Again, perhaps this is an excuse, a way to wiggle out of the demands that the resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit make. If we are honest, we might admit that too often we are satisfied with the lowest common denominator ... It is as if we expect to fail and so we set the bar low, justifying our inability to achieve such high standards of Christian community. Why are we willing to settle? Why are we so quick to consider this description of community beyond our natural reach? Maybe that is the point. On our own, left to our own devices, achieving such ideals is impossible. However, with the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called at the very least to lean into this kind of community.”¹

To what do we aspire in our community? With the power of the Holy Spirit, do we aspire to be the kind of community that devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers? With the power of the Holy Spirit, do we aspire to live as a community that is together for joy?

Together for joy! That has been our theme throughout our annual giving campaign this fall. And I hope it continues to be theme a throughout this coming year. To see this family of faith come forward this morning, young and old, long-time members and those newer to our community to make our commitments to each other – to share our time and energy and money with glad and generous hearts brings me such incredible joy.

It brings me such joy because just a year ago – I preached my first sermon here as your pastor. November 14, 2021 – there was a dusting of snow to welcome me. It wouldn’t be the last Sunday morning that I would be grateful Edward arrives here on Sundays before I do. And it wouldn’t be the last Sunday that Colleen and I would share a bemused laugh that it always seemed to snow on Saturday nights or Sunday mornings. So, it brings me much joy because there was no snow this morning! And it brings me such joy, because as you came forward, I was praising God for the relationships built over the past year – in study and in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers. And it brings me much joy as we plan for the upcoming Advent and Christmas season and next year – with Rebekah in place as my colleague in ministry and committees bursting with ideas.

Last week I shared that my email inbox is filled each week with articles from a wide variety of sources lamenting the demise of the church, offering ways to resurrect ministries lagging from COVID hangovers and the move away from institutions as well as perspectives on the cycle of transformations that the church has survived in the past. This week I read a commentary from a pastor just up the road from us – the Rev. Jim Keat, Digital Minister at The Riverside Church in Frankenmuth, Michigan. Now to be honest, I’ve never met a “digital minister” before – I am guessing he exists in flesh and blood and not just an avatar. Or at least I hope so. The title of his article was intriguing - “Three Things We Learn About Digital Ministry from Taylor Swift.” Now I must acknowledge that my seminary training did not include any classes on Taylor Swift, and I will claim right up front that I am in no way, shape or form an expert, or honestly even very conversant, on her music. However, I very much appreciated the commentary from Rev. Keat. What can Taylor Swift teach us²:

¹ Karoline M. Lewis. Acts 2:42-27. *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship. Year A. Volume 2.* Westminster John Knox Press 2019, p243

² <https://convergenceus.org/2022/11/07/three-things-we-learn-about-digital-ministry-from-taylor-swift/>

1. **It's ok, perhaps even necessary, to try something different.** He shares, that "With a music career spanning almost two decades, Taylor Swift has found continued success, not by doing the same thing over and over again but by diving into new genres and allowing herself to grow and change. But when it comes to church, trying something new can feel difficult. We tend to do what we've always done (tradition!) and scratch our heads when it leads to diminishing impact or engagement... We must remember that it is ok, perhaps even necessary, to try something different."
2. **Tell Your Story.** Taylor's latest album *Midnights* is a return to an intensely autobiographical Taylor. Keat opines that Taylor — and ministry— is at its best when it tells an authentic story, prioritizing our unique community over whatever other churches might be doing.
3. **Don't Do It All Alone.** Keat discusses various collaborations Taylor has had over the years, calling them intentional collaborations, and calling the church to likewise be intentionally collaborative, because ministry is better when done together. Because ministry is about the community we serve and the connections we share.

Try something different – the early church modeled that for us as the apostles left the confines of Jerusalem and Galilee and spread the message throughout the Roman Empire, spread the message to those who spoke different languages and had different customs and were not of the Jewish faith. We are called to follow in their footsteps, courageously spreading the love and grace of Jesus into communities who might look and sound different than we do. Communities who might have different customs and practices. And we are called to experiment with new and different ways to study and serve, to fellowship and worship.

Tell your story – the early church modeled for us the power of a good story. Paul's conversion from a persecutor of Christians to the evangelist spreading the Good News; the visions that Peter had that changed his mind about Jews and Gentiles of sharing meals together; the successful businesswoman Lydia, a seller of purple dye, who heard the word of God from the Apostle Paul and was baptized, along with her whole household and helped birth the church in Philippi. We are called to follow in their footsteps – to share our testimonies of how we have been transformed by the love of God, the healing of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit.

Don't do it alone – the early church modeled for us the power of community. Yes, it can seem out-of-reach, utopian, an ideal beyond our grasp, and yes, we should still aspire to it. We are called to be followers of Jesus in community, where we can do more and be more together than we can on our own. That is one of the take home messages of scripture – from the birthing of creation in Genesis to the new heaven and new earth in the Revelation, we are called to be in a joy-filled relationship with God and a joy-filled relationship with each other.

This week we dedicated our commitments to each other – our commitments of time, talent, and treasures. If you were not able to make a commitment this week, we invite you to share your commitment with us over the next few weeks. Next week in our worship service, we will give thanks for our commitments with a simple Agape Meal. We will share in a liturgy of thanksgiving, we will share in a time of prayer, we will share in a time of fellowship as we share bread and fruit, symbols of God's generous gift to us and our commitment to return to God a portion of these gifts as live together in joy. May it be so.