

Church Dreams

Acts 2:42-47 CEB The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. ⁴³ A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were united and shared everything. ⁴⁵ They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. ⁴⁶ Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. ⁴⁷ They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Church Dreams

Sometimes we dream about the way the church used to be. We might dream about what the church was like when we were a kid – the good old hymns, the Vacation Bible School, the youth group that we belonged to. And, in all likelihood, we're looking back with rose-colored glasses, remembering the good times and forgetting the moments that we enjoyed less.

On a broader scale, sometimes we also look back to the first years of the church for clues about how the church was pure and perfect before it was corrupted and misguided over time. Today's reading in the book of Acts is about those very first years, perhaps even the first few months, and it paints an idyllic picture.

Often, a sermon on this text is about money. See? Christians sold their property and gave the money to the church. Why aren't y'all doing that? And a big guilt trip bomb explodes right above the pews!! People ask themselves, "Do I have to sell the house and give the money to the church to keep from going to Hell?"

In other pulpits, ministers search around for rationalizations about why we don't need to worry about such radical financial commitment to the church. Explanations are offered such as, "A lot of the early converts on Pentecost were from out of town. Instead of going back home they stayed in Jerusalem to learn more about Jesus from the Apostles. But they had no jobs and no homes and the Christians who lived in the area generously supported them in this time of need. Besides, they expected Christ to return again very soon and they wanted to be there to greet him. Those speculations may or may not be factors in this early time of sharing everything in common.

Actually, we see more recent times when this sort of communal attitude is evident. Down through many centuries there have been monastic orders where all property and resources are commonly held. Monks and nuns have done this for ages. Some of the early colonies settled on the Atlantic coast of our own country were established initially in this manner. The Pilgrims had farming, hunting, food storage, and many other efforts as community efforts. Over the years Moravians, Quakers, Amish, and Mennonites have had a large communal component to their way of living together.

And sometimes people are kind enough to leave property or money to the church in their will. That has happened at least twice in this congregation in the last forty years and we can hope that others will be inspired to follow their example.

However, the selling of property and sharing everything in common is not the only point in this passage; it's not even the most important point. Impressive numerical growth and wondrous financial generosity are not what cause us to be the church, they are the effects, the results, of being the church. And today's text clearly addresses how to do that, how to be the church.

In recent decades, it's become common practice to shop for a church you like. You might be attracted by the music style, the formality or informality, the preaching style and length of the sermon, the age of the members, or the programs for children or youth. In the extreme, this approach can degenerate into finding a place just like you, a place that will tell you what you want to hear, and never challenge you to stretch and grow. Some places specialize in satisfying those who shop for a church that is a feel-good club for a homogenized group.

How does one identify an authentic church? What are the distinguishing marks of the real thing? The text says, "The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers." This verse lists four things that are the marks of the early church in Jerusalem. First, they devoted themselves to the *didache* of the apostles. That's the word in the Greek text, and it means "teaching." They were devoted to listening to, studying, absorbing, mulling over, discussing, thinking about, and applying what they were taught by the apostles. They hungered to learn and they spent time and energy on soaking up the teaching provided by the apostles. We Presbyterians have a long tradition of emphasis on learning. We hold scripture in high regard. We feel that it deserves deep, thoughtful, intelligent study and that it shouldn't be quoted out of context to back up some shallow pet doctrine. We require that our teaching elders be seminary trained, that they study Greek and Hebrew, and that congregations support continuing education for their pastors. Our congregations typically offer good adult Christian education. The opportunities to learn here at First Pres far exceed the Sunday school class and many of you take advantage of that.

The second distinguishing mark of the early church was *koinonia*, a Greek word that means fellowship of the closest and strongest sort. This is more than being congenial and sociable. It is an unshakeable support system. It has been likened to the unity of the Trinity. It is one for all and all for one as Christians support each other in striving to be Christ-like and therefore often different from the culture around them. The strong bonds of belonging result in joy, contentment, and emotional security. This super sort of fellowship makes us responsible to and for each other. This is community spelled in all capital letters. We see expressions of this today in how we're concerned about the well-being of each other, how we share our joys and our sorrows.

The third distinguishing mark of the early church is in what they did. The book that tells us about the early days of the church is the Acts of the Apostles, not the talks of the apostles. The doing is important. Today's passage speaks of shared meals and of meeting the needs of others. It says that they shared food with gladness. More than that, they demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. They cared for the body as well as the soul. Sharing with the less fortunate and caring for those who were suffering was a central feature in Jesus' teaching. Many of his parables and almost all of his miracles were directed at living with compassionate hearts, healing the sick, feeding the hungry and restoring people to physical wholeness. And Jesus did these things in a spirit of *diakonia*, a word that means being a servant. Jesus met needs as he came across them. He even wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the dirty feet of his disciples. And the early church was inspired to act in service to others. Their faith wasn't just believed, it was acted out!

This mark of the church may be one that's a bit difficult for us. Even the sharing of meals is a little spotty sometimes. While the early church is described as devoted and even sharing food and meals daily, we run out of steam fairly quickly. We serve soup and sandwiches one day a week during Lent and it is tiring. And while it isn't directly feeding the hungry, some of the money raised goes to feed people. We only manage to serve two meals of grace each year at

CCM. And sometimes the red wagon in the hallway takes weeks to fill up. We can do better than this.

The fourth sign of an authentic church is worship. Today's text says they were devoted in their praying. They met together at the temple daily. They praised God. They celebrated their trust in God with joyful hearts and they did so frequently and regularly. And this is *leitourgia*. Our word liturgy comes from it. We can reduce liturgy to where it is just boring, mind-numbing repetitive ritual. But liturgy really means "the work of the people." It isn't what we receive or endure in worship, it's what we do. The preacher is not the center piece of worship, God is. And so we sing, we pray, we confess our short comings, we proclaim what we believe, and we bring our offerings to God. Worship isn't done by observing, it requires that we participate!

The picture we get of the early church in Jerusalem is a church marked by learning, by a deep sense of community, by generous service to those in need, and by whole-hearted worship. And all of these signs of the church were characterized by dedicated devotion practiced regularly and frequently. It defined their lives rather than occupying some spare time. And they did all of this together, in common.

There's the shining example for us to follow. There's the vision for us to hold in our hearts. There's the target for us to aim toward. We can do this. We already do much of this to some extent. We shouldn't berate our efforts, but neither should we be satisfied with them. Given the love we have received and the blessings that are showered on us, let us move forward with renewed strength and great joy! Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
Dream of a church that eagerly learns,
That is a tight knit community,
That serves others with intense compassion,
And that worships with joy and gusto.
Then live the dream!