

We Are One in the Spirit

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 3, 2021

World Communion Sunday @ Friendship Presbyterian Church

They 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 by 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. (Acts 2:42-47, NRSV)

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:3-11, NRSV)

We Christians make our most magnificent claims and embrace our loftiest callings in the context of worship: "He is risen" ... "Christ has conquered Sin and Death" ... "Don't doubt, but believe." The gospel declares these things unflinchingly and calls us to action rooted in their audacity – even things that seem impossible.

For instance, the reading Karen offered a moment ago describes an actualized vision of Spirit-driven community that looks extremely attractive, and yet also utterly unrealistic and beyond our reach. Its utopian vision of sharing and service may look more like something dreamed up by Karl Marx or John Lennon, rather than St. Luke!

But then, why *should* its apparent impossibility stop us? We gathered on *Easter morning*, didn't we? Why shouldn't we, on any Sunday, proclaim what God is capable of bringing into being: a community that would truly dare to welcome *all* people, whoever they are, *wherever* they are, and say to them with conviction, and backing it up with action, that we're *all* in this together, that we need never walk this journey alone.

The text comes from that famous second chapter of Acts in which the Spirit is poured out on the apostles and other disciples, impelling them to cry out in praise of God in other languages. When the crowds respond in astonishment (and some with derision), Simon Peter speaks up and preaches what amounted to the first great Christian sermon. He calls on those hearing to

repent and to believe the good news that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead, and vindicated as Lord and Messiah. Three thousand people, of dozens of languages and nationalities, responded to that call and were baptized, joining the Jesus community.

The text that Karen read is what immediately follows, telling us what happened with this newly much enlarged, diverse body of believers: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers* (v. 42). And then, it tells us what shape of community this faith and devotion inspired:

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 (vv. 44-47).

Clearly, it was a community brought into being by the Holy Spirit ... a community of the deepest conviction ... a people for whom Resurrection was not just a miracle that happened in the past, but a living reality powerfully experienced in the midst of worship, fellowship, service, and even the simple routines of everyday life. And for such a Spirit-driven community in which no one had to go it alone, this radical generosity, rooted in the radical generosity of God, was as natural as breathing.

Empowered by the Spirit, these early believers were able to commit themselves to the practices of the life being held before them ... practices and habits which nurtured their lives as followers of Jesus. As verse 42 tells us, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" – all ever before discussing their sharing of property. In fact, this is the earliest listing of what came to be called "marks" of the church – signs that identified the church *as* the church:

1. Commitment to the *teaching* of Jesus and his apostles to ground our lives in an alternative vision of what life is and can be ...
2. The need for deep *fellowship* with one another. The spiritual life is not something we are meant to do alone, but something that calls us to one another and grows best as we share one another's burdens and joys ...
3. And the power of the *breaking of bread*. The early church would probably not have recognized the distinction we would make between an ordinary communal meal and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, for with them, *no* meal was ordinary – for wherever bread is broken in the Lord's name at a table of gratitude and welcome, the Lord Jesus is present, breaking down the walls and barriers which we erect to divide us from others ...
4. And finally, all these marks begin and end and are saturated in *prayer*. These earliest Christians knew that prayer is the lifeline, the connection with God that sustains everything else.

They found that as they practiced these things day after day, together, they were more and more drawn in by the *beauty* of the gospel, setting the Holy Spirit loose to work a miracle. No doubt they saw many of those among them, but the greatest of all was the miracle of the community itself – a deeper and deeper community of diverse believers who understood themselves as a *family*, of one heart and mind, united in purpose, identity, and destiny. It was a miracle then, and when we, today, experience it, it's a miracle *now*.

The last year and a half have been a painful time for us – as a larger society and as a community of faith. Our “social distancing” continues. While there are certainly some positive signs in the air, and I know that I grasp on to any good news I can, it will be a little while yet before life returns to anything like we knew it before. It has been a long time.

Now on the “glass half-full” side of things, these times have provided us an opportunity to see that our *oneness*, our deep unity in Christ, is *not* changed by physical distance. Consider for a moment that about *half of the New Testament* stems from the Apostle Paul being physically separate from those congregations he planted with love and care! Consider that the wisdom and warmth of his letters flow out of the heart of one who is hundreds of miles separated from those believers. As he wrote to the church in Philippi: *For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus*. Half of the New Testament was born out of a longing to see brothers and sisters in Christ again.

The earliest Christians, though of many different places, races, and tongues, were drawn together into one body by the Holy Spirit. They experienced themselves as family to others both near *and far away*. No doubt being in fellowship with those near at hand unleashed miracles, but the greatest miracle of all was that of the community itself – a deeper and deeper community of diverse believers, spread-out over many lands, who knew themselves to be united in identity, purpose, and destiny.

But that kind of community *is* easier to experience and to practice when we're *together* – face to face, in person. And the last year and a half have led us to a much deeper appreciation of how much we need one another. COVID exposed just how easy it is for us to lose connection and how easy it is for some to get left behind.

While this is a painful truth, in God's grace it doesn't have to be this way for us. This new day that is slowly dawning offers a fresh start – an opportunity to re-vision our life together such that ALL of us are included, our bonds of love and fellowship are better nourished, and our community of faith is strengthened and equipped for Christ's mission.

For this reason, our Session voted a few months ago to become a member of the Matthew 25 Initiative of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. One of its key aims is building greater congregational vitality, that churches like ours may grow a more effective presence and ministry toward those most in need in our larger communities. We pray for the blessing of God – manifest in stronger ties of love, care, and inclusion among us – that we may BE a blessing to those beyond our walls.

In this spirit, we are living into some simple, new practices for growing in love and vitality, and so providing a fuller, richer spiritual support system for one another – all written about in some detail in this month’s Church newsletter:

- “The Friendship Connection” – a simple monthly card, mailed out to all of you, for getting to know one another better, and sharing good news ...
- Providing for monthly Communion for those who desire it, and arranging care partners and visitations for church members and friends, especially those most at risk of isolation
- Alongside these and other efforts, strengthening our congregational commitment to mission and integrating this commitment more fully into our worship life.

This last commitment is manifest today: connecting our commitment to ACTS (Area Churches Together Serving) – serving the hungry in our community – with our celebration at the Communion Table!

As we share together in the Bread and the Cup, we also remember all who are hungry, who lack “daily bread.” This is why, from this day forward, we will bring items to donate to ACTS on Communion Sundays, usually the first Sundays of a month. ACTS always accepts donations of food, clothing (Fall/Winter right now), and monetary donations – and all are appreciated. We will then bless all donations as we celebrate Communion together, united in the love of God which binds us all together!

In these ways and others, we embrace this time as the divine opportunity it is to continue growing into the community which God calls us to be! For *we are family*. We are *one* in the Spirit ... we are one in the Lord.

To the glory of God! Amen.