
Becoming Community, Community Becoming

Acts 2:42-47

Luke's retelling of the earliest days of the church, in the book of Acts, gives us a picture-perfect vision of Christian Community. You can't get much better than this. Listen: They were committed to learning from their teachers, to praying together, to breaking bread together. It says, "All who believed were together and had all things in common." This group sold their possessions and everyone pitched in to help those who had need. Day after day, they went to the Temple together and ate together with "glad and generous hearts." And God added to their numbers daily. You want a church growth model, here it is right here!

You get the sense that Luke, who wrote the book of Acts too, is pouring it on pretty thick here, giving off major Norman Rockwell painting vibes—an idyllic snapshot of what it looks like to be the church. It's like someone typed into ChatGPT: Show me what the perfect church looks like. And this is what it sent back.

Throughout my years of ministry, I've heard numerous times people pointing to this description as the standard to live up to. "The Acts 2 church"—it even has a name. "Why can't we just be like the church in Acts?" Yet, as they say: Anything that seems too good to be true, is likely so.

We know from reading other parts of the book of Acts that there was enough disfunction: Whether it was the secrecy and deceit of Ananias and Sapphira, or the many debates over the place of Gentiles in the church, the petty squabbling between the apostles, figuring out how to navigate heresies and false doctrines, and even some who abandoned the faith altogether because of outside persecutions.

There's a line from our mission statement on our church home page that says: "We are not a perfect group of people, but God works through us anyway." That

could have been said of this early church. And, in spite of the imperfections, the church in Acts has left us quite the legacy to live up to. It's a bit embarrassing, to be frank. I mean, you can take just about any one of the activities listed here: teaching, prayer, communion, religious belief, service to the needy . . . on any one of these, the big-C Church has experienced significant conflict and even division.

I'll give you just one major example. Did you know that in the middle of the 11th Century, there was a ginormous split over which kind of bread to use for communion? I'm not talking one single church, I'm talking the church worldwide. At the time, the unified church was quite divided over whether to use the fluffy, aromatic stuff, or the flat, wafer-like stuff—"Jesus crackers" some call it. What became the Eastern orthodox church was convinced that the softer, more-doughy bread better symbolized the Risen Christ. It was earthy, and spongy, and of course, the way it was prepared allowed the bread to rise. The church in the West wanted to stick with the flat, denser bread because "if it was good enough for Jesus, it was good enough for them."

We barely made it a millennium, and the Great Schism ripped right through what had become of the Acts 2 church. And there were other issues on the table that were more theological in nature. But historians are unequivocal on the fact that the main divisive issue was over whether it should be sourdough or holy crackers on communion day. We can be quite petty in the church. The next time we have to have a committee form a nominating committee who chooses the members of an ad hoc committee just to decide on new wall paint color, we can take comfort that at least here we are united over our communion bread.

Even more disheartening to me: There are still issues that divide the Church today that are just as head-scratching, yet much more connected to actual lives. Like the debate over whether or not our queer siblings should be incorporated into the full life of Christian community—or more, serve in any leadership capacity. Of course, that isn't a question for us here. But this is the fracturing ecclesiological and theological issue of our time. And it's embarrassing that we haven't quickly moved past our hang-ups to fully embrace all people, no matter their sexual orientation or who they chose as a life-partner. And we have to go even further, not just welcome and acceptance, but to full integration and celebration of all our queer and trans siblings. What will it take for the Church to

be unified in our time for the sake of the gospel of unconditional love? What would that look like?

There's another part of this text that I particularly want us to look at together. It says, "Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done . . ." This, for me, is the catalyst—the thing that sets everything else in motion. Because you can read the list of what the early church was doing and it can seem a bit formulaic. But that there was *awe* at the signs and wonders, tells me that there was a special connection to the Spirit's work among them. It tells me that they remained open to being moved and transformed, and weren't just going through the motions. This wasn't just a model of democratic socialism—with the added element of *awe*, it became something much more radical, much more transformational than that. For me, it changes this from being a model to merely copy, to being "a way" to follow.

What are the signs and wonders that are emerging around us? Are we taking notice to such a degree as to be moved by them? Or does our way of doing church preclude us from seeing them at all?

"Awe came upon everyone . . ." Think about the nature of awe for a moment. It is a reaction to an outside stimulus, not typically self-generated. So, it's a response that can happen when paying attention and maintaining some state of openness. Studies have been done to try and characterize the feeling of awe. And they recognize, there is, ONE, a "perceived vastness". Think about standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Or looking up at the unobstructed night sky. It is taking in an expanse that leaves you feeling small.

I've been listening to some of the interviews from the four astronauts who recently returned from their flight around the moon—a mixture of some who are religious and some who are not. But they all shared this feeling of smallness during their mission, especially when looking back on earth from thousands of miles away. Even days later after returning, these professionals were still trying to find the right words to characterize what they experienced. Even one of the self-professed non-religious ones, talked about how it was even a spiritual experience.

In awe, there is a *perceived vastness*. And in that, even an inner affirmation without having to reason it out, or have all the answers. TWO, these studies show that there is a vastness not in regard to physical size but in regard to

depth—like experiencing immense beauty, or meeting someone with great prestige, like the Pope, or watching the unbelievable happen, like a baby being born. We have to cultivate this posture of openness.

I think sometimes a Christian community can feel like they've got it down, exactly how to do church. I mean, there are classes on how to build a successful church and tried and true models of church growth. It can be easy to think that we have it all down. But you can't get a degree in cultivating openness to the Spirit's work in your community. That's something you commit to as a spiritual discipline. In all the committee meetings and capital campaigns, as we go through church logo and website redesigns so there is a cohesive brand identity . . . church can sometimes devolve into something it was never intended to be. And we mistake the *method* for the *mission*. We can confuse church programs, beautiful worship spaces, and budgets as being our *why*, and forget that those are merely *how* we accomplish our mission, not *why* we do.

In Honduras, the new Sol Naciente Bridge was built with all the latest technologies of the time, to withstand any weather event that could be thrown at it. In 1996, the "Bridge of the Rising Sun" was completed over the beautiful Choluteca River. Two years later, in 1998, a tropical depression had developed into category 5 Hurricane Mitch which decimated the area, destroying 35,000 homes, killing nearly 7,000 residents, and causing more than \$3.8 billion in damages. The steel suspension bridge survived, but the heavy rains and winds had left the roads on either side of it completely wiped away and even altered the course of the river itself, no longer flowing under the bridge. The "Bridge of the Rising Sun" became known as "The Bridge to nowhere", surrounded on all sides by dry land, and missing its very purpose of being a bridge.

The church can be like that sometimes. Full of ambition to be the best structure it can be, put together with the best of intentions and latest technologies, but missing its very mission for why we exist in the first place—being a link of hope, compassion, healing, and reconciliation.

We are coming to the end of our Mission Study here. Through these months, we have found meaning in celebrating the stories of our past and great affirmation in our present ministry. And now it's time to cast a vision for our future. At times, for a church that seems to be as healthy as ours, a discernment project like this can feel a bit unnecessary. And I think that is precisely why it is needed. All churches inevitably develop blind spots, areas of neglect, not out of

any intent to harm, but because of the slow, undetected work of apathy. When a church becomes unconnected to the wild movement of the Spirit, we can default to following a blueprint instead of a “way”. We remember that while the mission stays the same, the landscape around us may shift. Cultural “weather patterns” can disrupt the way things are and change the course of a community.

Next Sunday, May 3rd, we will have our final congregational roundtable in this Mission Study. This one will be focused on vision-casting for the future. I want us to imagine what it can look like to be a healthy, thriving Christian community for the years to come. Do that prayerful, discerning work even now. For me, the answer is hardly ever in looking back, to reclaim some former glory. The times have shifted things, the Spirit is looking to do a new work.

Becoming community takes work. It takes sacrifice, and a commitment from each of its members. The *community becoming* recognizes that the *why* is unwavering but the *how* can change and shift over time. This makes essential the need for the Spirit’s guidance. May it be so, to the glory of God. Amen.