

## WHAT IS A CHURCH?

What is a church?

In the book of Acts, which is actually a sequel to Luke's Gospel and was written by the same author, the description of the early community of Jesus' followers that we heard a little while ago is a wonderful template for what a genuine church might be.

A community of disciples like us, who are striving to faithfully follow Jesus, would do very well and please the Lord if we emulated, at least to some extent, the early church that Luke described. Listen again to what Luke wrote.

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

I found five traits, or characteristics, in that one little paragraph I just read that seemed to be at the very heart of the infant church. Those five things were the basic, tangible qualities of the community of Jesus' followers when the church was just getting started back in the early first century. And those qualities defined for Luke what the very first Christian faith community was all about, many centuries before things like annual meetings, board and committee meetings, stewardship campaigns and church bylaws were ever invented by churches.

I want to take a closer look at those five things, one at a time.

Characteristic number one: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."

Okay, fellow church members, who among us wants to be the first to sell our house, our furniture, our car and all our other possessions and give the proceeds to anyone who has need. Can I see a show of hands? No one?

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." Yup, that's really what it says.

So, what do we, the 21st Century church, the Body of Christ in the world today, do with that startling passage—a passage that's on a par with Jesus'

radical suggestion to the rich young man to “go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me”? Do we take what Luke wrote literally, as a tangible guideline for our own church and our own lives as Christians? Or do we just ignore what Luke wrote, or outright reject it because for us it’s unreasonable and too unrealistic?

Maybe the thing we could do, and perhaps the thing the Lord wants us to do at a minimum, is pay special attention to the last six words of that passage: “give to anyone who had need. . . .” We could translate those words into the statement, “Be a mission church.”

A church that’s modeled on the early church Luke described in the Book of Acts is a mission church: it’s a church that cares about the hungry, the poor, the disabled, the homeless, the persecuted—in short, it’s a church that cares about any who are in need. So, even if we successfully take ourselves off the hook and breathe a sigh of relief that we don’t have to sell our house and property, we the church are still called by the Lord to love and show concern for the disadvantaged and destitute in the world by reaching out to them with compassion and generosity.

Then there’s characteristic number two: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.”

The Book of Acts makes it clear that the church back then was a gathered community. And not just on Sunday. According to Luke, Jesus’ first followers met together in the temple courts every day. And why did they do that?

Certainly one reason was to worship God. And another was for fellowship.

Those first followers could have worshipped God individually, by themselves. They could have come up with their own separate ways to honor and venerate the Lord without anyone else being involved, but they didn’t. Instead, they regularly came together in fellowship. For them it was important to be in community with one another.

On numerous occasions I’ve had people who consider themselves to be “spiritual but not religious” say to me words to the effect, “I don’t need to go to church to worship God. I can worship anytime, out in nature.”

I suppose that’s true and can be done, although I have to confess that I’m sometimes tempted to ask them if they actually do worship God when they’re out in nature, hiking or biking or on a mountaintop or looking out at the ocean.

The newly formed first century thought differently. They didn’t have to gather in the temple courts on a daily basis; as a matter of fact, it was actually dangerous for them to do so because they were risking condemnation, persecution and even execution for publically expressing their belief that Jesus

was Lord.

So, the fact they chose to meet together in the name of Christ every day in the temple courts in spite of the obvious and well-known dangers it posed indicates just how vital they thought it was for the community of Jesus' followers to come together on a regular basis for worship and fellowship.

And it's still important for the community of Jesus' followers to come together on a regular basis for worship and fellowship. Which is why we gather here every Sunday morning: because doing so helps strengthen the bond between us and gives us opportunities to minister to and love one another when we're gathered. And it also allows us to join our voices together in prayer and song to praise God more loudly and with greater power than we could if we were worshipping by ourselves.

Characteristic number three of the infant church that seemed to be very important was, "They broke bread in their homes and ate together. . . ." In other words, food! Churches and food, they go way back. They have a longstanding, significant history together.

Long before Jesus was born, there was the Seder meal the Jews celebrated at Passover. Jesus ate with the outcasts and sinners of society, and was even called a glutton and drunkard for doing so. We know how significant the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples was, before his arrest and crucifixion. And this morning we read how the first century church broke bread together on an almost daily basis.

Yes, food was an important part of the life of faith in ancient Israel. And a modern church just wouldn't be the same without food. For example, imagine our faith community without Neighboring after worship. Something very significant would be missing in our congregation if we didn't have a time for coffee and snacks before we left here after worship. Then there are things like pot luck suppers, chili cook-offs, the annual, ecumenical Lenten lunches we participate in, and the occasional public suppers we've put on and have invited the local community to attend.

And, of course, the most important food of all in a church community is the Bread of Life and the Fruit of the Vine that we eat and drink together at Lord's Supper. It's essential for our church to regularly celebrate the sacred meal Christ established and gifted to his community of followers so that whenever it's shared, we will remember our Lord and anticipate his coming again in glory to consummate God's Kingdom.

Yes, there's something about coming together and sharing a meal as a church that strengthens relationships and increases love and affection for one another.

There's something about eating together as a faith community that is able to break down barriers between individuals, heal strained or broken relationships, and makes it possible for peace and reconciliation to overcome division and discord.

And there's something about the act of breaking bread and drinking from the blessed cup as a church family during Holy Communion that, as we read last week in the story of the disciples encountering Jesus on the way to Emmaus, can open our eyes and allow us to experience the risen Christ in our midst.

Characteristic number four of the early church community was having what Luke called "glad and sincere hearts." In other words, the church back then was a place of joy and genuineness. The members of the first century faith community had every reason to despair and lose hope as they were being persecuted and even killed for following Jesus. But they didn't. Instead they had "glad and sincere hearts." Their hearts were secure in the knowledge that Christ had vanquished death on their behalf, and now Christ was calling them to share the joyous news of eternal life with the whole world.

And their gladness came from the belief that they wouldn't be on their own in this work of proclaiming the gospel, but Christ would be with them every step of the way, guiding them when they weren't sure what to do next, giving them strength when they found themselves growing weak and weary, and granting them peace when they experienced fear, suffering and despair.

The fifth and final characteristic of the fledgling infant church was "praising God." An alternative phrase that could be used here is "glorifying God." According to the Book of Acts, whenever the early church was gathered, it was always, constantly and unceasingly praising and glorifying God because God was responsible for their existence in the first place.

God in divine love had sent Jesus to them. God had revealed God's self to them through Jesus. God had shown them mercy and grace by forgiving their sins through Jesus. And had God vanquished death and opened up the gates of eternal life to them by resurrecting Jesus from the dead. So yes, the infant church was a community of believers who felt incredibly blessed by God and, in response, praised and glorified God to express thanks for the love God had shown them by sending Jesus, God's only Son, so that the world might not perish but might have eternal life.

Now I will return to the question I asked at the start of this sermon.

What is a church?

As followers of Christ and members of this community of faith, that's an important question to ask ourselves and to constantly ponder in our minds and hearts as we go about our work as members of this faith community.

And especially this morning, as we get ready to have our annual meeting, discuss important issues and make votes on our budget and proposed bylaw changes and even though it might be the last thing in our minds, we would surely benefit by asking ourselves, over and over again, “What is a church?” And, more specifically, what is our church? Why are we here? How is the Holy Spirit leading us? And what is Christ calling us to do as a community of believers and disciples?

The answer, of course, is to be determined. But I believe God is leading us closer to that answer every day.

What is a church?

Well, if what we read this morning is in the book of Acts is any indication, a church is a body of people united in Jesus Christ, who are generous in giving to the needy; who gather together in loving fellowship to do ministry and to worship God; who break bread together and celebrate the Lord’s Supper together as a sign of love for one another and an act of remembrance for what Christ in his love did for us; and who praise and glorify God for sending Jesus Christ into the world so that we might not perish, but might have eternal life.

May God bless our faith community and enable us to embrace and be guided by those characteristics described by Luke in the Book of Acts, as we carry on the ministry Christ is calling us to do here in our community and in the world. Amen.