

Pentecost 16: September 3/4, 2016

You Are...Together

You are the church. We continue our study of Acts. You are...*contagious*. You are...*ignited*. Today we consider you are... *Together*. “All the believers were together,” writes Luke; [they] were one in heart and mind.” There is a word for that. It’s called “community.” That is what Jesus formed when the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost. Not a new religion. Not an institution. Jesus formed a community. And he called that community his church. It is people, a community gathered in and through Jesus. It is a living, breathing entity made up of redeemed and forgiven sinners, like you and me. ?What is it that distinguishes the church from all other social organizations, many of which do much good? We consider the marks of the church, how it is that *You are...together*.

Together...in worship

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Together in Worship: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” “Devoted themselves” suggests dedication. The Greek is even stronger. “The believers *were continuing steadfastly* in worship. Why? One does not have an encounter with the living God and not be changed. The resurrected and living Jesus had appeared to many in those first forty days. Many were eyewitnesses. Many more became eyewitnesses by the outpouring of the Spirit. *Jesus who died was alive again!* Nothing would be the same. So they *were continuing steadfastly* in the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship of worship—these were foundational to that revelation. Like a good book or a favorite song that you delight in returning to time and again. It never gets old. The breaking of bread in Holy Communion, and prayer—these were not empty rituals for them. They spoke of an intimacy that one has with only the closest of friends. They were eating heavenly manna while speaking directly with its Giver. Awesome!



It is well documented that worship attendance is down, both in number and in frequency. Why is that? Much research has been expended on this question, and the reasons are many. I cut to the chase. The first believers came face to face with the living Jesus. Wild horses couldn’t keep them from worshipping. That Jesus is the same Jesus who is present in our midst this morning. We speak and sing responsively in worship as if to each other. Not so. You speak and sing to the living Jesus who promises to be wherever two or more are gathered in this name. So it’s not third person worship, as in “Jesus, *he* is the Lord.” It’s second person worship: “Jesus, *you* are *my* Lord.” You are here with us now. You speak to us today through your Word. You feed us through your supper. You forgive and restore us. Renew me again this morning by your living presence so that “My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.” (Psalm 84:2)

Together... in community

"Every day they continued to meet together."

Together... in community: "Every day they continued to meet together." The Barna Research Group released a survey citing reasons why people have stopped attending church. One of the most scathing was this: People are not finding community in the church. Despite a growing epidemic of loneliness, only 10% report going to church to find community. How sad is that? "Of all the many criticisms that can be levied at the church, lack of community shouldn't be one." You know the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, the great company that surrounds us, "angels and archangels and all the company of heaven." This is community with a capital "C". And that's just the *invisible* church. Combine that with all believers in Jesus in our day—both here and around the world—and you have a mighty community indeed.



Community is important. "The more isolated a person is," says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in [sin], the more disastrous is his isolation." He is simply echoing a thought penned many years earlier by Martin Luther: "Let him who is not in community beware of being alone." We were created for community. So what can be done to build community? We are a *Loved+Sent* people. Loved by God in Christ. The love of God *in* Christ *through* his people builds community. The love of Jesus is the most powerful force in the world. It forgives the guilty, it lifts the downcast, it mends broken relationships, it gives hope to the hopeless. It's personal, which is why small community groups are being encouraged within our larger faith family. Community is important.

Together... in bonding

"All the believers were together; they ate together with glad and sincere hearts."

Together in bonding: "All the believers were together; they ate together with glad and sincere hearts." The word for this is unity. They *enjoyed* being together. Paul establishes the basis for this unity. "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans. 12:5). Which is why he can encourage us in today's first reading (Eph. 4:1-6) to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body, one Spirit, one Lord; one hope, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." In other words, what unites us far surpasses anything that divides

us, be it politics or economics or ethnicity or family dynamics. Jesus prays for us this very prayer: “Father, I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be *one* as we are one. May they be brought to complete *unity* to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23).



Nothing breaks down barriers better than food. To break bread is probably one of the oldest traditions that is still practiced in our day. When you share your food with someone, be it a friend or a stranger, partaking of the same loaf means you become related in a sense. Breaking bread together can also be a metaphor for making peace with another person. Whenever we have shared a meal together, be it after the summer “Sabbath” at 10:45 worship, after the 5:00 worship, or at the Lent and Advent soup suppers, wonderful bonding has occurred. Should we make it a regular practice to eat together?



Together in sharing: “They shared everything they had.” On first blush it sounds like the model Christian community was socialistic, that is, the resources of the community were shared in common with no limitations. Not really. Human nature simply cannot abide such a system, as proven most recently by the defunct Soviet Union. No, what the early believers did was share extra property so that everyone had enough for the essentials of living. “There were no needy persons among them,” writes Luke. Nothing speaks more forcefully about your confession than your compassion. Jesus forgave the paralytic, and then healed him, saying “Get up, take your mat and go home.” Jesus taught the crowd that followed him around the Sea of Galilee, and then feed them miraculously that evening with five loaves and two fish. Jesus slept in the bow of the boat as the disciples panicked under an overwhelming storm, only to calm the wind and settle their fears. Nothing speaks more forcefully about your confession than your compassion.



The early Christians were not indifferent to suffering. “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body,” St. Paul would later write. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Cor. 12:13,26). It’s called vicarious suffering, and nowhere is it more pronounced than at the cross. Jesus suffered because he knew of our suffering. Compassion compelled him to act. Of

course, he acted in a way that only the Son of God could act. He bore our sins and carried our sorrows. He shared our experience in every way including our death to sin. That was his mission, and thank God he carried it to completion in his death and to victory in his resurrection. Our sharing is not on such an epic scale, but it, too, is motivated by compassion. We suffer when another suffers. So we collect gift cards for Baton Rouge, we collect food for the hungry, we sign up to serve for the Loved+Sent Servant Event October 8. This is who we are. This is what we do. We are *Together...in sharing*.

Love covers a multitude of sins. At no other time in the history of Christianity did love so characterize the entire church as it did in the first three centuries. Tertullian reported that the Romans would exclaim, "See how they love one another!" You are contagious, ignited, and now you know you are together. Let it be known in our community that a Christian fellowship exists together on this former Target site. And let the mark of that fellowship be: *See how they love one another!* Amen.