

1/23/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl on this warm January day. Welcome to both those who are here in-person and who are watching through Zoom. We acknowledge we are making our way through the present surge and hope we may be more in-person as this surge passes.

Nevertheless, we are one in the Spirit; peace of Christ for all who are joining us, as we wrestle with this question of what it means to be church, especially in this new normal, and the changes we have experienced.

INVOCATION

God, who is present to us through Jesus,

You have brought us together to as a people to learn to be your church.

Let us know the presence of Christ with us as we sing, pray, and listen to your Word and to one another.

We ask that we will receive your inspiration to live out the hope we have in Jesus in our whole lives.

In his name we pray...

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

(Leona Schroeder came through her surgical procedure well on Friday – she was able to return to Mercy Hospital in Moundridge yesterday afternoon and will spend a few days there regaining some strength, getting some physical therapy before going home. We'll also pray for Steve Janzen this morning. Recently he had a stent placed that went well but he's still healing from that. On Friday he suffered an attack of appendicitis. They really can't do surgery because of the recent stent, so they're treating him with antibiotics, hoping that will help heal the appendicitis.)

Dear God, we are gathered as your people – scattered from home to home and with spaces between us, but gathered in our hearts and our intentions for this time of worship and of prayer. We thank you for the many ways in which we experience your love... through friends and family, through kindnesses shown from strangers, through the bounty and blessing that we have from day to day. We thank you for the blessing of long life. Thank you especially for Esther Schmidt and her 90 years of faithful living. Continue to bless her and her family in the years to come. Help all of us to be more attentive all the time to notice your love in our lives.

Because we know you as the God of love, we are bold to bring the prayers of our hearts to you. We pray for those who work in the medical field – doctors, nurses, those who work at care facilities, putting one foot in front of the other every day as they continue through this virus and the havoc and stress it can wreak on people's lives. We pray for continued patience and

long-suffering as they care for those in their charge. We pray also for those who are patients and residents in medical and long-term care facilities. Give them also extra measures of patience and grace as they may have to wait for needed care.

We pray especially this morning for Leona as she recovers from surgery and regains more strength. We are grateful, God, for the medical treatment Leona has been able to receive and for the good care she has gotten – especially the therapeutic services in Moundridge. Send your Spirit of comfort and healing to her and to Norman also as she continues to recuperate with the goal of returning home soon. We lift Steve Janzen to you in prayer asking that the antibiotics will provide the healing he needs. We pray also for Braxton Church as he's trying to recover from Covid again. We ask for complete healing from this virus, Lord, so Braxton can feel well and be ready for his surgery in a couple of weeks. Be with Amanda, Kelcey and Natalie too as they move through this together, as a family.

God, we're grateful for the jr high students from our church and Tabor church who are able to be at snow camp this weekend; bless their time there and may it produce good fruit and growth in their faith. Grant them safe travel mercies now as they return home. And we pray for those students who were disappointed not to be able to go due to covid or for other reasons. We pray for their good health to return.

Dear God, we pray for your children everywhere – for those in our community, our state and this nation who live in situations of fear or scarcity. We pray for those who live in situations where they are not safe, where there is violence or famine or disaster. We have heard this week about the island of Tonga and the volcanic eruption that has caused so much loss. Be present with your children all around the world, God. Let them know your love and care in any and every situation.

Be with us now as we continue in this worship service. Bless the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts; may this time produce good fruit in us as we live our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

For our offering time this morning we will again collect it in the yellow boxes in the north and south lobbies rather than passing the plates. But in the spirit of gratitude and dedicating our offerings let's stand and sing number 757, There's Enough for All.

SERMON -- HOW SHALL WE BE CHURCH? – PASTOR CALEB YODER

All I can say is what an impressive group of people!

I sure would want to be a part of such a close and joyful group, especially since there's food...

...and apparently no conflict. No sharp divisions between people, and those that would be there are healed. The resources that people have are all shared and divided according to need. There was no needy among them, it says in chapter 4. They are growing!

It's a really attractive community. A pretty vivid sign of the reign of God. Sign me up! ...Except for the part of selling what I have and sharing it. And, well, I'd be a little concerned that I'd ruin it.

I think the point here is not that the early church was always like this. If you read Paul's letters or even elsewhere in the book of Acts, it is clear the church had conflict. It had divisions. Poor leaders added to the message of the Gospel for their own gain. There was dysfunction and favoritism.

In short, they were human. Luke's portrayal of the very first church might be a little idealistic, but let's remember this comes right on the heels of Pentecost. The point is to see what results when God raises Jesus from the grave and when the promised Spirit is outpoured.

You have a year of Jubilee (more on that later). You have fellowship, sharing meals together, praising God together.

Even if the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed doesn't come upon the whole world, this group of people gets pretty close. This is the fulfillment of what Jesus promised at the beginning of his ministry when he read the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue of his hometown.

There haven't been very many times and places in the history of the church when you really had something quite like this. But sometimes we need to "catch the vision," to know what direction to strive toward, to be inspired, to get our bearings.

So let's see what we can observe about this group, from the description we have in Acts. What's there to learn?

Two weeks ago, we asked the "what" question already – what is church – the church is the "body" of Christ," imperfect people with diverse gifts, committed to a way of life centered on Jesus, with shared practices that open us to the presence of Christ.

Last week, we asked the "why" question: "why have church?" The answer was basically that God works through people to make Christ present in the world. Jesus told his disciples that he is like a vine and they are the branches. We don't do anything amazing by ourselves. Instead, when we are connected together to Christ, we invite the life-changing love of God to work in us and through us.

So now this week we come to the "how" question. In some ways, it's the hardest question, and we will only be just getting started. Let's see what we observe in the first church in Acts with this question in mind. We will not set an impossible bar, criticize ourselves, or disqualify ourselves. Just: what's here to inspire us and open us to some new possibilities?

PRACTICES

First, let's look at the *practices* of this group.

Verse 42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Each of these is described a little further in the next verses.

There's this word that in most translations is translated as "devoted themselves." It's this idea of really giving yourself to something, being committed, and sticking with it. The same word is used in verse 46 to say that this group faithfully stuck together in the temple and breaking bread in homes.

So we know they had **teaching** – probably focused on how to enter this new way of life now that the Spirit had come.

They had **fellowship**. This is more than socializing. It's being together in heart. The Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, literally means "commonness." So this fellowship is connected to "having everything in common" (v. 44) as this group shares resources according to the needs among them.

Many interpreters believe Jesus' teachings had echoes of the "year of Jubilee" proclaimed in the Old Testament when indentured servants were freed, debts were forgiven, and land was redistributed. It was a kind of "reset" that removed the differences of status that set some people above others and left some in abject poverty.

It's something our world desperately needs, both in our country and globally.

After Pentecost, there was no Jubilee for the world at large, but among those who gathered in Jesus' name, resources were shared, and according to chapter 4, there were no needy persons among them.

This is a vivid foretaste of the reign of God, and a vision different groups have tried to live out, from the Hutterites to the Amana colonies in my neck of the woods in Iowa, to the Bruderhoff, or various Christian intentional communities.

The first church **broke bread** together – they shared meals together, creating a bond of intimacy. This was another form of economic sharing as well as a form of worship and praise. More than likely there was some form of the practice of the Lord's supper after these meals.

I know with COVID we greatly miss having meals together here. I don't think we will always be in the same situation, and I do believe this practice is one we will need to prioritize, even if it requires some creativity.

WHAT GOD WAS DOING

The heavy lifting didn't belong to the first Christians. The Spirit poured out at Pentecost was at work. Luke describes the "signs and wonders" of the apostles, probably healing ministry similar to Jesus. But that's not all.

God was also creating a kind of "year of Jubilee" I mentioned: inspiring the sharing of resources so that there are no needy persons among the group, so that differences of power and privilege are lessened and everyone feels an integral part.

The joy of sharing meals together is also a fruit of the Spirit. And somehow – we don't have details – there's growth. God adds new believers to the group – people who are finding salvation and healing (the word for salvation and healing is one and the same). I want us to pay

attention to the fact that the church commits itself to certain practices, but the heavy lifting is done by God.

CHARACTER OF THE FIRST CHURCH

I'll also want to make one observation about the character of this first church. Multiple times in verses 42-47 we have phrases that can be translated as "together" or "with one accord."

I doubt this means perfect agreement or absence of tension, but it pretty clearly means that this salvation-project is not privatized religion. It's the formation of a distinctive kind of people. Verse 46 describes how the believers "ate together with glad and sincere hearts." They have an expansive, generous spirit.

PLACES OF CHURCH

Finally, where is this church?

Acts specifically mentions the temple and homes. The temple was the site of Jewish worship (more than just Jesus-followers). They also shared meals in homes. We assume that means homes belonging to members of the Jesus-following group, but this may have meant interacting with neighbors along the way.

This was long before the first church building or cathedral was ever built. Church doesn't only happen in a building or centralized place. That's kind of a "re-think" for a lot of us.

David Fitch talks about "three places." One of these is the "closed circle" – wherever a Christian community is together often in the centralized location. This is an essential part of how we form a distinctive way of life and identity.

But we also are "home to home" or in neighborhoods (or we might add workplaces, school, community spaces). In these places we have relationships with neighbors and colleagues outside our congregation, some perhaps non-Christian. This is a "dotted circle."

And the "half-circle" is when engage in mission or ministry in the community or world.

In the first church of Acts – we would have to read between the lines – one can imagine that the "signs and wonders" of the apostle attracted the attention of the public at large. We can imagine that if the first Christians enjoyed the favor of "all the people" (at least at first!), they couldn't have been completely behind closed doors. They were visible.

They had intimate spaces where they deepened their fellowship and formed a very different way of life than the community around them. But they also had relationships with people outside their number who were curious.

Another way to think of it is like this:

We expect our faith to impact our way of life in every way that is distinct from the culture at large... and maybe even the culture of our local community, in which we have always assumed everyone is supposed to be a church-going "Christian."

Yet at the same time, we seek to be plugged-in, engaged in the community, and understanding of the needs of the community.

Being a **distinct community**, but also **engaged**.

Second, we don't try to impose our faith on others. We don't expect everyone to come to us. But in our relationships with neighbors, friends, colleagues, and people we meet, we do look for opportunities to explain our deepest convictions, explain the hope that we have in Christ.

This is bringing church to wherever we are in a non-impositional way, explaining ourselves when we have the trust to do so.

Most of all we try to pay attention to what the Spirit of God is already doing. We can't control it, or "make it happen," but sometimes we can participate.

GRAPHIC OF OUR HOMES

I made a map of the places where we live, using the addresses in our directory [see accompanying slides]. It's not perfect, as Google didn't get all the addresses quite right, but you get the idea. We could add the spaces where we work, go to school, are involved in our communities.

This is where we are already.

What would it be like if church isn't limited to what happens in a building, but is a whole way of life, centered around Jesus, that we bring to every place that we inhabit? Can we be attuned to how God is working everywhere we are and faithfully respond?

As we make observations about the church in Acts, none of this is meant to discourage us. As I've already pointed out, this is a pretty idealistic portrayal of the first church. The narrative directly follows Pentecost, so the point is not glorifying this group and holding them as the bar to judge every Christian community thereafter, but to demonstrate the *fruit* of the outpouring of the Spirit.

The Spirit creates unity, removes division, inspires providing for all needs, creates justice, and gives joy.

The point is not that we have to replicate the first church in every way or that we *can* replicate them. Just notice. What can we learn? Can we have a little reset – rethink our assumptions about what doing church means? Maybe look at what we already do in a different light, whether somethings we let go of or other activities we reclaim.

What can we dream about?

How might we rethink church as people coming to a centralized location and instead "bring church" to the places we already are a part of?

Maybe it's more community service days on a smaller scale. Maybe it's the creation of a new small group to which neighbors can be invited, seeing where the Spirit leads. Maybe it's viewing

some local ministries we already support in a new light – like New Hope Shelter or Core communities – not as “add-ons” but part and parcel of being church.

Maybe it’s appreciating the way that activities like singing are already spaces where we find joy and connection with one another. Maybe we come to worship, Christian formation, and fellowship opportunities with the expectation of being “built up” so that we consciously live out our faith as a “whole way of life” wherever we are.

I find I can let go of a little anxiety when I read an author like David Fitch say that God redeems and saves through the presence of Christ. So it’s not about us. The question becomes: how do we become more aware of what God’s Spirit is doing and how do we open ourselves and others to the presence of Christ who is already there in everything we do?

God’s Spirit is here. And God’s Spirit is well beyond the walls of this building. God continues to work drawing all people to Christ and creating redeemed communities that look just a little more like the church in Acts.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways is our congregation like the first generation of Jesus- followers? In what ways not?
2. What do we need to seize upon from this description of the beginnings of the church?
3. What does it look like for any of us to bring our faith and witness to the everyday spaces we inhabit?

BENEDICTION

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, unsettle you, and send you.

As you go, live your faith as a whole way of life. And when you find this impossible and find short, may God not let you rest until you have humbled yourselves and seek the power that only God can give.

Go in peace