

4/30/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Good morning! Welcome to our worship service.

May you be blessed by the peace of Christ as you worship with us this morning.

This morning we are happy to welcome the members of Woven, a student-led women's ensemble from Bethel college that includes some faces that will be familiar to you all.

Thank you for joining in our worship this morning.

We celebrate God's love and faithfulness and the resurrection life we share as we discover the presence of Christ among us.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Spirit of God, Work in us

LORD, capture our hearts

As we worship and pray

Fill us with awe

At what you are doing

May your joy pour out

Spirit of God, Work in us

Grow your character in us

As we humbly serve each other

As we share what we have

Wherever there is need

We break bread together and remember you

Spirit of God, Work in us

Help us to share your rescuing love

With everyone around us

Help us make space at the table

And space in our schedules

For those you are adding to our number

Spirit of God, work in us

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Spirit of God, work in us,

As we gather today in a common spirit of worship and prayer, we ask that you would open our hearts to encounter you as well as a sense of connection and being known by others.

Let us hear your Word today, help us to be steadfast in the spirit of the very first communities of Jesus-followers.

Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

Based on VT 1024, Rosemarie Freeney Harding

Generous God,

There is no scarcity. There is no shortage.
 No lack of love, of compassion, of joy in the world.
 There is enough. There is more than enough.
 Only fear and greed make us think otherwise....

There is enough land and enough food.

There is enough water.

There is no end to grace,
 and we are all instruments of grace.

The more we give, the more we share,
 the more you make, O God.

There is no scarcity in love. Amen

STEADFAST IN BREAKING BREAD – PASTOR CALEB

Acts 2:42-47

There's a saying that nothing worthwhile comes easy. For a great many endeavors in life, we have to be consistent and persistent. This would be true of work on the farm, or keeping sharp with a musical instrument, or rigorous training for a sporting event.

When I was in high school, the coach tried to motivate us to run during the summer in advance of the cross-country season. I remember there being a chart in the weight room where we could record the running we had been doing.

You might describe it as persistence, perseverance, steadfastness, devotion, "stick-to-itiveness" or maybe just being "hard core."

There are several important descriptions of the early church in Acts. It's possible that Luke's description of the first church is idealized. We know from Paul's letters, as well as other parts of the book of Acts, that there wasn't always perfect accord.

But several things are striking about this first congregation. One is that they are a committed bunch. They are "hard core." The opening statement is that they were firmly committed to the teachings of the apostles, to their fellowship or cultivating community, to "the breaking of bread," and to prayer.

There's a lot of breadth in that statement, but it is really interesting to see what is emphasized. "Breaking bread" probably means shared meals, and it is mentioned again in verse 46. Here, the congregation is firmly committed to constantly being together in the temple, while breaking bread in their homes.

While the believers worshipped regularly at the Jewish temple, they also had fellowship meals in homes. These meals likely harkened to the Jesus' last meal with his disciples, or they may have been followed by a ritual of communion.

"Together" doesn't just mean "in the same place." It literally means "having the same passion." The central activity in verse 46 is "partaking food with glad and generous hearts."

There is much that could be said about this early community. We are challenged by the mention of how the early church shared material possessions, and ensured that there was no person in great need among them.

A passage in chapter 4 expounds on that, and these texts inspired Christian communities that have shared all possessions, such as the Hutterites, Bruderhoff, and various monastic communities.

Luke says in conclusion that the "Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47, CEB). It's clear they are a community with a sense of common purpose. There is something attractive about them, that more people have wanted to join.

We might wonder, "saved from what?" The phrase might be connected to verse 40 when Peter was preaching and called people to "be saved from this perverse generation." – Remember that this was the generation that stood by as Jesus was crucified.

But it is more than just being saved or healed from the commitment to violence. It is being saved *for* a commitment to genuine community.

Last week we listened to the account of Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. These two disciples spent hours with Jesus, yet did not recognize him until a specific moment. Do you remember when that was?

It was the moment when he broke bread, blessed it, and served it. Now we have his description of the first Christian community after Pentecost, and twice the passage mentions breaking bread.

It makes me wonder, what is the significance of breaking bread? Is there a connection between these two passages? Does this just mean we need to have potlucks all year round? (that might get a little tiresome, especially for the people cleaning up).

Last week, I said that at the heart of the encounter with Jesus was hospitality. Hospitality flows when we know ourselves, are willing to take risks in sharing ourselves and our story, and are willing to listen with curiosity to others.

I want to expand on this while reflecting on these meaty few sentences in Acts about the earliest church. It seems that hospitality was at the heart of what the earliest church practiced in its beginnings.

A few years ago, Brett Klingenberg, the former pastor of First Mennonite Church in Beatrice, Nebraska, wrote an article entitled “Creek crossings and the rural church.”¹

In his article, Brett addresses the pressure that a lot of established rural congregations with a long history feel. How do we stay relevant? How do we remain attractive for our young people or for neighbors? How do we compete with the non-denominational churches that have more contemporary music?

Maybe we should do away with anything that has to do with Mennonite. Maybe we should tone down any talk of theology or values that might not be understood by our neighbors.

Maybe we need a pastor who will walk across the stage, or some better lighting and a fog machine.

Brett’s answer is that if you do all that, you’re denying who you are. If we aren’t genuinely ourselves, we won’t be a genuine community.

But there is a temptation in the opposite direction to be a closed community, focused on existing families and long-standing relationships, not open to new ideas or new people until the insiders are gone and the doors eventually have to close.

This congregation’s history, distinct culture, foods, and traditions are part of who we are. We can’t deny these things, and to decide to never talk about these things won’t make them go away. It will just cause more confusion for anyone who didn’t grow up here.

Also, to deny or forget our story is to deny God’s faithfulness up to the present. It is to no longer know ourselves, and it makes it all the more difficult for outsiders to also tell their stories and be known.

Again, the question becomes: is this a closed history that belongs only to those who are direct descendants, or is this a story still being written, inclusive to anyone who wishes to join?

Is their one correct story that is to serve as the mold for every story? “I grew up on the farm, played sports at Goessel High School, went to catechism and was baptized as a junior, then I did 1-W service before coming back to the community...?”

Or do we tell our stories both rich in the particulars with openness and curiosity to other stories with different particulars?

In the article, Brett’s answer is to picture a pasture or a field with a creek. It would be a lot of effort in vain to eliminate the creek – it’s simply part of the geography of the pasture.

But you need what he calls “creek crossings,” a way to get from one side of the creek to the other. He writes, “The good news of crossing points is that a church does not need to eliminate its common story, traditions and local culture in order to be accessible by the outside

¹ See Brett Klingenberg, “Creek crossings and the rural church,” *The Mennonite*, Nov. 2016
https://anabaptistworld.org/es_issue/november-2016-fidelity-place/

community. Forming and maintaining adequate crossing points into our rural congregations bring the access we long to offer outsiders as well as keeping our unique identity in place.”

Sometimes if you’ve always been part of something, or have been part of it for a very long time, it is difficult to step into the shoes of a different person. Someone who has recently joined, or recently married in, or someone from the younger generation with different needs and perspective.

Paradoxically, knowing yourself is crucial to being able to wrap your head around another person and offer welcome and inclusion. When you don’t know yourself, you may not even realize that there are invisible boundaries that separate insiders from outsiders. We need to be able to identify the creeks that make up our congregational geography, and work to provide “creek crossings.”

In his book *God’s Country*, Brad Roth uses the image of fences. The fences often serve a purpose – they are part of the identity of the community. Some fences may need to be challenged, even torn down. But we won’t be helping ourselves by tearing all the fences down. But we do have to be conscious of helping each other over the fences – kind of the way many of us have done in the field – testing to see if the electric wire is hot, and then finding a way to climb up and over.

The New Testament often uses the image of “adoption.” As Christ is the “son of God,” so we are adopted into God’s family as brothers and sisters in Christ and “children of God.” Let’s think about what it means to be a congregation that adopts.

In our congregation, families are a central feature. Unlike an urban church, many people here worship with members of their extended family. Many of the families are related to each other, especially if you go back some years. There are endless family connections, more than even younger people who grew up here can keep up with.

How does someone become a part of the congregational family when they come from a different background? How do we adopt?

There could be numerous examples:

- Maybe in a conversation, being sensitive to those who are present and explaining a backstory that it’s assumed “everyone knows.”
- Maybe it’s asking questions of someone of a different background about their family or the traditions where they came from.
- Maybe it’s organizing milestone celebrations for a person who doesn’t have many family members nearby to do that for them.

We already do well at responding with meals, volunteer help or even financial assistance depending on a need that is among us.

Hospitality involves knowing ourselves. How do you tell your own story? What do you value, or dream about? What is the kind of church that you would dream we would grow into?

After becoming aware of how you answer those questions for yourself, the next step is to be able to ask those questions of others, with genuine openness to hearing their answers.

May God's Spirit inspire us from the example of the early church. As we break bread and share life in other ways, may we discover unity of passion and glad and generous hearts in order that God be praised.