

Fourth Sunday of Easter April 30 2023

Acts 2:42-47

Three years ago, when we heard this text, we were just beginning to come to grips with the fact that COVID was going to be a real and present danger among us for quite some time. Our lives, but certainly our life as the church had changed. Through all the stress and strife of that time, I am thankful for the opportunity it gave to us as individuals, families, and a community of faith to get a sense of what was most important in our lives. What was essential and what might be secondary at best.

I remember in our meetings for confirmation which moved to Zoom relatively quickly, but also in conversations with other parents, that I heard very clearly an appreciation of the slowing down of the pace of life. The joy of simply sitting at the table with one another for a meal. The whole family. Of everyone being present in the house with one another not going six ways to Sunday with activities and practices. I remember inviting them to hold onto that feeling and to remember that when the time came when we could safely gather together again things did not have to go back to what was before. Was there something to be learned in this time about what was essential?

Our readings from the Acts of the Apostles is another in a set of readings since Easter that tells the story of the Holy Spirit coming upon the apostles after Christ's ascension. The crowds hear them speaking in tongues and come to see what the commotion is. Some assume they are drunk, but Peter stands up and says, no, this is the moment promised in scripture where God breaks into the world. Peter

then goes on to bear witness to who Jesus is and what his ministry was. The crowds are transformed by this proclamation and ask what they must do. Repent, change your thinking, Peter says, and be baptized. Three thousand people were baptized into the Body of Christ that day. That's where the reading last week concluded.

With this wild growth of the church, Peter and the other apostles need to decide, what is important to our life and ministry together? What is essential to who we are as followers of Jesus. What do we teach, apprentice these thousands of new believers into? Their decision, follow the pattern that Jesus had set for them.

As faithful Jews, they still go to the synagogue and observe the Sabbath. What day is that? However, they also gather on the first day of the week. The day Jesus rose from the dead. They devote themselves, are steadfast, in immersing themselves in the apostles' teaching about Jesus and his message, in the fellowship of shared life, to the breaking of bread- the way in which the disciples on the road to Emmaus knew Jesus. Language that probably refers to the ritual meal of communion, but also to table fellowship. They had meals together, regularly. They devoted themselves to prayer- something Jesus did throughout his ministry, both in public and in private. This essential conversation with God, a constant understanding that God was present with you, listening everywhere and always. Ready to be engaged in conversation.

They hold everything in common, if someone in their fellowship is in need- does not have enough for their daily bread- then someone with more sells what they have and makes sure they all have enough.

They do all of this consistently, with glad and joyful hearts. They praise God in all that they do. And because of their devotion to those other things, great signs and wonders are done by them. Things that seem impossible to others, but which for a people fueled by the teachings of Jesus, by the fellowship of believers, by communion and prayer, are just the byproduct of that devotion. The care of widows and orphans, people who society left behind. Caring for the sick and outcast. Welcoming the sinners into fellowship. And they have the good will of all people and God adds to their numbers day by day.

It raises the question for us, what is essential? To our life as individual believers, as families, as a community of faith.

Many people would say that these things (cell phones) are essential for our life together. My wife will attest that mine is never far from my reach. But are they doing more harm than good? Especially for our children. Psychologist and author Jean Twenge is coming out with a new book that points to many studies that show strong evidence that the rise in rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness among children and youth corresponds to the introduction of cell phones.

Since 1976, the number of times per week teens go out with friends, hang out, held basically steady for nearly 30 years. In 2004, it slid a bit. Then in 2010, it nosedived. This is about the time that smart phones became most popular. One recent study showed that 22% of 10th grade girls spent 7 or more hours a day on social media.

This is the definition of devotion. They are devoted to social media. And it isn't just youth. Adults average 4-5 hours. I wonder, where is the teachings of Jesus in

that time? Where is the fellowship of breaking bread? Sitting at the same table, eating the same food? Talking with one another. Where is the prayer, that communication with God? Cell phones and social media may be central to our life today (St. John is on Facebook), but is it essential to who we are as human beings created in the image of God? Is it what we should devote 4-7 hours of our day to?

What is essential for us as an assembly of believers? One of the first things we turned to during COVID was worship. The very definition of church in the core confession of Lutherans is that the church is the assembly of believers gathered around Word and Sacrament. You need to have that assembly, the Word (teaching), and the Sacraments of baptism and communion. Only then are you church. Note, it does not say it has to be in any particular place. So as your household is more than one person, you are church when you gather around the Word of God in scripture and study. When you share in the breaking of the bread that is a meal. This regular assembly of worship- around Word and Sacrament is essential.

By its lack, we found that fellowship was also essential. The sharing in common of life, food, fun. It is what happens regularly with our Dorcas Quilters- come to their open house next week. It is the celebration of new grandbabies and the loss of old friends. It is the coming around one another when someone's health fails. It is the shared work of serving others through their gifts. It is the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints around coffee and a treat. We continue to work to recover this fellowship among ourselves.

What is essential to our life as followers of Jesus? Both individually and as a community?

Acts would have us make hearing and pondering the teachings of Jesus as something we devote ourselves to. Constantly put before us. How well do we know the story of Jesus? How well do we know the story of God's pursuit of God's people? Well enough to discern when we hear something that isn't in scripture? How well do we spend time together sitting at the feet of Jesus other than in our weekly worship? What might we be missing from our lives if that is not part of who we are and what we do?

Acts points to fellowship, life together. Studies have shown that even with these devices and social media- even prior to COVID- the number of youth who say they are lonely had risen steeply. Smart phones can be wonderful things, I can see and talk with my mother who is 900 miles away. Yet, even during COVID, I did not go as far as my colleagues in equating remote worship with being physically present. Don't get me wrong, having the cameras and the ability for people to connect who cannot get here physically anymore is wonderful and we are never going back. But the witness of scripture, history, and science shows that we need to be in physical proximity to one another. To interact in the reality that God has created, not the simulacrum that our human minds have dreamed up.

We need the sound of voices bouncing off our eardrums. We need the literal feel of other bodies around us. We need to inhabit the same physical space as others. Part of this is because we need shared experiences, good and bad, to enhance and enliven the unity we already share in Christ and through baptism.

What is essential to our lives as the assembly of believers that is the church and as individuals and families who are followers of Jesus? What makes us followers of Jesus and not something else?

As we struggle with these important questions. Perhaps as we are convicted, realize that we need to repent, change not only our thinking but our actions, our lifestyles. We also have a promise. A promise from Jesus, our shepherd.

That he has our back. That we are in his care. That green pastures and still waters are in store for us. That he has a table prepared for us, even when we are faced with challenges. That because the Lord is our shepherd, we come in to protection and out to be fed. That when we follow the Lord's voice, we shall not be in want. That in Christ you shall have life, and that abundantly. Greater than you can imagine, and not in material things- but in what gives life. Eating and fellowship filled with joy and laughter. Communion with God and with our neighbors. That brings healing and love.

This is what we welcome Carson and Quinn into this morning through the waters of baptism. Into the fold, a fellow sheep saved by the love of God in Jesus Christ. Ones to be raised in the way that they should go. Devoting themselves to the Word of God that is Jesus Christ. To fellowship with other believers, life lived together. Messy at times, to be sure, but better than life lived alone. And receiving the Meal of Christ's own body and blood.

As we ponder how God is calling us forward. We rest always in this. That God in Jesus Christ loves us and his voice will always call us into life. Thanks be to God!

