

## **Worshipping and Sharing**

### **Fourth Sunday of Easter**

#### **Acts 2:42-47**

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

<sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

How does one convey the promise and momentum of a movement? Countless books and films have attempted to express the self-determination during the American Revolution, their unity, collaboration, and camaraderie. Also, books, movies, poetry, and song express the reverence, solidarity, and resolve experienced by participants in the civil rights movement in the United States and South Africa. These are examples of historical social movements with both spiritual and political underpinnings and goals that authors, poets, historians, composers, painters, sculptors, photographers, filmmakers, and others have attempted to convey. Participants in each of these shifting times experienced profound internal wrestling, wide-ranging and conflicting styles of leadership, and intense periods of hardship and oppression, and yet emerged from those experiences with a deeply exhilarating sense of renewed human community, a kind of transformation that it is difficult to describe to someone who was not there.

Luke is neither a historian nor a journalist in the modern sense, but the book of the Acts of the Apostles is our most comprehensive history of the spiritual and political movement that gave birth to the early Christian church. Beginning with

the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Acts chronicles the deliberations and actions of the church at Jerusalem and the spread of Christianity across Greece and Asia Minor, culminating in the apostle Paul's very public Christian presence in Rome.

There is no doubt that the early Christian church emerged from Jewish practice as it was reinterpreted, modified, and augmented by Christian experience; it is Luke's description of the early church and enormous shifts in faith and practice. The picture is one of a maturing community in the process of developing its own ethic, economy, and culture. In six verses Luke tells us that Christian faith has changed where people live, how they understand property ownership, and their sense of communal obligation in response to personal crisis. Also, it changed how they understand something as basic as a meal, its purpose, and its implications. Eating together, not simply the ritual of the Lord's Supper, has become a spiritual activity, and it is accompanied by depths of gratitude and spiritual awareness that Luke wants us to understand. **Susan B. W. Johnson**

What do we learn from Luke's description of the practices of the early Church and their response to Peter's resurrection sermons and how does what he said effect our actions and behaviors? First of all, Luke tells us the members of the community devoted themselves to "the apostles' teaching." A mark of authenticity and health in a church is what it does with the writings of those early Christian leaders. We are called to explore the texts that come down to us in their names. Specific teaching and preaching approaches are not specified, but active effort is. We all are called to dwell in Scripture. As in most of Christian history, many people encounter Scripture primarily when it is read aloud and preached on Sunday morning. We study together in Bible study, we read religious authors, we read daily devotionals, and we listen to sermons that help us hear and understand the Scriptures. This very video is one of the methods we use to understand the Scriptures in this time of pandemic when we find it difficult to gather on Sundays.

Second, Luke says they devoted themselves to "fellowship." A mark of authenticity and vitality in a congregation is the quality of peoples' relationships and their efforts to include others in those relationships. There are churches (like our own) that view themselves as friendly and welcoming. We may be surprised, that a visitor may not be drawn into conversation—even members can suffer silently, unknown and unloved by others that are more talkative and dominate the conversation. Devotion to fellowship means nurturing the habits of hospitality—and it takes work. It takes courage to notice a newcomer, helping him or her find the coatrack or a restroom, or not sitting in your usual seat to be present with them during worship. It takes initiative to invite someone to lunch or a cup of coffee after worship. It takes creativity to start a regular gathering where a small group can begin to know and care for each other. With devotion to fellowship, people are made to feel at home, growing close enough for genuine rejoicing, encouragement, and support.

Third, they devoted themselves to "the breaking of bread." Authenticity and health in a congregation are surely seen in the way they eat together, but this is more than our third Sunday fellowship dinners. This "breaking of bread" also alludes to the Lord's Supper, faith and community fed by the sacrament. Many miss the life in the Eucharist, whether it is offered every Sunday, as at Unity, or four times a year. Only if we make concerted efforts in study of the Lord's Supper will people find the richness offered in Christ's broken body and shed blood. The promise of the gospel, portrayed there in more than words, is available to all our senses—but we will miss it if we are not devoted to it.

Fourth, they devoted themselves to "the prayers." A mark of authenticity and vitality in a congregation will be our involvement in prayer. More than a part of worship, prayer is for each of us the opportunity for communion with God. As we pray the Lord's Prayer, the Psalms, or other forms of prayer we connect with God

and care for each other. There are now many ways to pray, but to be "devoted" to it, individuals and communities must pursue prayer intentionally and with energy.

### **Gary Neal Hansen**

These four elements crucial to the developing Christian community, in Luke's portrayal, still have contemporary relevance: apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayers. The "teaching" and "fellowship" may take on new expressions, but the centrality of Jesus Christ in each of these components must remain. Equally important, as contemporary communities of faith, we should not overlook seeking how to continue to live out the sense of responsibility each one has for the other. Was the distribution of goods only for the early foundation of the movement? Is there a crucial Christian message in this distinctive activity, in which followers of Jesus should continue to "sell possessions" in order to care for others in an organized, structured manner? Are we still called to ensure that those with less may benefit without our calling attention to the less fortunate in a direct way? Throughout the history of Christianity, many believers have attempted to grapple with the distribution of goods "to any [who] had need." In Luke's story, this action became an effective means of "evangelism" for the early church as God "added to their number" daily (2:47). **Emerson B. Powery**

One way we continue the tradition and behavior of the early church is in our gifts and offerings. Many give a tenth, one dime of every dollar, to the support of the church for teaching, preaching, fellowship and evangelism. Many give over and above to the support of their denominational structures, to disaster relief, to anti-racism efforts. Many give to non-profits who seek to feed the hungry, give aid to those who are sick, and assist those who live in poverty. We give to soup kitchens, and individuals help as they have ability.

When we worship, fellowship, pray and share we may be like our spiritual fore-parents. Verse 43 tells us that "awe came upon everyone, because many wonders

and signs were being done by the apostles." We can still experience awe when we count and acknowledge the wonderful blessings that God showers upon us! In this time of pandemic, we may focus on our limitations or our blessings. Have you ever visited the Grand Canyon? Its age, beauty, and vast expanse turns us literally speechless and can bring us to tears. We became intensely aware of the awe and wonder that we feel toward a God of such infinite wisdom and power. We don't have to go far, just look up at the night sky and marvel at the generous grace of a God who chose to include us in the great gift of creation.

A man gathered in a crowded field with thousands of others to watch the launching of the space shuttle. As he described the craft's disappearance into the beyond, he noted how a sensation of awe permeated the people. Suddenly the mass of hot and impatient spectators had become a community of courteous and smiling people who felt newly united by the wonder that they had just witnessed.

Maybe you have not seen the Grand Canyon in person, and never seen the launch of the space shuttle, but you can look at the night sky or look in the face of your loved ones over the internet or from a distance. We can each receive the blessings of God's love, hope and salvation! The awe and wonder that we feel point us to God, because they point us beyond our common awareness to the beauty and mystery that always surround us. Worship, fellowship, prayer and sharing can open our eyes to this beauty and mystery and unite us with the experience of the early church and lead us into Spirit-filled discipleship and God's grace in our lives. **Timothy B. Hare**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.