

Acts 2:42-47

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It had not happened before, it has not happened since; and in that uncommon experience God was uniquely present; but it was only the beginning.

A shoeless shepherd stands before a burning bush, and God is uniquely present; but it is only the beginning.

A rag-tag group of slaves, fleeing from their former masters, stand frightened before the Red Sea, and God is uniquely present; but it is only the beginning.

A young woman, weary from a long journey, gives birth unnoticed amid manger earthiness, and God is uniquely present; but it is only the beginning.

Sorrowful women hurry at dawn to anoint a dead body, only to find an empty tomb, and God is uniquely present; but it is only the beginning. Fifty days later a group gathered for the common purpose of prayer, and something uncommon happened! It had not happened before, and it has not happened since. In that uncommon experience God was uniquely present, but it was only the beginning. So it was on the Day of Pentecost that God revealed himself mightily through the symbolic presence of wind and fire. The Holy Spirit descended upon every believer, communication was heightened as each one heard in his own language, and the missionary enterprise of the New Testament church was empowered and launched! But the real significance of this event was expressed in what happened afterward! The disciples were given a new boldness and a refreshed spirit, as evidenced by Peter's dynamic sermon. They received a vision of the gospel's universal intent, thereby jolting them from their pride and exclusivism. And the church grew (2:41)!

Thus ordinary people in a common purpose began to bear witness to an uncommon experience. The background passage of Acts 2:1-39 emphasizes that God always gives himself to redeem and his gift always is intended to be a means to the end of empowering us to share that gift with others. One might use sermon design to stress that the Holy spirit descended upon every believer, not a select few. Thus the gospel is to be shared with everyone. The true Christian community can never be exclusive. Its great enemy is exclusivity. Scott Peck states, "Groups that exclude others because they are poor or doubters or divorced or sinners or of some different race or nationality are not communities; they are cliques—actually defensive bastions against community."¹ The entire narrative of Acts 2:1-39 climaxes with Peter's statement, "The promise is for you and your children and for *all* who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God

will call" (2:39).

A title of the sermon could extend from Carl Sandburg's insightful statement when asked, "What is the ugliest word in the human language?" After strained deliberation, he replied, "The ugliest word in the human language is . . . 'exclusive.'"²

Thus at Pentecost God was uniquely present, but it was only the beginning. What followed—how that common experience bound the early disciples together and how they gave expression to their uncommon experience—is the emphasis of Acts 2:42-47.

One way to treat this passage would be to center its emphasis around the concept of fellowship, or *koinonia*. "And they devoted themselves to . . . the fellowship" (2:42). The word *koinonia* is built upon the root word *koinos*, which simply means "common." The early fellowship was made up of ordinary people who shared much in common. It was their commitment to each other in community which enabled them to be an uncommon, even extraordinary people.

One could design a sermon or series of sermons around what the early church shared in common which made them so uncommon and extraordinary.

The earliest converts shared in common their conviction and confession of sin (2:37). It was Karl Barth who said, "Genuine fellowship is grounded upon a negative; it is grounded upon what men lack. Precisely when we realize that we are sinners do we perceive that we are brothers."³ Many of those who heard the Pentecostal sermon realized their sinfulness and responded in repentance and faith (2:41).

Luke shows that personal salvation is linked to and consummated in the Christian fellowship. To the *koinonia*, "they devoted themselves . . ." (2:42). The giving of themselves was expressed in common experiences and practices. "They devoted themselves to the *apostles' teaching*" (v. 42). It is interesting to note that the early church did not try to duplicate the unique, mountain top emotional experience of Pentecost. They were content to let that remain the never-to-be-repeated experience it was. Rather they set up a Sunday School! They began to center their fellowship around the teaching of the apostles, the "living scriptures" of their day. Growing churches appreciate and often cultivate the sensational and hyper-emotional, but realize the heart of the fellowship is the week by week small group dynamic and study of God's Word.

They gave themselves to the *common community, the fellowship* (v. 42). Out of the diverse groups that heard Peter's sermon God formed one body, one organic whole. It was a fellowship that was recognized in a common life. "A life-together" is the realization that we hold many things in common, but no man is common. Each one is unique, gifted, and called for individual and specific service.

They devoted themselves . . . to the *breaking of bread* (v. 42). Whether this was the sharing of a common meal or the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread symbolized their oneness in Christ. Sitting at the table, the universal symbol of friendship, signified that indeed in Christ there was no east or west, no bond or free, no male or female, no Jew or Gentile. All were one in

him. They continued to nurture that oneness by observing their disciplined habits of *prayer* (v. 42).

Thus the fellowship was based upon a negative, their sense of common need. They realized their finitude and limitedness: they were "filled with awe" (v. 43). They were aware of the human tendency toward doubt, thereby the need for "miraculous signs." They knew they held in common certain ailments and deficiencies. Hence they needed "wonders." They realized their own poverty, which led to a voluntary (and temporary) selling of goods and possessions, holding everything for the common good. They realized their own vulnerability, precipitating the need to share. The early fellowship was based upon a common negative, a mutual need and the necessity to bond together in meeting that need.

How this needs to be stressed today! Our world is structured to exclude. We are accepted if we have met certain economic, political, social, educational, and even theological qualifications. Otherwise one is excluded and isolated. In his latest book, *Who Needs God*, Harold Kushner has a chapter entitled "More Die of Loneliness." In that chapter he stresses the point that our twentieth-century emphasis upon the individual and independence has left us with a lonely competitiveness whereby we see others as rivals and "enemies."⁴

Is there any wonder the psychologist Joel Block states in a recent survey that only one in five Americans admitted that he had a real friend to whom he could truly confide.⁵ In a world that bases acceptance upon what one can acquire, accumulate, and amass, it will never be different. But the church can show by its fellowship that it can be different. In the church there is acceptance and forgiveness. No one has to be lonely. As one has said, "When I became a Christian, I found the boat in which I thought I was alone, to be very crowded."⁶

Even the common and ordinary experiences of life can become uncommon and even sacred when shared together because, more than any ritual or practice, every Christian shares the power and presence of the risen Christ. It is he who binds us together in our common need for the purpose of making us uncommon people. And what we hold in common is greater than anything we could ever hold in difference.

At the 1967 Southern Baptist Convention, Gert Behanna detailed her life as an alcoholic and subsequent conversion to Christ. She was treated to a standing ovation. She returned to the microphone and said, "Now you know you are not applauding an old drunk like me. That's just the Jesus in you meeting the Jesus in me. Let's both give him a hand." "The Jesus in you meeting the Jesus in me!" That's fellowship. That's *koinonia*.

Sharing in a common life and purpose equipped the early church to be an uncommon, even extraordinary people, to carry out that purpose. Another emphasis of this passage could be a series of sermons centered around the uncommon people who literally "turned the world upside down." Who were they? What were they like, these growth agents of God?

They were people who lived on the promises of God. Some had heard the great commission to go into all the world (Matt. 28:18-20). Some had heard the promise of the Spirit to go with them as they carried out Christ's directive (Acts 1:8). They

dared take God at his word. Only a few short days before they were defeated: Jesus lay cold in a tomb; and their dreams were shattered. But now they held in common his resurrected promise and power. Out of their bankruptcy, they found his riches. They were to use their newly found resources to carry out his mission. One could pause here to remind today's church that we must constantly ask the question, "Why do we exist? What and who is the church for?" We must remind ourselves that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. The early disciples did, and they grew (vv. 41 and 47). It is also beneficial for us to ask what are we attempting that we can accomplish only through the power and promise of God?

The early church was a growing people. They not only grew in numbers (vv. 42 and 47), they were growing spiritually. They worshiped together (v. 46). They met together and recollected the words of Jesus from the eyewitness accounts (v. 41). I can see them grouped together. "I remember the look on Zacchaeus' face when the Master told him to come down out of the tree." "I'll never forget the look in his face when he met Simon after the resurrection." As they shared from a common past, they grew in and with each other toward a common future. That is why we too need times of common study, worship, and play. We grow only as we grow together.

They were a joyful people. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts (v. 46). They praised God and enjoyed the favor of the people (v. 47). True to their common life was praise, celebration, music, worship, and joy. Their world had its pitfalls, problems, and persecutions. But they chose joy.

In spite of our abundance, we often are an unhappy people. Many Americans are dissatisfied with their jobs. The preacher could stress that we too can choose joy. Each and all of us can choose to keep the garbage and throw out the gold, or keep the gold and throw out the garbage. We always have a choice as to how we respond to the problems life presents to us.

As growth-minded leaders, the early Christians had a high pain threshold. As we read the book of Acts, we see how the New Testament church began to confront its culture and the vested interests within it. Everywhere they experienced confrontation and conflict. They were beaten, jailed, denied membership in the trade unions, and yes, even murdered. Why? Because the gospel of Jesus Christ treats no man as common but all persons the same. Everyone is equal before Christ, but there always are those who wish to keep others in subjugation. It is a gospel of the "second chance." It brings about godly change, and there always are those who see change as a threat to their own status and authority. The gospel sees the future under God as good and progressive. Always there are those who wish to live in the past without realization that their rut will soon become their grave.

The early disciples not only had a high pain threshold but also *had a high risk quotient*. The early church lived on the edge of disaster. Having no political, economic, or ecclesiastical security, they realized their only security was found in God. Thus they relied upon Him! Risky? You bet! Challenging? Always! Exciting? Of course! It's also called faith.

Thus, an ordinary, common group of people had an extraordinary experience. In a common life, they gave expression to that experience and calling and became a very uncommon people. They became people who were more interested in service than status, more interested in opportunities than problems, more interested in preference than potential. They asked simply, "Is this the best that we and God can do together?" Perfect? No! Common? Very much so! Uncommon and extraordinary? Yes, because of the life and power of the Lord himself they shared! A possible sermon or series of sermons could emphasize the "characteristics of growth-minded leaders." One might center a whole series of sermons on this text and background under the general topic of "Doing Church New Testament Style."

William Bausch tells a story that may in some ways summarize the emphasis of Acts 2:42-47: the establishment of the New Testament church upon the mutual meeting of common need in love.

Two brothers worked together on a family farm. One was unmarried and the other married with children. They shared what they grew equally as they always did, produce and profit. But one day the single brother said to himself, "You know, it's not right that we should share the produce equally, and the profit too. After all, I'm all alone, just by myself and my needs are simple. But there is my poor brother with a wife and all those children." So in the middle of the night he took a sack of grain from his bin, crept over the field between their houses and dumped it into his brother's bin. Meanwhile, unknown to him, his brother had the same thought. He said to himself, "It is not right that we should share produce and profit equally. After all, I am married and I have my wife to look after me and my children for years to come. But my brother has no one, and no one to take care of his future." So he too, in the middle of the night, took to taking a sack of grain from his bin and sneaking across the field to deposit it in his brother's. And both were puzzled for years as to why their supply did not dwindle. Well, one night it just so happened that they both set out for each other's house at the same time. In the dark they bumped into each other carrying their sacks. Each was startled, but then it slowly dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another. Suddenly the dark sky lit up and a voice from heaven spoke, "Here at last is the place where I will build my Temple. For where brothers meet in love, there my Presence shall dwell."⁷

Where Christians meet in love, there is fellowship—the church—and it's only the beginning!

¹M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 61.

²Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), p. 167.

³Frank Stagg, *The Book of Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1955), pp. 69-70.

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- ⁴Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God* (New York: Summit Books, 1989), p. 97.
- ⁵Bruce Larson, *Wind and Fire* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), p. 56.
- ⁶Robert A. Raines, *New Life in the Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 66.
- ⁷William J. Bausch, *Storytelling, Imagination and Faith* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), pp. 68-69.

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