

## "Seeing Things From Jesus' Point of View"

Acts 2:42-47

FCC Puyallup – July 16, 2009

Today, as we continue with the summer sermon series on “Rediscovering Sabbath as a Spiritual Practice”, I want to focus on the text from Acts that Connie just read; that is Acts 2:42-47. In this text, Luke gives us a few clear snapshots of the early church. His description is so brief, his tone so matter-of-fact, that it is easy for us to miss the full impact of what we might discover from these snapshots.

Most of what Luke describes seems familiar and none too earth-shattering. He says the apostles taught the people; they enjoyed fellowship, and they prayed together. Pretty much what goes on here or in any other church on any given Sunday.

But then, in quick succession, Luke tells us about three more characteristics of the early church that may be somewhat different from our contemporary experience of church. First, he says that **"many wonders and signs were done through the apostles."** That is, miracles were performed; people were healed.

Now, to some small degree we do see evidence of miracles and miracle healings in our midst today...but they certainly are not the on-demand kind of miracles that the apostles seemed able to perform in those early days of the church. This is different than our experience of church here in the 21st century, especially in an established, mainline church such as ours.

The second characteristic of the early church unlike the modern church is that the members of the early church had all things in common. That is, they divested themselves of their earthly possessions and distributed them to anyone who had need of them. Can you imagine us doing that today? Why we would, at best, be called “Holdover Hippies” (or something like that) for living in a commune if we did...or at worst we’d be called “Communists”!

But, these early Christians were willing to live in a communal fashion for two reasons:

first, they no longer laid claim to anything as their own because now they bore the name of the one who gave up everything for their sakes. And, second, perhaps more to the point, these early Christians believed that Christ would be returning to establish God's reign on earth very soon, in their own lifetimes, a reign in which they would have no need for personal possessions. So they were glad to give them up.

Then Luke goes on to mention the third characteristic of the early church...something that may or may not be characteristic of the modern church...something that was, in and of itself, a wonderful sign and a powerful witness, a miracle, if you will.

By this rather unusual activity the new movement called Christianity demonstrated how it had turned the world upside down and shaken everything loose. Do you know what that miraculous activity was? Do you have any idea what it was that set this new community of faith apart from all others?

Well, Luke says that "**day by day...they broke bread in their homes and partook of food (together) with glad and generous hearts, praising God.**" **THAT'S RIGHT...THEY ATE TOGETHER IN THEIR HOMES...WOW!** Well, you don't seem very surprised or startled by this.

You see, what we have here is a clear record of the first church pot-luck. (You know, if your name begins with A-L, bring a loaf of bread. If it begins with M-Z, bring a jug of wine.) Now, the fact is that to us today a pot-luck, a shared meal, is no big deal, it a routine thing. There is nothing startling or earth-shaking about eating together either here in the church or in someone's home.

But in the first century, among the people who made up the early Christian church, it was unheard of. You see, the fledgling Christian church included both Jews and Gentiles and in the first century Jews and Gentiles simply did not mix.

Not only did Jews and Gentiles live in separate neighborhoods, they wouldn't even walk on the same side of the street as each other. In fact, if a Gentile happened to wander into a Jewish home while a meal was being served, all the food would have to be thrown out because it was considered unclean...just by the mere presence of the Gentile in the house!

So when Luke says that the members of the early church - Jews and Gentiles - ate together, he is reporting a startling new phenomenon, a true sign, a veritable

wonder...indeed he is reporting a miracle. Jews and Gentiles actually eating together! So, what happened that could account for this amazing miracle?

Well, in short...Jesus happened...that's what happened! In the first letter of John, the evangelist reflects on how Jesus brought an entirely new point of view to the world. He writes, "**Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.**" In other words, if God can love all people, in spite of our differences, then surely we ought to be able to love one another in spite of those same differences. We ought to be able to...

But the reality is, we humans have friends and we have enemies...people on the inside and people on the outside...those whom we seek out and those whom we'd rather have nothing to do with. People we like and people we don't like.

But as Paul said to the quarrelsome members of the church in Corinth: "**from now on we regard no one from a human point of view.**" We now seek to see others as Jesus does, the same Jesus who invited hated Samaritans, tax collectors, and prostitutes to join him at the table. Now we seek to regard others as Jesus did. Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, put it this way: "**The kingdom of God is simply seeing things from Jesus' point of view.**"

So, for the members of the early church to sit down and eat together meant nothing less than that they had learned to see things from Jesus' point of view more than from their own cultural perspective. **And that is a wonder, a sign pointing to God's reign, a true miracle!**

Two noted anthropologists made this observation about the way we humans dine together: "**In all societies, both simple and complex, eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships...Once the anthropologist finds out where, when, and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society's members...To know what, where, how, when and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society.**"

Just so, Jesus revealed a great deal about the nature of God's intended society for all of humankind, about the nature of God's realm, by the manner in which he ate his meals. He observed none of the usual distinctions or ritual taboos or discriminations when it came time to eat. He ate with whoever would join him at the table.

So, when the early church gathered for a meal, they did so in this same manner as Jesus - bringing together at table those who would normally not have anything to do with one another.

And to this day, whenever the church gathers to worship and share our common meal at the Lord's table, we are attempting to recreate this same experience of God's in-gathering love. This gathering to share at the Lord's table is one of the most significant events that occurs during our Sabbath time together, this time set apart from the mundane happenings of our daily lives so that we might focus more clearly on our spiritual connection with God and with one another. **(PAUSE)**

So let me ask you, what about this communion meal, this Lord's Supper, we are about to share? Do you think it has the same significance to us today as did those communal meals shared by the early church? What do you think?

Well, most of us here in this congregation are pretty compatible ...we are more than pleasant to one another...we seem to like each other...and probably not unrelated to these facts is the realization that we really don't know each other all that well, not at a really deep, spiritual level.

So let me ask you a direct, and, yes, a rather difficult question, but one that I think is important to ask as we prepare for our meal together: **Is there someone in this church that you simply don't like? Someone whose lifestyle you don't approve of? Is there someone here who has betrayed you, or disappointed you, or who offends you, or angers you...someone you would rather not have anything to do with...someone who just grates on your nerves?**

If there is no person like that here in this congregation for you, then I suspect we don't know each other well enough yet... because true community not only brings us closer, but also it reveals our differences, those things we may not agree upon...usually stemming from different points of view, different perspectives, or different life experiences.

If we are not aware of such differences then that is an indication that perhaps we need to draw closer together; when we have encountered people with whom we normally would not choose to associate, it is then that we have a chance to become more than just another pleasant gathering of congenial people...it is then that we have a chance to be the church,

a community of people who realize that ultimately it is not our point of view that really matters!

I once heard a psychologist say that the church is a valuable institution because it is a place where we can learn to stand one another. This statement rather shocked me at first, but now I think she had made a good point.

If we draw close enough to each other to become a true community, and if in so doing we can still stand one another, then it is a clear sign that we have been willing to adjust our point of view and to begin seeing things from Jesus' all-inclusive point of view.

That is the only way during our Sabbath time together that we can truly gather together around the Lord's table with glad and generous hearts...and that is the only way that we can be a real community of faith!

I remember when one of the elders of the church I served many years ago in Louisiana was summarily fired from his job. He was confused and angry and scared. He had four children, two of whom were already in college, so you can imagine the difficulties he faced. The situation was complicated by the fact that one of the people who played a major role in his dismissal also was a member of our church.

It just so happened that the Sunday after he was fired, he was one of the two elders scheduled to serve at the Table. That day we planned to have the congregation come forward to partake of communion by intinction. These two elders would be serving the communion elements to all who were present in worship that day.

I overheard the two elders talking to one another before the service. The elder who had been fired was asked by the other elder what he would do if the man who was responsible for firing him showed up for worship and he had to serve him communion.

This elder...this hurt, angry, scared man...seemed to be startled by the question. He responded to the other: **"Of course I'll serve him. The Lord's Table is not about me...what we are doing here is not about me at all! Of course I'll serve him!"**

This episode reminded me that the post-modern church, the 21st church, our church, is really not so unlike the first century church after all. This elder's response reminded me that we are all called to see things from Jesus' inclusive point of view.

And what better time to do that, what better time to practice seeing things from Jesus' point of view than during our Sabbath keeping time...here when we gather to worship and to share our common meal together at the Lord's table...and in those other Sabbath times when we intentionally seek to make that vertical spiritual connection with God and that horizontal spiritual connection with those people who share this time on earth with us.

**"They partook of food together with glad and generous hearts, praising God."** Now that is a witness! And something like that happens every Sunday when we gather at the Lord's table.

We did not choose one another, but God chose all of us and called us here. We may not have a lot in common with one another, except the only thing that really matters: **a common faith in Jesus Christ and a shared commitment to follow his way in our lives.**

So, you see, it is not about us, but about this wondrous God who, as improbable as it seems, loves all of us and invites each one of us to see things from the same point of view...to see things from Jesus' point of view. **To that I say:** Thanks be to God. Amen.