

Growing for the Joy of Fellowship

22nd Sunday after Pentecost – October 31, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Acts 2:42-47

⁴¹So those who welcomed his [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

1 John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Today, we conclude this four-week series entitled "Growing for Christ." In this series, we've been looking at growth – in our ministry, in our commitment, in our relationship with Christ and one another, and in our life together as St. Andrew.

Growth. This series has been about growing as a people and as disciples. And St. Andrew has been growing fast. But even our growth pales next to what happened in the first Christian community nearly 2,000 years ago.

Let me tell you about growth!

In the book of Acts, Luke tells the story of the beginnings of the Christian church from the time of Jesus to about 62AD, a little more than thirty years.¹ Luke begins with Jesus' return to the Father and then moves the scene to Jerusalem. There, some of Jesus' followers have gathered to await the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Jerusalem is bursting at the seams. Perhaps 200,000 Jews are there for the late spring festival of Pentecost. On the day

Koinonia

Fellowship halls. They are as common in Methodist churches as [fill in the blank]. It is easy to think that fellowship is merely a warm-hearted brotherly and sisterly love. Fellowship is certainly that – but also far more.

The NT Greek word we translate "fellowship" is *koinonia*. Sometimes it is also translated as "communion." Many Christian organizations and churches use *koinonia* as a name for one thing and another. Type it into Google and you'll get 118,000 hits!

The best way to understand *koinonia* is to see it as "sharing in" something. At Pentecost, Jesus' followers shared in the gift and the power of the Holy Spirit, as do all Christians (2 Cor 13:13). Indeed, the *koinonia* of the believers was a gift brought by the Spirit. But we also share in the Spirit, just as God has called us all to the *koinonia* of his Son, Jesus (see the pg 2 text box).

In verse 44, Luke writes that the Christians held all things in common. This was a well-known phrase from Greek philosophy indicating friendship. As Robert Wall writes, "A fellowship of believers share more than common beliefs and core values; they display a regard for one another's spiritual and physical well-being as a community of friends" – a community created by God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹Acts is the second volume of a two-volume work that begins with the Gospel of Luke. Together, the two volumes comprise about 25% of the New Testament! Luke was the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament. My plans now are to teach classes on the Gospel of Luke (winter session) and Acts (spring session) in the upcoming Bible Academy sessions.

of Pentecost, Jesus' disciples are gathered in one place and, as promised, God's Spirit comes upon them with great power, enabling them to speak in languages it would be impossible for them to know. Some onlookers even accuse Peter and the others of being drunk. In the face of this ridicule, Peter rises to address the crowd. Invoking the words of the prophet Joel, Peter preaches the first great sermon in Acts (and there are many!), closing with "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Many in the crowd were "cut to the heart" and asked what they could do. Peter's response was simple: "Repent and be baptized. . . ." Luke records that on that single day, more than three thousand Jews came forward to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. 3,000 in one day! Now, that's growth. But reading on in Luke's account, what struck me most is the value of looking at these early Christians through the lens of our own vision statement, which is "to invite others into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving."

The joy of inviting, worshiping, learning, loving, and serving

The story of Acts is a story of *inviting* – more than 3000 in a single day and many more as the movement expands from Jerusalem to the entire Roman empire. The invitation made is straightforward: repent, be baptized, trust that Jesus is Messiah and Lord. *Worshiping* was woven through their fellowship. They prayed together. They still went to the temple. As Jewish families would do, they came home from temple and shared a meal, praising God. This "breaking of bread"

Fellowship with Christ

Like John's Gospel, 1 John opens with a prologue. It is designed to drive home, by personal testimony ("touched with our own hands") the truth that Jesus lived and was fully human,¹ that Jesus is "the eternal life that was with the Father" (v.2).

Why does John want us to grasp the truth of Jesus? (1) so that like the community in Jerusalem, we might have fellowship (*koinonia*) with one another (the horizontal), (2) that we might have *koinonia* with the "Father and his son Jesus Christ" (the vertical), and (3) so that our "joy may be complete." What a trifecta.

There is a mutual indwelling shared by the Father, the Son, and believers. It is a fellowship that we refer to as the church. It is a unity for which we can only express our thanks and to which we cannot over-commit.

1. Christians in the first century had just as much trouble as we do now trying to grasp that Jesus is fully God AND fully human. Overemphasizing either at the expense of the other is a woeful mistake that sells short the grace and power and mystery of God.

would come to be a remembrance of Christ and a tangible expression of Christian unity.

Jews greatly valued *learning*, so we should not be surprised that they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." There was much to learn. Who was Jesus? What was all the kingdom-talk about? What did it mean to be Christ's church? What were they to do? Our own need for learning is certainly no less than theirs.

Luke attests to the *loving* and *servicing* character of this new community. They took their responsibilities to one another so seriously that "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (v. 45).² As any had need! Such a radical commitment.

Luke's portrait of this community is so radical, so uncommon that it is sometimes seen as idealized. Who could really live this way? But such skepticism betrays a lack of appreciation for the power of the Holy Spirit to lead a community toward a life they never even imagined. No wonder that these disciples had "the goodwill of all the people."

Teaching, fellowship, sharing our resources, breaking bread, praising God, praying – these are all marks of a genuinely Christian community. Our own vision statement expresses the same concrete understanding of what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. It is more than a belief, a baptism, a membership, even a tithe. Proclaiming and embracing Jesus as Messiah and Lord is a *commitment* encompassing all we are, do, and have. Through the grace of God and our own commitment, we share in one another and in Christ.

²Some see these verses as implying a form of early Christian communism with the banishing of personal property. But there is no need to read it this way. Luke simply says that the Christians sold assets and used the proceeds to take care of those in need.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the fellowship and community of the early Christians)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Acts 3:11-26 Peter's second speech in the temple</p>	<p>Day 2 Acts 4:23-31 The believers in Jerusalem pray for boldness in the face of threats</p>
<p>Day 3 Acts 4:32-37 More about life in the Jerusalem community</p>	<p>Day 4 Acts 5:1-11 The disturbing story of Ananias and Sapphira. Be sure you notice that their offense was lying about their contribution, not failing to sell all they had.</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 6:1-7 The apostles are overwhelmed with the work of the community and decide to reorganize!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Mark Your Calendars – Nov 7th and 14th: Dismantling the DaVinci Code

At 9:30 in Wesley Hall on Sunday mornings Nov 7th and Nov 14th, I will take a look at many of the claims made in Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*. Though this is a work of fiction, many Christians have taken seriously Brown's claims of impeccable research. Was Jesus married? Was the claim of Jesus' divinity invented hundreds of years after Jesus' death? How did we get the New Testament? Who was Mary Magdalene? Do the gnostic gospels help us understand Jesus?

November Book Recommendations: TWO!! – Both on *The DaVinci Code*

It would take a lot of fingers to count all the books that have been written about the historical and theological problems in *The DaVinci Code*. I've been waiting for books written by well-regarded New Testament scholars and I now know of two: *The Gospel Code* by Ben Witherington and *Breaking the DaVinci Code* by Darrell Bock. Witherington's book gives an overview of many issues associated with the premises of the novel and includes a glossary. Bock's critique focuses on eight questions, such as whether Jesus was married. Bock extensively quotes some of the gnostic writings referred to in the novel, enabling you to read some of the original texts yourself.

Both are available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today's Scripture passage from Acts is a good opportunity to use our imaginations. In the study, I suggest that it is helpful to read about life in the early church through the lens of our own vision statement. Try making two lists. Label them "Jerusalem church" and "St. Andrew." List out what you see as some similarities and differences between the two communities. What might we learn from them? What might they learn from us? I'm guessing that the latter will be more difficult for you. You might even take the passage from Acts and go through it phrase by phrase looking for similarities and differences.
2. When you've got your lists done, you'll likely find that the sharing of goods marks the most striking differences. The Jews had long traditions of private property. Otherwise, what would be the purpose of a commandment against stealing. But does even the word "private" get us off track? Does it lead us to believe that what we possess is ours to do with as we see fit? What would it mean to turn over to God the deed to our property? How do you think the believers in Jerusalem would have gone about sharing their property? Assuming that Luke means for us to see this as a dramatic change in the attitudes among these people, could it be one of the "wonders and signs" done by the apostles (2:43). Do you think that such wonders are available to us as well?