

GREAT GRACE

First in Series: Learning Church

Acts 4:32-5:16

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Last Sunday we celebrated the Day of Pentecost. This was the day that the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles enabling them to give witness to the resurrected Christ. It was the beginning of the evangelistic movement that ultimately led to a worldwide church. Thus, Pentecost is one of the three high holy days: Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Thousands came to believe that day. Woohoo!

Ah, but what comes after woohoo? Convinced by The Gospel, thousands said, “We believe.” They told Peter and the apostles they were ready to sign up. Great! What? Wait. Now what? I once heard a preacher talk about the most difficult part of ministry was directing people after they accepted Christ. He said getting people to the altar, getting them to accept Christ was one thing. Another thing was answering their question, “Now what?” Well, three thousand people responded to Peter’s altar call on the Day of Pentecost, and then asked, “Now what?” The apostles did not have an answer. There was no plan. They had not thought through that. This Holy Spirit thing had just come upon them. They had no clue that morning that at the end of the day there would be thousands of more believers.

This was all new. They had to figure it out as they went along. They had to figure out what it meant to be a believer: how they were to relate to each other and to others, who was in charge, who could belong and what they were to do. Because it is ever evolving, it is fair to say that we are still learning, still trying to figure it out. In the series over the next weeks that we are calling “Learning Church,” we will be looking at some of the issues the earliest church faced and how they worked through them. So, what happened after that first day?

Right off the bat, they had to negotiate how they would relate to each other. They were a disparate group. Oh, they had some commonalities. They were all Jewish, so they shared a common heritage. They were all new converts, so they were learning together. But beyond that they did not live in the same neighborhood, go to the same schools or frequent the same businesses, share the same social and economic class, or even share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The potential for internal conflict was there. It was hardly a guarantee that they would get along and work together.

In what I consider a miracle as powerful as the miracle of the Spirit interpreting language on the Day of Pentecost, however, they did get along, amazingly so. The differences among them were set aside and, instead, all attention was focused on the one thing that brought them together – belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

They were able to be one because they did three things: they learned from the apostles; they prayed regularly; they lived communally.

It started with learning from the apostles. Again, they were all new to the faith. There was no New Testament scripture or church doctrine or tradition. There was nothing written or anything they could study. Ah, but the apostles had been with Jesus, learned from Jesus, experienced Jesus, seen the resurrected Jesus, and watched the ascension. The new believers wanted to hear and wanted to learn everything. We read in today's lesson that the apostles, with great power, gave their testimony to the resurrection. They shared what they had seen, experienced and learned. We have always said that Bible study is of major importance in the church. Well, these earliest believers had first-person Bible study.

They were also a praying community. Lots of external pressure was being exerted on them by the authorities, in addition to their internal challenges. We often read how together they prayed for guidance and help for all that was going on.

In addition, they lived communally. We read that they shared meals together, giving Biblical evidence that the first Christians were Methodists. Here we have the source of the potluck dinner! Of course, this partly relates to communion, but it was not just a sacrament experienced in worship. They actually ate their meals together on a regular basis. Church was not a once a week experience. It was extremely communal.

How communal? This is where it gets especially interesting. They established themselves not just as a social community, but also as an economic community. They turned their assets over to the apostles who, in turn, distributed the money according to need. This was reported earlier in Acts, and again in today's lesson. Luke says that no one claimed ownership of any possessions. Those with land or houses sold them and laid the money at the apostles' feet. Consequently, no one in the community wanted for or needed anything.

This is very important. Let me explain why. It is not because it serves as an economic model for all time, although it is a powerful statement about actually physically caring for the needs of each other. Experience has shown, though, that this complete sharing of assets works well only in the short term, a generation or two, or is practiced among a manageable number of people, and only when a group is committed to it, such as a monastic order or a particular tribe of people. Otherwise, it falls apart, and as we'll see in a minute, a potential break almost right away. So, as is, it is not a model for all the church for all time. Honestly, as Biblical as this is, if a charismatic, full-of-the-spirit-Christian evangelist invited you into a community and said, by the way, turn over all of your assets to me and I'll use them to take care of you and others, I would strongly advise you against that. I would be more than suspicious. It rarely works that way.

But, in the early Christian community, it did work. And what makes this important is that, in this setting, it served as a powerful witness to others.

Think about this. The Christian community was brand new, not just for the believers, but for everyone. Others had to figure out what to make of this new group. The political and religious authorities were against them. In fact, Peter and others had already been arrested and warned not to speak of Christ. Others were not sure what to think. All they knew was that they were fellow Jews who believed that Jesus, who was crucified, rose from the dead and was the way of salvation. For the most part, that made them odd in the minds of others, not special, the kind of

people who might shave their heads and hand out literature in the airports.

Undoubtedly, they would have been discounted as nothing more than a bunch of kooks, except for two things. One was that, despite legal prohibition, Peter and the others were in the Temple everyday boldly giving witness to the resurrection and backing up their testimony with signs and wonders. We read, for instance, that people from all over brought the sick and laid them along Peter's walking path just so his shadow would fall upon them and heal them. The other thing was that the Christian community was impressive. Whether or not they understood what it was all about, those outside the church saw how those inside cared for each other and supported each other with unqualified generosity and love. They were committed to everyone in their community being able to eat, to have shelter, and to have clothes to wear. They shared everything so that all could be well.

The result was that, instead of dismissing the Christians as nut cases, those on the outside held them in high esteem. Many joined them because of it. Those who did not join still admired them. It is like my impression of the Amish. I don't fully get the way the Amish live. I understand the history and theology, but I don't really understand what it is about, and I am not ready to sign up. Still, it is obvious that they have convictions, and they have a tightly knit community, and they are willing to sacrifice to make it work. So, while I do not fully understand them, I admire them. We sing, and we will sing this at the end of the service, *They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love*. In other words, our attitudes and actions will give our witness. Well, the people knew that the community of believers was Christian by their generosity, unbridled sharing, and care.

Now I mentioned that they had an early break in this witness. In our lesson, we first read about Barnabas selling a field and giving the proceeds to the apostles. But then we read about Ananias and Sapphira, a couple who also sold property, secretly withholding some of the gains, while claiming to turn it all over to the apostles. Peter asked each one individually about it. Each one continued to lie. When Peter exposed their lies, each died on the spot.

This is a strange vignette, though one loved by finance committees. It gives Biblical support to give-your-offering-or-else campaigns. But when we look closely, we discover that the issue is not that this couple did not give everything. It is that they lied about it. Peter told Ananias that it was his property and he was not required to sell it, and that the proceeds were his and he was not required to give them. The issue was that he had said he would and that he had when he had not. Through his lie, he was only pretending to be participating fully in the community.

Was this a big deal? Yes, because it made the witness of the community inauthentic. People were moved by the witness of people sharing everything. But, if they were not really, if they were secretly holding back, if they were only pretending to live that way, then the witness was false. That would be devastating. Am I overstating? No. We have that very issue today. We do not have people literally dropping dead because the preacher says they did not give enough. But, and this is the point, in survey after survey after survey, those who are not participants in church say that their number one complaint with the church is hypocrisy or inauthenticity. You are not doing what you say you do and you are not being who you say you are, these onlookers say.

If we want to be held in high esteem and give witness to the joy of life together in the body of Christ, we need to demonstrate that which is special. Let's be honest. No one wants to become part of a church body that is constantly bickering. We can get bickering anywhere. No one wants to come to a place where they feel unwelcome or excluded. We can feel unwelcome lots of places. No one is inspired by a group that pays little attention to each other's needs. We can be left on our own anywhere. People are looking for something different, something special. I have been part of many churches and, in every case, it has always meant a lot to me when I told a stranger that I was part of a certain church, and the response was, oh, that's the church that houses the homeless or has a big youth ministry or has programs for the elderly - whatever it may be. I love it because it means that the church is known by reputation, by what others have seen and experienced. Even if they have no part in it, they are moved by the witness. When we fail to be who we say we are or fail to be who we are called to be, however, our witness becomes mute.

Well, there is a lot of church history here, enough for today. Let's circle back to the main idea. What did these earliest Christians learn about being church that applies today? Firstly, they learned everything they could about Jesus. They sat at the apostles' feet saying, tell us the stories of Jesus. The church should always be learning, growing in understanding and faith. Who is Jesus, and what does it really mean to be a follower?

They learned to be a praying church. They did not try to figure everything out by themselves or to accomplish everything by themselves. They were constantly in prayer seeking God's guidance and help. The church that fails to pray is an arrogant church and not effective.

And they committed to living out their discipleship together – being together and sharing so that no one had need. They were not individuals each doing their own thing. They were sisters and brothers in Christ, truly one body. As we read in our lesson, they were of one heart and soul.

The result was that great grace was upon them all. Did you hear that in the lesson? I love that verse. Great grace was upon them all. Paraphrasing one commentator, they were practicing resurrection in their common life, learning new habits of mind and spirit, and experiencing the life and grace that comes when we live as one with God and God's children.

That was a good beginning. It could not stay just that way. It is not alright to say we got ours and keep it to ourselves. We'll see in the weeks to come how they learn to expand that grace. But they started in the beginning with the basics: learning, praying, supporting each other. Others saw and said we want a piece of that. And this community, held in high esteem, was covered with great grace. May we not forget the lessons learned. Amen.