

## A Service the Church Will Never Forget

Acts 2: 42-47 & John 10:1-10

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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### Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

### John 10:1-10 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup> The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. <sup>3</sup> The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

<sup>6</sup> Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. <sup>7</sup> Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full...."

## A Service the Church Will Never Forget

Churches are funny places. Have you ever noticed that? Burt Kettinger tells about a small church in Rocky River, Ohio, just west of Cleveland where he grew up. This church had a small restroom behind the pulpit with a door right behind the pulpit for the convenience of the pastor. There was also a door on the other side of the restroom that led out to the church parking lot.

One day the pastor was waxing eloquent on Rev. 3:20. With great exuberance he exclaimed that the Lord is standing at the door of our hearts crying, "Let Me in. Let Me in!"

Then, adding a touch of drama to his message, the pastor walked back to the restroom door behind the pulpit. He knocked loudly on it and, again, reminded the congregation that God was at our heart's door crying, "Let Me in. Let Me in!" when suddenly back from behind the closed door came the

plaintive cry, “Just a minute. Just a minute.” Certainly that was a service that small congregation remembered for a long time!

We want to talk this morning about a service that happened two thousand years ago that the Church of Jesus Christ is still talking about today. On the day of Pentecost Simon Peter preached an amazing sermon. The result was that three thousand persons were added to the Church on that day. Pentecost is the birthday of the Church and on June 4 we will celebrate that historic occasion. But then, what happened after those 3,000 were converted? Does the story end there?

We know that it ends there for many people! There are those who go to an evangelistic crusade, or to a very meaningful retreat, or to a richly rewarding spiritual life weekend, and get extremely enthusiastic about their faith — for a while. But soon the enthusiasm cools. The fervor subsides. Before long they are back in a deeper rut than before.

Is that what happened when those three thousand were converted on that first Pentecost? No, indeed! We read, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

In these few verses we have the true essence of the Church — who we are and what we are about.

**THE CHURCH, FIRST OF ALL, IS A COMMUNITY GATHERED FOR STUDY AND FOR WORSHIP.**

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer....” That is why you came to this place today. Henry Ward Beecher once said, “The Church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians, but a school for the education of imperfect ones.” So we should keep coming back, not just to worship, but to Sunday school and Bible Study as well. Actually these standards for study and worship are minimal at best.

I was reading about our Moslem friends. One of the largest universities in the world is the Al-Azar in Cairo. This Islamic institution, with something like twenty-one thousand students, requires every applicant to repeat the Koran from memory. Think about that for a minute. The Koran is about the same length as the New Testament. Three days are required to recite it. How would you fare with the New Testament? Perhaps we do not demand as much from Christian disciples as we ought. For some people, simply coming to worship is asking too much.

You probably know the story about the little boy who went to church with his grandparents. His grandmother sat in the choir. It really disturbed her to see grandfather nod off to sleep every Sunday in the middle of the sermon.

Finally, she decided on a plan. She gave her little grandson fifty cents each Sunday morning to poke grandpa in the ribs whenever he fell asleep. This plan worked until Easter Sunday morning. The church was packed. Grandmother was sitting in the choir. She noticed grandfather nodding off. However, Tommy made no effort to wake him. Grandfather even started snoring right there in the crowded Easter service. Still Tommy did nothing.

After the service grandmother was quite disturbed. She said, “Tommy what happened? You knew I would pay you fifty cents after the service if you kept grandfather awake.” Tommy said, “Yes Ma’am, but grandfather offered me a \$1.00 if I would let him sleep.”

Many of us can sympathize with grandfather. Sometimes worship is not the most exciting place. But I like another little story concerning two boys who were talking about Noah and the ark. They were thinking about the odors and the noise and the inconvenience of being cooped up on the boat with all of those animals — about how crowded, and about how dirty and how smelly it must have been, and about the problem of separating animals that were natural enemies and so on.

One of the boys said, “I just don’t think I could stand that.” And the other little boy thought for a while and he said, “Well, yes, it must have been awful. But think of it this way. It was still the best thing afloat!”

I believe that about the Church. Sometimes this is not the most exciting place to be on a Sunday morning, and sometimes church people are not all they ought to be. But it’s still the best thing afloat. Those early believers were certainly excited about it. They met regularly for study and for worship. But, however, they did more than just study and worship.

#### THEY ALSO HAD GREAT FELLOWSHIP.

They broke bread together, they talked together, they laughed together, they sang together. “See how those Christians love one another,” observers declared.

It must have been a joyous experience being part of that first church. Any church that’s doing what it ought to be doing is a joyous place to be. Fellowship dinners, softball games, working on things around the church, helping out with the food pantry, doing things together even when we are away from the church — these things may not seem very spiritual to many people, but we would be making a terrible mistake if we were to minimize the importance of fellowship to the life of the church.

Christian fellowship is one of the greatest gifts that we have to offer the world. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all we are and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. God cares about our fellowship, our relationships. Even if I were a pagan, I would want my children to be in Sunday school — I would want my teenager to be in a church youth group — I would want my aging mother to be in a senior citizens group at the church. Even if I did not see much theological content there, I would want those I love to have the benefit of being among Christian people.

I remember a Peanuts comic strip many years ago. Charles Shultz has a way of looking into our hearts. He has Lucy saying, “It’s my life.” Sounds like Lucy, does it not? “It’s my life and I’ll do whatever I want with it. I’m my own person. It’s my life and I’m the one who has to live it.” In the last frame she grins and adds, “With a little help.” We all need that little bit of help from our friends.

Harry Golden, that wonderful Jewish storyteller, tells of a time in his youth when he asked his father, who was not a believer, “Dad if you don’t believe in God, why do you go to the synagogue regularly?” Harry Golden’s father answered, “Jews go to the synagogue for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkel, who is Orthodox, goes to talk to God. I go to talk with Garfinkel.”

To be sure, that is not the best reason for coming to church. But that is missing the point. When we were baptized into the Christian Church, we did not become an island unto ourselves. We became part of a body — the body of Christ. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian, except perhaps under the most unimaginable circumstances of deprivation.

Our word “fellowship” comes from an old Anglo Saxon word “fee-lowship.” Fee was an old Anglo-Saxon word for cow, which was a form of wealth in days of yore. Neighbors would put their cows together, breaking down the fences between them, to show trust in one another. They were creating fee-lowship through the mingling of their cows.

You need some place in your life where you can trust other people — where people will accept you just as you are and will not take advantage of you. The world is so often taking advantage of us. Church is a place where you can be loved just because you are another human being, even if you are not yet, or perhaps never become, a fellow believer in Jesus Christ.

Of course there are dangers, even in Christian fellowship. The greatest danger is that we could become just another clique — a group of people who are so inwardly focused that we are blind to the needs of others.

Dr. Eugene Brice tells about a guy who toured a factory. “This is the world’s largest grease factory,” the tour guide said as they started through the gigantic plant. They walked through rows of machines with gears turning, wheels revolving, cylinders whirling, belts running, huge motors roaring away.

Toward the end of the tour the guy asked the guide, “What do you do with all the grease you make here? To whom do you sell it?” The guide said, “Oh, no. We don’t sell it. We have to use all the grease that we produce to lubricate the machinery here at the factory.”

Here is a parable if I ever heard one. If we are not careful, we can end up putting all of our energy, all of our time in church to lubricating our own machinery — spending all our time planning our services, working on our finances, enjoying our fellowship opportunities while ignoring the needs of the world outside.

The number of those being added to the early church was increasing daily. That meant that they were constantly enlarging the fellowship. There is not much joy in a church that is not enlarging its circle of fellowship. If you keep fellowship to yourself, fellowship dies. When you keep enlarging that circle of fellowship you have life, hope, meaning, purpose and joy. The early disciples met together for study and worship and for fellowship. They broke bread together and they praised God with joy. There is one more thing that characterized that early group of disciples.

#### THEY SPENT MUCH TIME IN PRAYER.

They recognized that theirs was not simply a human enterprise. One Evangelical pastor, speaking about his own denomination said, "In Acts 2 they prayed for ten days, Peter preached for ten minutes and three thousand got saved. Today, churches pray for ten minutes, preach for ten days and might get three saved."

That is quite a remarkable difference between the Church at Pentecost and today's congregation, is it not? This is not merely a human enterprise. This is not simply another social organization. E. Stanley Jones once said, "The streams that turn the machinery of the world take their rise in silent places."

You and I need a source of power for our lives, and we need a source of power for our church that comes from beyond our own energies, desires and commitment. It is a power that takes its rise in silent places. We need to spend time in prayer.

One of the most effective men who ever lived was Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a lawyer already in his forties and living in South Africa when he conceived the idea of freeing India from foreign control. He never used a gun, he recruited no armies, he possessed no great personal fortune, he resorted to no fixes, no payoffs, no compromises. Virtually the only source of his power was prayer.

Even while he was in South Africa, he began to crusade for his people's rights. At that time, South Africa was not a very good place to begin a crusade. He once wrote, "There was a law directed especially against Indians in South Africa, and I had come there to oppose it. My ship was met by a hostile mob, and I was advised to stay on board for the sake of my physical safety, for the crowd had come with the announced intention of lynching me. Nevertheless, I went ashore. I was stoned and beaten a good deal, but I had not prayed for safety, but for the courage to face the mob. And that courage came and did not fail me."

Anyone who wants to be a witness for God is going to have to depend upon prayer. If this church, like the New Testament Church, stands tall in our community, we are going to have to have the power of God undergirding us. There is only one way that power will come. That is through unceasing prayer.

I confess that I've never preached a sermon that brought three thousand people to their knees. And I will confess again that this is not the most entertaining place you can be this morning. And certainly this

church is not yet all God means for it to be. We can all confess that. Churches are funny places. Churches can be very sad places. Still, like Noah's Ark, we believe that it is the best thing afloat!

This is where we have found God, and this is where we share our experience of Him together. This is where we gather together for study and worship, as we are doing this morning. This is where we gather to have genuine fellowship together — to laugh together, love together, sing together, give thanks together.

I hope you will commit yourself to reaching out to people you know and inviting them to this place so that we might add to the church everyone who needs Christ. Not for our glory, but so that we can spread the love of Jesus Christ throughout this community, and the world.

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