

All Together in Awe and Wonder

4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42-47

Today's text from the Acts of the Apostles is one of several summaries that Luke inserts into his story of the early church. He steps aside from the particular names and places and sequence of events and gives a general snapshot of how the church was in its earliest years in Jerusalem. This brief passage today could be compared with the way I have taken to calling St Paul's the little country church with the big global heart. Or the way many of you describe our congregation as welcoming, warm and friendly. Our mission statement says, in part, that we are called to live *God's word in offering a caring and accepting family of faith to our community*. In our monthly newsletter, *Chapel Bells*, and in our annual report every winter we share details of dates and names and events in the life of the congregation. But if someone asks us about St Paul's, we don't launch into an autobiography, naming names right away. We find a more general way to describe our church. Our website says that we are a congregation of "intimate size and broad diversity."

This is what Luke has done here in the Book of Acts, summing up what the church does and who the church is as God's people, offering a general, interpretive lens through which to view the particular verbs and nouns of church life: the actual activities of specific people, places and things. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles takes the place of an Old Testament reading during the Easter season, the Sundays after the Day of Resurrection. In Acts we see how the Holy Spirit continued the ministry of Jesus, after his crucifixion and resurrection. We see how the first disciples (the students who sat at the master teacher's feet) became apostles (those sent out to teach others in the master's name). In Acts we see how the apostles' teaching created something new, from Jews for Jesus continuing the spiritual practices of Judaism in temple and synagogue, to a gospel community that embraced the Gentiles (all the rest of the non-Jewish world) and spread from Jerusalem into all the known world, throughout and beyond the Roman Empire. At Pentecost, Jerusalem was transformed from the place where

the life of Jesus of Nazareth ended, to the place where the global church of Jesus Christ was born.

Today's snapshot of the early church shows us what it means to be the church, and provides a rule by which we might measure our own mission as the church here and now. Along with commentator William Barclay, I find nine characteristics worth remembering. (There will be an exam at the end. So pay attention!)

A learning church. The first thing Luke says is that "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." The early church was an educational community, gathered around a quite specific set of teachings. We don't care for the words "dogma" and "doctrine" in our tradition, but that's where it all started. The apostles learned directly from Jesus and they passed along what he taught and who he was so that others could walk and talk with Jesus as they had been privileged to do. When we ordain people to ministry today, we still have in mind a kind of apostolic succession in which those who learned from Jesus taught another generation, and they in turn taught another, and so on through the centuries. We don't make up this stuff as we go. As St Paul the Apostle put it, "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day...." (1 Corinthians 15:3,4) This is the core teaching, a primitive creed, around which the church gathers as learners, first and foremost. The church must be a community of lifelong learning. We never stop growing.

A church of fellowship. The church is a community of faith, of learning, of believing, of discipleship, of mission and outreach. We are in this thing together as the church. An individual Christian is an oxymoron. We are the body of Christ together. As we sang at the end of worship last week, "What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms." One of the early church fathers put it this way: we cannot have God as our father if we do not have the church as our mother. We are nurtured in faith and for faith by our brothers and sisters in Christ. Biblically speaking, the basic unit of humanity is not the individual, but the family, the clan. St Paul's certainly knows how to do fellowship.

The church eats and prays. Eat, Pray, Love could have been a title for the church before it was a bestseller and movie. Luke says the first Christians devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers. These are not separate things. We eat and pray together. Eating together keeps prayer from becoming too aloof and esoteric. Praying together keeps eating from becoming too self indulgent. Breaking bread is more than Holy Communion as a set apart sacrament or ritual. It is what families do together. It is making the stuff of daily life sacramental.

The church shows reverence for life. Theologian, Physician and Missionary Albert Schweitzer popularized this expression. Luke says the church was filled with awe and wonder because of what was happening around them. The KJV said they were filled with the fear of the Lord. Here is one of those places where the antiquity and poetry of the early seventeenth century King's English can be improved upon. The fear of the Lord is not about being afraid of God. It is to be filled with awe and wonder, to be amazed, to be like a child, overcome with the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, the panorama of a mountain landscape, or witnessing the miracle of new life in childbirth. The church must be the place and people who see God at work in the world, doing awesome and wondrous things that elicit reverence, worship and praise. Reverence for life is more than just whispering and taking off your hat in church. It is treating all life with the care a fragile creation deserves.

Things happen in church. Reverence for life isn't just about an attitude adjustment to see things through the positive light of rose colored glasses. Luke described awesome and wondrous things like the blind seeing, the lame walking, the dead being raised. When is it that we adults shift from telling our kids that they can be whatever they put their minds to, to where we get later when we cut off possibilities by telling ourselves "it just cannot be done" for lack of funds, for lack of imagination, for lack of energy, for lack of faith? Things happen when movers and shakers get together and start moving and shaking. Things happen when rooms are filled with the Spirit and people who know better get out of the way. When my father served on the consistory of our

church, he would sometimes come home from a meeting in frustration and say, “There’s nothing wrong with our church that a funeral wouldn’t solve.” Sometimes we have to know when to get out of the way of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate mover and shaker of the universe.

A sharing church. The tea party movement and Paul Ryan’s Ayn Rand-reading staff would not think much of this text: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” There is no getting around the fact that the early church, as Luke describes it in the Acts of the Apostles, was communitarian if not communist. They shared. Plain and simple. It wasn’t about private property or wealth. It was about the community, the fellowship, the economics of the household of faith. Period. It wasn’t about charity. It was about justice. It was about just economic relationships and the fact that you cannot separate spirituality from finances.

A worshiping church. The center of their life together was worship. They went to the temple, they broke bread at home and they ate with glad and generous hearts. I can sit home and watch Ryan Braun and Prince Fielder hit home runs on TV. I can get pretty excited about it, there by myself. But what makes a homerun worth remembering is being at Miller Park with 35,000 other enthusiastic people, all on their feet, yelling and screaming as Bernie Brewer slides down from his left field perch as the slugger jogs around the bases.

Corporate worship requires a crowd, whether it is one hundred people filling this place or 30,000 filling the Houston megachurch where Joel Osteen holds forth. Worship, when it lives up to its name, is a team sport that demands a team spirit and cheerleaders, a pep band, fireworks and fans in the grandstand. Worship, when it lives up to its name, spills over from glad and generous hearts and gives gladness and generosity to all hearts to take home. It makes you want to share and be together, and make things happen together, and learn together appreciate with reverence all the blessings around you. It sends you home with a song in your heart.

A happy church. I take full responsibility for the ways my

profession has managed to squeeze the joy out of the gospel. We have given the Beatitudes a bad name. A dour or gloomy Christian is as much a contradiction as is the oxymoronic individual Christian. There should be a lot more laughing and smiling in church (the pastor said with scowl and pointing finger). Which reminds me of when I was in therapy and the therapist looked up from his notepad and asked me, "Is there a hyphen in nut job?" Or when I was in a large church and my computer acted up. A junior high student stopped by after school and told me my hard drive crashed. I called our church's IT guy and asked, "Can you come and look at my computer. My hard drive crashed." The IT guy said, "I can't just come down there on your say so. How do you know that's the problem?" I said, "an eighth grader told me." He said, "I'll be right there." The church is not in the pursuit of happiness. We are happy because we have good news to share.

The church is winsome. Real Christian faith is attractive. People can see that we are happy, smiling, laughing, caring for one another, sharing, filled with awe and wonder. This is the best evangelism program: winsome attractiveness. Luke says the early church had the goodwill of all the people. In our day, there are plenty of churches that do unattractive things, like burn the Koran or picket funerals or in other ways contradict the joy of the gospel and the spirit of Jesus. I believe that one of the great assets of our fellowship right here is that we are blessed with people whom others cannot help but like. The growth we have experienced recently has to do with exposure that has helped others to find their way here. Two and a half years ago I was attracted to you. I did not feel a call to come here and make you different. I came here because I wanted to hang out with you and be more like you. You are winsome. I am hoping some of it rubs off on me.

Now for that exam: the church is...

A learning fellowship that eats and prays together, shows reverence for life, where things are happening, and people share and worship with winsome joy.