

Date: January 22, 2023
 Series: *This is...*
 Title: *...the Power of Unity*
 Text: Acts 2:42-47
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Take your Bibles and turn to Acts 2:42-47 where we read Luke's description of the very first church---the church in Jerusalem. And if able, let's all stand in respect for God's Word as it's read.

Acts 2:42-47

42 – They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

43 – Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

44 – All the believers were together and had everything in common.

45 – Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

46 – 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,

47 – praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In his book, *Seven Practices of a Church on Mission*, David Fitch tells the story of how back in 2010 a group of eight people from two churches---felt called to the Detroit Boulevard neighborhood of Sacramento. He writes:

"At the time it was known as one of the most notorious crime-ridden neighborhoods in all of Sacramento. Each house in that neighborhood was a place of danger. Nonetheless this group of eight decided to walk through the neighborhood praying over each home---and praying for the presence of Christ to reign over violence, addiction, and satanic oppression. They began walking through the neighborhood, praying over each home and rebuking the demonic strongholds of addiction and violence. One of the eight, former Sacramento police officer and gang detective Michael Xiong, reported that 'each time we prayed over the houses, we felt the weight of oppression becoming lighter.'

A woman from one of the houses confronted them. When she discovered they were praying for the community, she asked for healing, and God healed her. The group soon physically moved into the neighborhood and started what they called Detroit Life Church. A couple years later a local newspaper, the Sacramento Bee, reported that there were no homicides, robberies, or sex crimes---and only one assault in Detroit Boulevard between 2013 and 2014.

Detroit Boulevard had been transformed by a small group of Christians who began their ministry in the neighborhood by praying. Kingdom prayer in body is what it means to be faithfully present to his presence in the world."

In my mind this little church in Sacramento is a lot like that first church in Jerusalem. God used both sets of believers to have an incredible impact on their community. Well, this kind of thing has happened hundreds of thousands of times over the millennia in *"Detroit Boulevard and Jerusalem kinds of places"* all over the world. God has used local bodies of believers who are unified---ONE IN CHRIST---to literally change their part of the world---in miraculous, powerful ways. When a group of Christians come together as ONE and get serious about doing God's will amazing things can and do happen. This is why UNITY is a basic for any growing church. What is it that makes a church's UNITY so powerful? What is it about the church---this community of oneness and love---that makes it an unstoppable force?

(1) A unified church meets people's inborn need for CONNECTEDNESS.

You see people are designed to need OTHER people. To thrive we all require healthy, life-giving relationships. In short, we need friends---REAL friends. As our Creator says, *"It is not good for man to be alone."* (Genesis 2:18) To flourish as God intends, we need to interact with others.

The New Living Translation of Proverbs 27:17 puts it this way, ***“As iron sharpens iron so a friend sharpens a friend.”*** Ortberg once wrote, *“In the same way that the body is nourished by food, the soul is nourished by people.”* I guess you could say we remain *“DULL and under-nourished”* without healthy relationships.

An academic journal called, *The Journal of Happiness Studies* publishes the results of research that is done to identify what makes human life grow and develop properly. This “relationship journal” reports that when researchers look at what distinguishes very happy people from less happy people, one factor consistently separates those two groups. It is not how much money you have; it is not your health, security, attractiveness, IQ, whether or not you keep your hair, or career success. No—the thing that distinguishes consistently happier people from less happy people is the presence of rich, deep, joy-producing, life-changing RELATIONSHIPS.

Back in 01, Leah Yarrow of the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote an article entitled, *“Adults Get a ‘D’ for Being Disconnected from Kids.”* Here’s an excerpt:

“Most American adults already know they have the power to influence children into becoming healthy, responsible, and mature adults. However, according to a recent study, most adults don’t try. Research has confirmed that the more involved adults are in kids’ lives, the less likely the kids will engage in self-destructive behavior. Peter Benson, president of the Search Institute, says: ‘Relationships are the oxygen of human development. This study is another attempt to get into the ether of America the notion of the importance of connectedness, the power that real people have but which most of us are not using.’ Complimenting a kid on good behavior, or telling his parents about it, is obviously meaningful to any child, but only twenty percent of adults do it. For example, while 75 percent of adults are all for advising kids about money, only 36 percent actually do it. Nathan Dungan, vice president of Lutheran Brotherhood, says: ‘There are 190 million adults in this country. If just five percent of them jumped up and did something, it would have an enormous impact on kids.’”

Well---we never outgrow this need for connectedness---affirmation. As I said, it’s how we are made. And, in my experience, the best place to satisfy our inborn need for loving, life-giving relationships is in the local church---that group of people who are bound together by the Spirit of God Himself living in each member.

The church is where we are most likely to find friends that stick closer than a brother---friends who divide sorrows and multiply joys. That very first church in Jerusalem understood this. They knew they needed each other. They cherished their life-giving fellowship. This is why, as we read in our text, they met together not once a week---not twice---but EVERY DAY---with glad and sincere hearts. This is one reason healthy churches—can have such an impact. When communities see church-members loving one another---when they see us meeting each other’s needs for connectedness they come running---because they need connectedness as much as we do. The relational health of our powerful fellowship pulls them like a magnet does metal.

(2) A UNIFIED church meets our need for ACCEPTANCE.

Powerful churches—are churches where, AS ONE, they welcome sinners and love them unconditionally. Don’t get me wrong—healthy, UNIFIED, churches hate sin—but in spite of the sin—ANY SIN—they reach out in love to the sinner. We do this because we know all people—you and me included—are sinners who have been welcomed by God so we eagerly do the same for others. We respond like beggars telling another beggar where to find bread. Powerful churches are places you can come just as you are and feel God’s love flowing through the people who welcome you.

This week I read about a farmer in Brevoerde Germany named Friedrich Stapel. One day when Friedrich went to move the herd of cows under his care, he spotted a wild boar piglet, roaming with his cows. He theorized that it must have gotten separated from his own kind while crossing a river, but he couldn’t leave the piglet to fend for himself. He said, *“To leave it alone now would be unfair.”* He nicknamed the piglet *“Frieda,”* and like his bovines welcomed it to the herd. He even told the local hunter not to shoot little Frieda.

One reason healthy churches are powerful is because their members are like this farmer. They accept the *“runt boars”* of the world. They welcome all who come through their doors, the vilest sinner, the person suffering from trauma, the lonely, people who have made sinful choices---even those people who are just plain hard to get along with.

In his book, *The Me I Want to Be*, John Ortberg writes: “Jesus accepts us just the way we are. And, when someone knows the embarrassing, humiliating truth about me and still accepts me, I come alive.”

As I’ve told you in the pass, my best friend in all the world, other than Sue, is Bill Ratliff. We met my first day in seminary back in 1979 and have been fast friends ever since even though since graduation we have usually served in churches that are far apart.

I remember one time during our second year I was driving home alone from church and steam started pouring from under the hood of our car. With Louisville’s complex shoulder-less beltway system, by the time I was able to pull over I was sure the engine had burned up. I didn’t know how Sue and I were going to be able to afford to replace that car and thinking panic-driven thoughts all the way—I walked home—told Sue what had happened—and then crossed the yard to Bill’s apartment to ask for his help.

He calmed me down—we prayed together and then Bill rolled up his sleeves and grabbed his tools and drove me to my car and helped me fix the hose. And—good news—the car was fine. The engine was great—no cracks in the block no burning oil or antifreeze.

I remember another time—it was Bill’s last semester. He had one more paper to write but he told me he was so tired of writing papers that he just wanted to quit—and forget all about seminary. You see, Bill suffers from a mild form of dyslexia which made seminary and sermon prep a lot more difficult than it was for others. Bill had reached an end to his strength. He was ready to forget the past two and a half years and do something else for a living. So, I grabbed my typewriter, made some coffee, calmed HIM down, and we got out his books and his notes and we worked most of the night such that together we got that paper done. It wasn’t a GREAT paper—I think he got a C- but it was a paper. And he graduated.

I could share other examples—but the fact is Bill and I have seen each other at our worst. He’s seen me overcome with panic. And I’ve seen him overcome with trying to be a pastor while suffering from dyslexia. And that’s ok. It only deepens our friendship. We both cherish the fact that our friendship is not based on our having to be perfect. We can be real with each other—completely honest. That acceptance—that unconditional love—makes our friendship into one that helps both of us to grow spiritually.

And all people hunger for that kind of deep friendship. I like how Ortberg puts it, “When I am in superficial relationships, I can forget my brokenness. But when I am with people who know me deeply and accept me fully—their acceptance touches my brokenness as a doctor touches the injured place on a patient’s body. Their very touch begins to heal and through the mystery of the fellowship of acceptance, God’s Spirit flows.”

And of course, he’s right. To be fully known and still fully loved is the most healing gift one human being can give another. This is why James 5:16 says: “**Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.**” Listen! Churches that unite to accept people as they are and love people as they are—are crowded churches—powerful churches.

(3) A unified church meets our need to experience God’s FORGIVENESS.

This week I came across the story of a 23-year-old man named, Brenton Winn. Winn suffered from an addiction to methamphetamines. When his brother died suddenly, he became angry with God. And—while under the influence of those drugs—in a warped way to express his anger—he broke into Central Baptist Church in Conway, Arkansas. Winn went on a rampage and destroyed \$100,000 of church property including computers, projection systems, etc. Six months later Winn was baptized at that same Central Baptist church. He said, “As I’m starting to understand how God works, I’ve realized I didn’t pick the church that night. God picked me. If it had been any other church, I think I’d be sitting in prison right now.”

Winn's journey from a jail cell in February to a baptismal pool in September began when Central Baptist's senior pastor, Don Chandler, talked to the prosecutor. Chandler knew the godly response to Winn would be to offer forgiveness rather than judgment. Chandler said, *"You can't preach grace for 50 years without practicing it, especially in front of your whole church. This was a young man who had made some mistakes. He was on drugs and alcohol when he did what he did. And like all sinners he was redeemable."*

Chandler told the prosecutor that the church would like to see Winn get help with Renewal Ranch, a faith-based residential recovery ministry. The judge, who at the time had been a board member of Renewal Ranch, gave Winn the option. He could either go to jail, potentially for 20 years, or he could voluntarily choose to go to Renewal Ranch. Winn chose Renewal Ranch. Winn accepted Christ as his Savior after one of the Bible studies at Renewal Ranch. Winn and other ranch residents attend church at Central Baptist on Wednesday evenings. Winn chose to be baptized at the church on one of those Wednesday nights. Winn said. *"I gave my heart to Christ. I used to think it was a coincidence [that I chose to break into the church], but now I call it confirmation that God is real, and he answers prayers. I needed a relationship with Jesus Christ."*

One of the main power sources of a church's UNITY---is its member's understanding that we forgive---because we have been forgiven. And this draws people because inside we all know we are fallen sinners and that our sin separates us from the one relationship we need and want the most---a relationship with our Creator.

This message that we have to share as a church: *"You can be forgiven! Your sin debt has been paid—paid in full!"* This message makes churches unified---and powerful. Our message of GRACE is what turns communities like Detroit Boulevard upside down.

This wonderful message of grace is why as one, we say we "CELEBRATE" communion---because that's what it is—a CELEBRATION. We partake of this ordinance as a way of rejoicing over the fact that Jesus died for sinners like you and me and in so doing made our forgiveness possible.

This morning as we celebrate in this way, we invite all Christians present to partake with us because even if you are not a member of this church---If you are a Christian---if you are His, this is Yours.

THE ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION

If you are here today and don't know God personally, I hope you have heard our message. You can be forgiven. You can have your debt paid. You don't have to clean yourself up to come to God—you come just as you are—so DO! Come and talk with me I'll tell you how you can be forgiven and come to know Jesus personally. If you are looking for friends—REAL friends—come ask to join our church family. Redland is a place where you can find the connectedness you long for so come. Come in any way that God leads as we stand and sing.