

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2026
9:30 AM

Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47 & 2 Cor 8:1-5, 7-9, 14-15; 9:7-12

Theme: Pentecost People: Fellowship & Connection

[prayer]

There are two important words in today's Scripture readings that I want us to focus on: *koinonia* and *charis*.

Prior to Pentecost, Jesus's followers numbered just one-hundred-twenty people – roughly the same size as our church. But after the Holy Spirit descended and lit a fire in their hearts, after they heard Peter preach the Risen Christ, their numbers increased thirty-fold. In a single day, three thousand people were baptized.

What drew those three thousand converts? The powerful sermons, and the “wonders and signs” being performed by the apostles, were indeed part of what attracted people. But what made people stay and commit, what made them not just casual participants but devoted disciples, was the rich and vibrant faith practiced by the early Christians. The way the church gathered was attractive. The sense of community they shared was attractive. Those three thousand conversions are not a benchmark for successful ministry; vital ministry comes in all shapes and sizes. Instead, Luke records that number as an example of the magnetic power of a community gathered around the Risen Jesus, confessing the same *kerygma*, the same good news: That Jesus died, and then was raised from the dead, and now reigns as our Lord and Savior.

Luke uses a very specific Greek word to describe the kind of community embodied by the early church: *koinonia*. This word is used only here in Acts. It means “fellowship.” The root of *koinonia* is *koinos*, which means “common,” and it has multiple connotations. It can refer to things that are held in common or shared by a group of people, like “they had all things in common.” It can also mean things

that are commonplace – things that are ordinary, unconsecrated, even unclean or unholy.

Luke describes God performing “wonders and signs through the apostles” (v. 43). But he does not tell us what those were. Instead, he immediately follows that statement with another one: “All the believers were united and shared everything” (v. 44). The great sign and wonder of the early church was a diverse community of people gathered around the resurrected Jesus – men, women, and children; slave and free; rich and poor; Jew and Gentile (cf. Gal 3:28-29). They were united across their differences by their experience of God’s saving love through His Son, Jesus Christ. And they responded to this experience of saving love in common (*koinos*) ways: Spending time together, sharing meals, and being generous with their money and belongings. Studying Scripture, praying together, and worshiping in the Temple were common acts of faithfulness.

“Common” and “unity” are the pillars of community. A true community is a group of people united around shared values, shared beliefs, and a shared purpose. What fueled that attractiveness of the early church was the solidarity of the first Christians. This solidarity came from their shared belief in the Risen Jesus. They were united by this belief and this belief alone. Most of the big theological disputes (and *all* the little disputes) that divide the church today weren’t on the radar of the early church. Remember that the earliest Christians did not even think of themselves as practicing a new religion. The Acts 2 church was a group of Jews practicing a fresh expression of Judaism. What separated them from conventional Jews was their shared belief that “God has made Jesus...both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). This shared confession was the *koinos* in their *koinonia*.

Koinonia, therefore, is fellowship with a purpose. It is not simply enjoying each other’s company over a potluck meal. Instead, it is a shared commitment to a singular task. And that task is loving each other and loving our neighbors sacrificially, like Jesus. What the early church did was an outward expression of this internal purpose. They sought to embody in their communal life the sacrificial love that Jesus embodied in his life and death.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is calling the church in Corinth to practice *koinonia* by promoting a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the first church, the Mother Church, but it was much poorer than the Gentile

churches in the Greek provinces and it sought financial support from across the growing Christian community in the Near East.

The English translation of Paul's letter uses many terms to describe the collection: a "remembering," a "collection of money," a "ministry," and a "gift." But in the Greek Paul uses a single word to describe it: *charis*, which means "grace." To be a Christian is to receive grace. To be a Christian is also to be a conduit of that grace in the world. God's grace is freely given, abundantly and beyond measure. When we accept grace with open hearts, it spills into our lives, filling us up and up and up, until it overflows. We can direct that overflow of grace into the lives of other people by sharing God's abundance through every good work God calls us to. Or we can build a dam around our hearts and cut off the flow of grace altogether. Paul teaches that if the grace of Jesus truly resides in us, then it cannot stay there. It must be given away.

The Corinthians had committed to supporting the collection a year prior to Paul writing this letter (1 Cor 16:1-4). They displayed a lot of enthusiasm at the start (2 Cor 8:10). But a year later their enthusiasm had evaporated, and they had failed to fulfill their pledge. Paul was compelled to convince the Corinthians to reopen their hearts to the need of their Christian siblings in Jerusalem. He challenges them with two examples of radical giving. First, he compares their lack of generosity to the sacrificial giving of the churches in Macedonia (Thessalonica, Berea, and Philippi). Despite their poverty, these churches gave eagerly to the collection, according to their ability. They gave out of love for their Christian siblings in Jerusalem, who had previously shown them generosity by sharing the gospel with them. The Macedonian churches understood themselves as returning a blessing for a blessing.

Paul also reminds the Corinthians of the radical generosity of Jesus. Though he was born a king, invested with all the power and glory of heaven and earth, Jesus willingly gave up that splendor and humbled himself, living an impoverished life and dying like a criminal on a cross (Phil 2:5-11). Jesus became poor for our sakes, so we could become rich (v. 9) – not in material possessions, but in the things of God. Our generosity toward others must always be grounded in this bigger story of God's abundant grace toward us. We are wealthy in grace, in our possession of eternal life, and our status as God's adopted children. This is the wealth we are called to share with the world.

Paul's collection was a sign of unity among the people of God. Will there be one church for Jews and one for Gentiles? Or will the church be a place where truly "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal 3:28)? When the Gentile churches gave and the Jerusalem believers received, they each acknowledged that they belonged to the other in Christ. They gave *charis* and practiced *koinonia*.

Pentecost People nurture the grace of fellowship and connection. In a world where everyone seems to be watching out for themselves, isn't it a rare and joyful thing when people watch out for and take care of each other? The community that the early church created was attractive because the people took responsibility for one another. They were their brother or sister's keeper. They made an appealing witness to the world by radically supporting each other. A fellowship of believers shares more than common beliefs and core values. A fellowship of believers is a community of friends devoted to one another's spiritual and physical well-being.

Today after worship we will gather to accomplish our annual church business together. Later this week, Michael, Janet, John, and I will attend the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference with United Methodists from around our region. These are two important business meetings in the life of our congregation. John Wesley taught that "holy conferencing" is a means of grace – whether the holy conferencing we will do together as a church today or the holy conferencing some of us will do on your behalf this week. Doing the business of the church is often boring and sometimes messy. But it is one of the ways that we maintain our connection to and care for each other.

Connectionalism is an expression of our faith in a God who has called us to be one in Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to the whole world. We are one in the body of Christ. We share as one in the body of Christ. Whether we have more than enough or whether we find ourselves in need, there is hope and help in the body, hope and help when we open our hearts to each other. How we maintain *koinonia* – fellowship – with each other communicates to the world that we are people of *charis* – a people saved by and for the work of grace.

Amen.