

The Living Church - Acts 2:32-47

Last week, an influential church in the south announced their September sermon series.

“Over four weeks this September, [we] welcome four legendary guests from the world of professional wrestling - Ric Flair, The Undertaker, The Million Dollar Man, and Sting!” They promoted that month with a “let’s get ready to rumble” video and there’s no doubt that die-hard wrestling fans who grew up in the 80s will show up every week.

And I don’t say this to criticize people who like to watch the WWE. If you like watching fake wrestling, do so to the glory of God. But I say it because it is so easy for the church to lose our sense of where the power is in our ministry, and to lose our rudder that guides us. We don’t know where we’re supposed to be going or what we’re supposed to be devoted to.

And we try to spend at least one Sunday per year being reminded of where our focus is to be and renewing our emphasis on those things.

Next week will be starting about a 9 month study through Exodus, so I would encourage you to be reading ahead. But today we will be in Acts 2, where we have a picture from God of what the living church is to be like.

The setting is that just before our passage today, God had fulfilled a major promise. He had said that His Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, not just on the Jews, and that people from all around the world would have the Spirit of God and speak the words of God. So tongues of fire came and rested on them, they spoke in languages they had never learned, and communicated the good news of Jesus to people from all over the world. It showed God’s global purposes that people from all nations would know Christ, and that what God wants to get done in the world He wants to do through all of his people, not just an elite few, through all peoples, not just the jews.

And Peter thinks, "The one thing this gathering lacks is a sermon." And he gets up and preaches all about Jesus to the thousands gathered there. Halfway into his message is where we pick up - verse 32

32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. 33 Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. 34 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, 35 until I make your enemies your footstool." 36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

So Peter preaches Jesus - that He was the one who was promised who was crucified and resurrected, and is now seated at God's right hand while the Father works to make His enemies His footstool.

And the people perceive that they are those enemies. So here's what happens next:

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." 41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

So there's this fear among the people - they sense they are enemies of God, and ask how that can change. So Peter says "Repent." Turn.

And that day 3000 people convert and are baptized.

So look at the central focus of this church: it's Jesus.

The message of Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins is the power underneath the church. It's not their sweet music, it isn't their political stances, it isn't the way they figured out how to entertain everybody just right and bring in all the celebrity speakers, it isn't their amazing programs and perfectly air-conditioned building, it certainly isn't their careful political correctness. It isn't that they figured out a way to not offend anybody - their message was certainly offensive - "you crucified Jesus" is an outright accusation of murder. But it is spoken - and the power of the message of Christ penetrates hearts and people turn from their unbelief and trust Jesus.

Christ is the center. Christ is the power.

This is the big E on the eye-chart - Jesus crucified for our sins. The church exists to make much of Him, to declare Him, to teach about Him, to baptize his followers, to call people to repentance, and to invite the world to come know Him. That's the core.

Because in knowing Him our greatest problem is solved.

We were His enemies - those worthy of being trampled under his feet because of our sin. We faced His judgment - not just because we had broken His rules, but because we had totally rebelled against Him and his reign.

We aren't good people who need to be entertained into belief, but enemies. As CS Lewis wrote, ""Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms."

And then message is that we had rebelled against our king. And then the king showed up among us. And he came to begin the process of eliminating all of his enemies. And while he will, ultimately, eliminate all of His enemies under his feet, He came seeking to eliminate enemies by making them friends.

Those are the two ways of getting rid of an enemy - destroy them or befriend them. And Christ's death for our sin offered a forgiveness that

made us friends who are recipients of his promises and his gifts as opposed to enemies who will be eliminated with His wrath.

There's no greater problem people face than being an enemy of God, and no greater gift ever given than being made his friend. And because the Gospel message - the message of Christ's death and resurrection for sinners - is the power to make that change happen, any living church is focused on that Gospel message.

But it isn't a message that there is already universal forgiveness. His forgiveness must be received.

And when people asked what they should do, he said (verse 38), repent and be baptized.

Repentance and faith are different sides of the same coin. In repentance we are turning from something - sin and selfishness and self-rule. In faith we are turning toward something - someone - Jesus Christ. So conversion from an enemy to a friend happens when we turn to trust in Christ, which means we are turning from self-reliance for our rightness with God.

And Peter says be baptized. Not because baptism washes sins away, but because it is the initiation ceremony that Christians go through when they become Christians. It's like the wedding ceremony of the Christian life. You can get married without a ceremony, but a marriage typically is accompanied by a ceremony. Likewise, you can be a Christian without being baptized, but that's a strange thing - the baptism ceremony is the ceremony that publicly celebrates what God has done for you.

So they are focused on Christ, and they become part of what Jesus is doing when they repent.

And this is our desire as well - that we could proclaim the Gospel for all of life, again and again, and if God gives grace, that people would come to believe and be baptized. And because, as Luther said, all of life is repentance, we proclaim it again and again, week in and week out, so that Christians would come guilty and burdened, with faith that is weak, with relationships with one another freying, and hearing the Gospel we'd confess our sins, repent again, get right with each other, and grow.

Jesus and his work to convert enemies to friends is central to our church.

So in this Acts 2 church, Jesus has been proclaimed, and that day 3000 people come to faith, and are baptized, and are added to this church.

And that was God's work.

I can't imagine what a huge change it was. This day started with a smaller church of 120 people and now there are 3120.

What was once an intimate fellowship of people, most of whom had seen and interacted with Jesus, who all knew each other well, has now grown into a very large church overnight. Everything was now different - there was a new empowerment for mission, a new sense of awe and wonder, but also a new Christian community that was no longer small and intimate, but large and in many ways chaotic.

And this is major relational upheaval for people. We've certainly never seen anything like Pentecost here or any revival that compares to that. But it has felt like major changes very quickly because our church has grown from 0 to about 1300 people in 9 years, with about 1500 calling Grace Road home now.

And this is a major change for people who've been here since the beginning. They say that you can switch denominations, and as long as your church is the same size, the church experience is very similar. A baptist church of 150 people that is bible based is culturally often pretty similar to a presbyterian church of 150 that is bible based.

But if you go from a Baptist church of 150 to a Baptist church of 1,000, even though the teaching is identical, the culture of the church is much different. It's a different experience all together. Size determines how a church operates, how decisions are made, how relationships are formed, what the experience is like for a new believer or a new member. And a large church is a very different body than a small church.

And I admire many of the people at Grace Road who have been along on this ride, and have seen their church change so much, but have embraced each

new season and put their heart for the mission above their desire to keep things the same. The growth has brought difficulties, but it has been the work of God to draw people to Himself.

And we have to learn from this that we shouldn't be suspicious of a church because of its size. It's so easy to throw stones at churches of other sizes: all the big ones have sold out and gone corporate. All the little ones are dead and not reaching anybody. But each gospel-centered church is formed by God - the church of 120 was God's church in Jerusalem, and the Church of 3000 was as well. Each size has unique strengths and weaknesses.

When we were small, it was easy to build relationships and community completely unintentionally. 50 people showed up in the basement at the Dietrich's house, and we were all close without trying, and everybody who showed up was noticed.

Now, people can slip in and out unnoticed. There can be a large number of people who are here on Sundays but not connected on to smaller church life.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book TIPPING POINT lays out the rule of 150, which states that the maximum number of individuals in a society or group that someone can have deep friendships with is 150.

You can't have more than 150 people you know well. Facebook may call them a friend, but You can have about 150 relationships that are close, but then everybody else moves into an outer circle. So it is impossible to know everybody you go to church with now.

So they had to adjust, they had to embrace what the Spirit of God was doing in that season.

And they became, in the midst of the chaos, a church filled with the life of God's Spirit. Not a perfect church - in just a few chapters you see how hypocrisy and phoniness and deception and sin were all growing there -as they do in any church. They had greed, and hero worship, and false teaching, and leadership teams that were formed and broken up and reformed, controversies, disputes, arguments over resources. They were still a very human church.

And often when people say “I wish we could be like the early church,” they are actually comparing their church to a eutopia in their heads that never existed anywhere, not the real early church. Because it wasn’t eutopia.

So we don’t want to be all that they were. But we do want to share their core commitments.

So once they had come to know Christ, once they repented, what did that lead to?

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe⁴ came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching

The apostles, remember, were the guys who were with Jesus in person - they learned from him directly, they were witnesses of the miracles, and were commissioned by Jesus to carry his teaching to the world. They did that in person, and in their inspired writings which are now called the new testament.

And a core element, the first one mentioned, about this early church is that they were devoted to the teaching of the apostles.

Teaching was a core element of the church. They cared about physical needs - in a few chapters you see they were feeding widows and providing all kinds of care. But in doing so they made sure that work didn’t infringe upon their ministry of the word.

And while we don't have the apostles with us today, we have their teaching in the Bible to be devoted to. And for a church to remain strong, we have to remain devoted to the teaching of the Bible. It's not the only thing we do, but it is at the core.

And being devoted to the apostles teaching means not only that we read and teach it a lot, but that we work continually to conform our lives to it - it shapes us. We are devoted to the teaching. We're not just devoted to teaching and preaching as an exercise, but to what is taught - allowing our lives to be changed by it.

This is a primary piece, and the primary need. The greatest need of everyone in our region is for Jesus, who is present in His word, who speaks through his word.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship,

Fellowship is when you are in it together with others.

And this is an important balance. A healthy church is one where you hear from God and hear from his word. But also you have real friends and relationships.

Where you get a sense that not only do you need to hear from Jesus and strive to live for Him, you need to connect with others. You need to have your life knit together with the lives of others.

And remember, this was happening in the midst of a church of 3000+. He's not describing what they had when the church was 120 before they blew up. This is after.

So that's important for us. It is true that at Grace Road, you can't be friends with everybody. It is too big. But everybody needs to be diligent about building relationships somewhere.

And while it's true that when it's big you can't know everyone, it's clearly not true that when it's big you can't have those friendships that are every bit as deep and helpful. We all just have to be cool with not being Jesus who

knows everyone. And losing the control freak inside that needs to be part of everything that's going on at church.

And we'll see in a second how devoted this church was to sharing all that they had with one another. They did that with finances, but we need to remember to do that with all we have, including fellowship.

If you've been here a couple of years, you don't need more church friends. But the new people do. So please redouble your efforts at fighting clickishness, work to meet new people here, and welcome them into the fellowship.

And being devoted to the fellowship means that these people become a big part of your life. Again, not all of them, but a pocket of people here should become very close friends. People that you're open and honest with, unguarded around, challenged by. People that occupy such an important spot in your life that you change the rest of life around them.

Church for this early church was not just a Sunday gathering that they planned around, though it included that Sunday gathering as a high priority. It was a community they were part of.

Over and over this says they were "together." They didn't live together - they didn't practice widespread communal living. They had distinct homes. But they did practice close living. They were in each others' lives, they were friends, they were committed to practical expressions of their faith in Jesus.

It's clear here that not only is God saving individuals and forgiving their sins, but he is making them part of a new community.

And he does this for us. It doesn't mean we spend every waking hour together, it means that our lives are tied together in meaningful ways.

There are lots of ways we do this, and our biggest concern is not that everybody jumps into our program, but that everybody is so impacted by the gospel and connected to community that there's real consistent sharing of lives happening. There's a sense of connectedness to each other, responsibility to each other.

And this is why we do have Grace Groups & Grow groups- so this can be lived out.

It's also why we practice church membership - to make a commitment to long-term growth and ministry together.

Church hopping is fine when you've moved to an area, you're looking around a little. But if you plant a tree in the yard and dig it up and replant it every year it won't grow deep roots. So committing in a place is very helpful.

Now I know many of you are official members here. And this year we are working to do a much better job of keeping track of our members, of making sure they're connected, and communicating with members about important developments at church. We'll be sending regular email updates and doing more pro-active checking in with members.

We have been very good at responding: nobody who asks to meet with a pastor, for example, can't meet with one.

But we haven't been as good at actively checking on and caring for members when they don't express needs and communicating with members.

So this month we are asking all of our members to do us a favor and fill out the members covenant again - we have paper ones here and an online version up hopefully this week.

And we are asking you to thoughtfully read this covenant that you've signed before, and fill it out again and leave it in the offering box. And we will update our membership roles, communicate with people who don't fill one out, and begin much better communication and care.

Again, this is only if you're already a member: you've taken the membership class, filled this out, and been accepted as a member. If you'd like to become one, still come to the class.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread

People wonder whether this is the Lord's Supper or just eating together. Verse 46 mentions eating together separately, it would be strange to mention the same thing twice.

But they regularly observed the Lord's supper - which was given to us by Jesus to keep the church focused on Jesus. It's meant to engage the senses and the whole person in this reminder of who Jesus is and what he did.

He has given us not only his spoken word to give Jesus to us, but confirmed that word and made that word visible through the Lord's Supper.

We are weak and struggling, and we want to see something, touch something, experience something, and God gave us some bread and wine as visible signs and seals of his grace.

These elements of the Lord's Supper physically display what the bible teaches. In the Gospel of Jesus God promises us forgiveness for our sins, everlasting life, pardon from all that we've done. He tells us that He was our substitute when he died on the cross to pay the price for us. And then he demonstrates it and confirms it with the Lord's supper- "the word made visible."

This simple observance is a place where He has given something for our eyes to see something to build our faith. It's not anything spectacular. We live in a season in the history of church life that teaches us that Jesus only shows up in the big - the big moments, the big victories, the big commitments, the big media displays, the big sounds, the big hype, the big emotions. And we spend all kinds of effort and money manufacturing experiences to allow us to touch and feel and see what we think is the presence of God.

But the good news of the Gospel is that we couldn't make God's presence happen. We couldn't get to him through efforts. We couldn't ascend to heaven to bring him down, so He came to us in Christ, gave His life, and drew near to us.

And He comes not in the hype, but the still small voice of scripture. Not in the storm or the smoke and mirrors, but Jesus and all of his benefits are preached to us in the bread and wine.

Nothing is more ordinary than bread and wine. But it's there that God makes his word visible to us. This is where he reminds us and assures us of Christ's sacrifice for us.

The Heidelberg Catechism says:

As surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.

As surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.

The preaching of God's word, and the regular observance of the Lord's Supper, or communion, may be the most important rhythms in our lives when it comes to our growth as Christians. We have all kinds of good things we do in response to God, and we have even made up some good ways to process our thoughts about Christ, like journaling and prayer walking.

But when Jesus got his disciples together on the night He was betrayed, he didn't say, "Guys, bust out your journals, time to get close to me." In the most intimate of all of his times with the disciples, when He drew closest to them, He dressed like a slave and washed their feet to serve them and he broke the bread and said this is my body.

It seems too simple, not effective. It doesn't create the buzz that getting wrestling superstars to come speak does. But it's there that the most powerful things happen.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

They prayed.

Each week when we gather we try to pray for God to work among us, to teach us, to change us, we pray together to confess our sins and failures and to be strengthened in the Gospel.

But we know there are many personal needs that should be prayed for together - groups.

Acts 2: 42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

"Awe" here is the Greek word "phobos", where we get our word "phobia." It could be translated fear.

This is not a characteristic we'd normally associate with church life today. We think fear was for the Old Testament - God was pretty grump back then, and now he's all calmed down so we have nothing to fear.

But these people, after the cross, in the new testament, experienced fear as a natural response to God. It seems that they had a real sense that God was among them, and they acted like He was.

You know how you might be willing to say something about someone as long as they're not in the room? Then they walk in and it changes what you would say? That's fear of them. You fear how they would react to you.

And fear of God is similar. It is to have a different disposition and different behavior because He is present. And how he will react if we sin or oppose him should be a concern. Because He is still a Holy God, who hates evil, who disciplines his children. And fear of the Lord means we act like all of that is true, and He is here and watching.

This doesn't change the fact that He's a personal God that we approach as a Father. He's a Father who will always love and never disown us. But He's also a loving Father that will discipline, and even oppose our purposes when we're proud or against Him.

So as they saw the apostles doing miracles, which confirmed their authority and the authority of what they were teaching, a healthy fear spread. God was among them, and they acted accordingly.

And because of this sense that the teaching of the apostles was true, that Jesus had risen, which must mean that He cares and is generous. And here's how they responded:

44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

They gave. They so recognized that Jesus was their treasure, that they held to their material possessions lightly. It was like all they had belonged to each other.

God had made this promise in Deuteronomy 15:4 about His people, **“But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess”**

And here they were making sure nobody was destitute.

They sold stuff, brought it to meet needs of individuals and they gave generally as well, laying gifts at the apostles feet.

Giving is an important part of our worship.

It's part of the life-rhythm of a Christian: God gives to us, and we give back what He has given us.

In addition, they opened their homes and tables to each other:

46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,

They had homes that were open to each other. And this is a model for us, too. That we open our homes and tables to each other. If God gives us a home, its for our immediate family and also for our church family.

Our homes are all ministry centers that exist for community and hospitality.

They also had glad and generous hearts.

They did these things and lived this way not because of duty, but out of gladness.

There was fear of the Lord, but also real joy.

47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

God gave them a season when people liked them. This changed soon as persecution breaks out, but God gave them a season with a good reputation. Some of what God does he does sometimes: especially giving gifts. So the miraculous gifts, the favor with the people - they were good gifts from God, but things we can't make happen - He does them as he will.

And in their church, another great gift was that God saved people every day.

Real converts to Christianity were being made. God was growing his church through his people on a mission.

In fact, a big part of what made their community so authentic and tight in the midst of a big and rapidly changing church was that they were all on the same mission.

What gave that early church community such a sense of passion and wonder was that they were being empowered by God to engage in an impossible mission: to tell the world about Jesus. 120 people - no facebook, no tv, no twitter, no printing press - and Jesus comes to them and commissions them to blanket the globe with the Gospel. That is a huge, impossible task.

And because they had a sense of sent-ness, a sense of calling, and a sense of mission, they were able to have community.

If we aim just for community, we may get it for awhile, but it will quickly become sick and inbred and infighting will inevitably develop.

If we aim for mission, we'll get mission and community.

We must have a sense that we have something to advance, not something to preserve.

And we expend our efforts adding people to God's family, adding groups so they can connect in fellowship, adding churches to the community - these are the core things we work to add to the community around us.

And here's what happened in Jerusalem. It was a city of about 200,000 people (though there are lots of estimates of its size - from 80,000 to 1 million). But the church grew to maybe 15 or 20,000 people. They were still the minority.

But because of them, everywhere you went people were talking about Jesus and you can't talk about Jerusalem in AD 33 without talking about Jesus and his followers. The resurrected Jesus was the biggest name in their city in their day.

And that's the goal: that His name would be great in our region.

That we would be devoted to Christ and his word and prayer and generosity and gladness and mission, and as a result, Jesus would be made glorious here.

<Lord's Supper>

The Living Church
Acts 2:32-47

- I. The Living Church is:
 - A. Centered on Christ (Acts 2:32-36)
 - B. Made Up of Repentant People (Acts 2:37-41)

- II. The Living Church is Devoted to:
 - A. The Scriptures (Acts 2:42)
 - B. The Fellowship (Acts 2:42)
 - C. The Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42)
 - D. Prayer (Acts 2:42)

- III. The Living Church is Characterized by:
 - A. Awe (Acts 2:43)
 - B. Generosity and Shared Lives (Acts 2:44-46)

C. Gladness (Acts 2:44-46)

D. Addition (Acts 2:47)

For Discussion in Small Groups:

- 1) Is it possible to be a healthy Christian without devotion to the local church?
- 2) What makes a gathering of Christians a church?
- 3) Why is addition of new people difficult? Why is it desirable?
- 4) How do we often treat church as a consumer product?