



From the Pulpit: October 3, 2021

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time / World Communion Sunday

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Acts 2:42–47

The (Re)Birth of the Church, IV: Education

Bill Katie and I are in the middle of a new sermon series, using the book of acts as a blueprint for the birth of the early church and the (re)birth with the *re* in parentheses of the church as we emerge from the pandemic. In Acts we find what Bill calls, “the fundamentals” of worship, community, fellowship, outreach, and today, education in Acts 2:42–47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 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. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

“The idea for this multi-age ‘Prayer and Painting’ Lenten event came out of the five year strategic plan for Children and Family Ministry.”

I’ve been comparing notes with fellow parents of college aged kids and the consensus is that students are happy that campuses are filled with people again—despite the resulting parking hassles. My own daughter sent me pictures of the laser cutter in her architecture studio, a space that just reopened. Her professors made a valiant online teaching effort but making mod-

els out of toothpicks and pouring concrete molds in the front yard of your sorority house are poor substitutes for hands-on learning possible in well-equipped studios and labs.

Our common understanding that education is an experiential process is an idea that grew in part, from this local community. Carleton Washburne, the superintendent for whom the Winnetka school is named, called his hands-on philosophy of education “living.”¹ Washburne was a product of John

Dewey through Francis Parker, together they created an education movement counter to the lockstep, one size fits all, rote instruction of the early 1900s, not too long after this church was founded and developing its Christian education program. In the church history book you will find several of the innovative curricula that were employed to create a school of love, grace, and hope—a school that seeks to form disciples of Jesus Christ who not only know things about God and the Bible, but who practice living in the way of Jesus every day.

¹ <https://www.winnetkahistory.org/gazette/how-progressive-education-came-to-winnetka/>

The last in-person event I attended in this church before the pandemic shut down was a Prayer and Painting event, led by Mignon DuPepe and attended by more than a dozen people aged three and up on March 10, 2020. Just like in Acts, we shared a simple supper, we prayed—with paint. We enjoyed each other's fellowship. If memory serves, it was a meaningful time for all. The idea for this multi-age Lenten event came out of the five year strategic plan for Children and Family Ministry.

The strategic plan is grounded in research about the importance of having adult mentors in nurturing the next generation of young Christians and seeks to add intergenerational, faith forming opportunities to the robust education offerings of this church.

The Sunday school model for nurturing disciples has been a topic of debate for several decades but came to a head in 2016 when several articles and books declared "Sunday school is killing the Church."

Sunday school is just a piece of the Christian Education program here at Kenilworth Union, but an important piece with a rich history. Before the pandemic the strategic plan was working! We had seen a notable increase in children, youth, and family ministry involvement, not just attendance and new families, but an increase in engagement measured by frequency attendance. There was buzz, momentum, and a desire to create what church leaders called a culture of "24/7 faith" using a spirit of "innovation grounded in tradition." Before the pandemic we shocked consultants with our attendance averages; a church with our worship attendance would usually expect 45 children in a given week. We were doubling that and more. Youth Ministry attendance patterns were also multiples of what consultants told us to expect.

And then, just two days after the prayer and painting event, everything shut down. Children and Family Ministry did not host another in-person event for 177 days. Along with my colleagues, I wondered about the future of Christian education.

In Acts:2, in addition to praising and worshiping God in the Temple, we find four cornerstones of Christian formation: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. Just one of them—teaching, is what many would consider "education" in a traditional sense. But a growing volume of research proposes that all four are experiential practices which form people into faithful Christians who not only know God with their minds but love God with their hearts and souls.

A few of you noticed I am wearing a red stole for Pentecost even though the liturgical color is green. This is for two reasons: the first is that I received this stole on Friday evening at my ordination where United Methodists wear red as a symbol of the Holy Spirit's gift to the church. The second reason I am wearing red is somewhat coincidental, today's verses from Acts:2 follow the coming of the Holy Spirit, like tongues of fire on Pentecost, when 3,000 people were baptized.

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Does it matter that we teach the liturgical colors in Sunday school? Does knowing the colors make us more faithful? Perhaps not, but actively participating in the seasons of the church year does.

Through the church year we participate in the life of Christ, moving from yearning for a savior in Advent, through the life and teachings of Jesus, into the intentionality of Lenten practice, then the sorrow of Holy Week, to the joy and hope of Easter. When our calendar rhythms are formed to the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are transformed, just as the people of Acts were transformed through their faith practices by the power of the Holy Spirit into a new community that evoked awe and wonder.

Perhaps the transformative power of the everyday faith practices of the Acts community should come with a warning label: likely to cause surprising change. Those of you who have children or grandchildren who go on mission trips or confirmation trips with Silvi Pirn know that those weeks aren't about classroom learning or a service project, they are the practice of living in community. I'm paraphrasing Silvi here, "What we are doing is stripping ourselves from what is familiar and worldly and submitting ourselves to God for the week. Through this practice of community, by the power of the Spirit, youth learn to trust in God, to serve humbly, and live in unity with Christians in other places." With suitcases full of sweaty laundry, youth come home, transformed.

The same thing happens in adult Bible study. This week's Exodus study led to a rich discussion on the difference between God's socio-economic system and pharaoh's, a comparison that put our beliefs and actions in conversation with the realities of the economically vulnerable in our world today.

In Acts the daily practices of the community result in transformation, a new relationship with their materials goods. They "had all things in common, they would sell their possessions and goods, and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need." Pay attention here, communal sharing doesn't seem to be the requirement to be in the community, but rather the surprising change that results from daily faith practices. Awe and wonder indeed.

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So what is the future of Christian education in this church after 18 months of disruption? I'm happy to report that statistically we are still defying the predictions of the consultants. And I would like to suggest three lessons from today's reading in Acts that might guide us in this time of (re)birth. Three lessons that lead us forward to innovative faith formation ministries, grounded in the rich traditions of this church, and consistent with the most recent research findings:

1) First, faith formation is part of our daily life, 24/7, not for Sundays only. The community in Acts is a model for experiential growth and learning through daily practices prayer, studying scripture, giving thanks, and living in community with one another. Our email devotionals, the kuc.org, and youth ministries websites as well as the children's ministry app, CONNECT, are filled with ways to practice faith.

2) Second, being formed as a follower of Jesus Christ is a lifelong process. Children and youth ministry are just the beginning of a continual process of growing in grace and knowledge. I encourage you to mark your calendars for the upcoming Adult Education and Racial Justice events—there's one tomorrow night!

3) Lastly, Christian Education is multi-generational. Not only do adults who pray, worship, study the Bible, and care for one another serve as models and mentors for young people, our young people have ideas and insights that enrich our lives. Let's explore together how we supplement our current age-leveled programs with multi-generational opportunities for worshipping, serving our neighbors, and learning together. Let's look back to our 2020 prayer and painting event, and forward to the upcoming Tulsa mission trip, and imagine what might be Spirit led and Spirit filled multi-age opportunities in this emerging era.

Let's rediscover and recommit to foundational, educational, faith practices bound to lead us toward the kind of surprising transformation possible by the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

—The Great Prayer— **By The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

We come before you Triune God, in gratitude to glorify you and in humility to plead for your help in our trials.

Creator God, we thank you for the brisk breezes of autumn and the hints of gold and amber and rust creeping into the canopy above the village lanes, for sun above a crystal lake, for prairie and marsh, farm and forest, marigold and maple. The extravagance of your creation dwarfs our reasonable need or expectation.

Son of God, rabbi, teacher, friend, exemplar of mortal behavior, and victor over death—we have been taught your lessons. We can recite them. We take delight in them. Yet when the workweek arrives, we fail to ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" and then act accordingly. We pray for new focus in applying those old, old lessons.

Holy Spirit, comforter, advocate—you applaud us in our success and soothe us in our sadness. The affirming nod, the uplifting smile, the gentle pat on the back is evidence of your continuing presence in our lives.

Kind and Generous God, so many of our neighbors around the world are in need and danger. We pray for those who are rent- or food-insecure, for the homeless and the hungry.

We pray for those who struggle for breath because of this virus, for those stricken with grief after losing long loves to illness.

Loving God, gather Ned's family and friends into your safekeeping at this time of loss and sorrow—his spectacular children, his caring parents and siblings, Erin's family, his loyal, loving almost lifelong partner. We thank you for the gift of his life—for his scholarship, his intellect, his gifts for pedagogy, kindness, friendship, and those sprawling networks of colleagues, co-conspirators, students, and clients. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, in the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and reunion, one day, with all those he left behind.

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine, that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, eternal God, now and forever. Amen.