

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Year A

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

The rate of growth in the church as recorded in Acts would make any congregation giddy. From approximately 120 on the day of Pentecost, to over 3000 as the result of a single sermon, to the statement that day by day members were added to their number is the sign of incredible growth. What was the cause of it?

As churches try to emulate the early church in an effort to grow, they look at this passage from Acts to guide their work. They look at the verse “All who believe were together and had all things in common” as a model. Perhaps if they formed a commune or a monastic community, they would grow. There are many examples where this was tried. But, is this the model for growth, or is it an outcome of what was happening in the early church?

Having all things in common, people selling their possessions to support each other, is a model that did not even last to the end of the Book of Acts. It was an economic system which could not be sustained. Even the act of selling property for the benefit of the church did not last. This generosity was important for the church, but it was a manifestation of what was happening, not the cause.

Others look at the verse where it states that the members spent much time in the temple, broke bread together at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts. Perhaps it is this fellowship and worship that is key to the growth of the early church. Or again, is this only the outcome of what they were doing?

There are four actions that the writer states as characteristic of the early church: “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. These were the fundamental practices of the first century church. What do they mean?”

Throughout the Book of Acts and in the letters, we see the disciples teaching the members of the church about what they had witnessed and experienced during the ministry of Jesus. But most importantly to them, they testified to the resurrection of Jesus on the third day. They also explained their experience on the day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The apostles taught that baptism was the entry point into the Christian family and that the Eucharist was the remembrance of the passion and death of Jesus.

As we have already noted, the early church spent much time together in fellowship – eating and enjoying the comradery that came from having a common goal in the worship they experienced. They were encouraged to worship together, as scripture admonished them to “forsake not the assembling together.” Being with each other for mutual support became even more vital when the persecutions came.

The breaking of bread signifies the Eucharist. When they ate at home, they broke bread, but this phrase is their way of expressing the remembrance of the Lord's Supper. Eucharist became the central form of worship, even as it is today for us.

We might wonder why it says, "the prayers." Although we do not have a record of their services, there seems to have been a few prayers that were universal in their worship. Not only did they pray when together, but the use of the plural form tells us that these prayers were learned as part of becoming members of the community. The Lord's Prayer and the Psalms were probably included in this list. They were not casual in their prayer life, but devoted themselves to this practice.

These four practices formed the basis of identifying the members of the early church. They were the characteristics beyond the confession of Jesus as Lord that identified the church as the Body of Christ.

How might we take these practices and use them as the foundation of our community? We already spend much effort in the study of the apostles' teaching. Beyond hearing scripture readings during the service, our class is focused on these teachings as we study the books of the Bible in depth. Fellowship is a hallmark of this congregation. We like to get together for meals – brunches and Wednesday evening being the most visible. Each week, we celebrate the Eucharist, remembering the passion and death of Jesus as we share His Body and Blood in the bread and wine. We also are faithful in the prayers – again not just on Sunday mornings but many say the daily offices and other prayers regularly throughout the week.

All of these efforts are following the example of the first century church. I believe we do these practices as an integral part of our experience of worship. Why, then, don't we see the growth that the early church experienced? We need to remember that our job is to plant the seed. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to cause the increase. There were many ups and downs in the history of the church and there was never a time that it was all easy sailing. Even Jesus had many fall away from following Him.

As we continue to faithfully devote ourselves to these practices, people notice our efforts and the Holy Spirit honors our work. Growth may take years; we only need to continue to do our part.