



90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Associate Minister: Amy Hollis
Choral Director: Mindy Shilansky
Accompanist: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

Acts 2: 42-47

Getting It Right

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I think I know the reason that the author of Acts included in his narrative this story about the practices of the early church in Jerusalem: he wanted to make sure his readers got it right. By that I mean, getting it right as to how communities of Jesus' followers were to be and live their collective lives. Not in all the details, of course. Luke didn't have a blueprint for churches – or church growth – but he did have a conviction of what was primary, of those practices that were foundational for followers of Jesus, and what might emerge from a community who actually kept them at the heart of their life together.

It's actually quite simple: "They devoted themselves," Acts says, "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Who could object to that? We need to teach our Christian faith, nurture fellowship, emphasize holy communion and be devoted to both private and public prayer, and that we do. No problem, right? Right, but sometimes, I think we get things turned around in the church.

For instance: I don't know if this has always been the case, but it seems to me that people love the spectacular, the big, flashy events. I remember as a kid going to circus and being in awe of those "magnificent young men [and women] on the flying trapeze," and the tightrope walkers so high in the air, balanced, if you will, "on the edge of a knife." I'm probably not alone when I say that it's the big stuff – whether triumphs or tragedies – that cause our mouths to drop and hearts to race: a spectacular race car crash, the Grand Canyon, a 500 foot non-steroid induced homerun. In the realm of the Spirit, too, we're enthralled with the spectacular: the Red Sea parted; the sun standing still; walking on water; raising someone from the dead; Saint Teresa levitating in a mystical trance; Francis communicating with birds and animals; visions; Divine "interventions."

Signs and wonders, are what they're often called by us religious folks, those events, happenings or seeming coincidences that we rarely experience, or they are happenings which we are almost always unawares and attribute to the hand of God (as opposed to what we call "natural," which, I want to claim is a duality that we ought to rid ourselves of – natural versus supernatural, spiritual versus material; sacred versus secular – but that's for another time.) They take us back, startle us, sometimes even frighten us, and usually, they affirm our faith.

So when we read of this congregation in Jerusalem being in “awe of the many signs and wonders” happening in their midst, that’s what most people want. And signs and wonders do, indeed, happen. We read about them throughout the book of Acts: healings and more people coming into the church, the amazing spread of the gospel throughout the Roman empire in the face of severe adversity and the inclusion of people the early church never dreamed would be part of their community, earthquakes setting free prisoners and shipwrecks that set down some of the human cargo in lands destined to hear the good news of God. . . . Signs and wonders.

Signs and wonders still happen in the church, you know. Twelve people from our church are with dozens of others from West Hartford congregations building homes with those still devastated by hurricanes in the Gulf Coast. A sign and wonder.

In an age when many of the growing churches of our culture preach a prosperity gospel or tip-toe on the surface things of the Spirit, this congregation yearns for the riches of depth, and to be brave by living in the gray areas of life, while holding fast to the One who is with us on our pilgrimage of life and faith. A sign and wonder.

I visited someone in our congregation recently and we had a long and deep conversation. We talked about declining health, death and what comes next. And we talked about her family – children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren – and how, though all live out of town, she receives 2 or 3 calls a day, pictures of the great-grandchildren, small packages of love, all symbols of the amazing love they share. And I said to her, “You know, the love you experience with your family, is a sign of the love of God, and this isn’t going to end when we breathe our last; this embrace of love lasts forever.” I was in awe. A sign and wonder.

150 years of ministry – from this congregation, from us, from those who have gone before us – a sign and wonder.

Wonderful, isn’t it? I think so, and there’s so much more. But let me ask you something: from where do all these things come? As rich and exciting are the signs and wonders, they aren’t the starting point of community; “devoting [ourselves] to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers,” is.

How are we doing on that score? How are you? How are you investing yourself in the life of this community in education, nurturing fellowship, regular worship, prayer?

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As a friend of mine would say, “all that’s cool.” And it’s pretty easy to deal with, isn’t it? What causes us to get all squeamish, however, or maybe even a little upset, is another characteristic of this community we find in Acts: “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.” Uh-O: now we’re on shaky ground. We’re not so afraid of communism anymore since the fall of the Berlin Wall, so we needn’t be fearful of labeling the early church as a bunch of commies. But it’s still a problem for some good, old capitalist Christians, some of whom have turned the right to own private property into a biblical mandate. The problem is this: the early Christian community in Jerusalem shared, radically. They shared everything.

And the community grew as a result. Not forever. The realities of empire and religious institutions saw to that. But this radical sharing caused them to grow in a way that we really shouldn't ignore. And that, if we take scripture seriously, makes us American Christians, a little nervous.

Of course, there are hundreds of years of biblical interpretation that has spiritualized the whole thing away to cram whatever point Luke is trying to make into our view of things. But the story says something else, and to make the point, the author tells another story, that of Annaias and Sapphira. These two were part of the community of believers and they, like everybody else, were to sell everything and give the proceeds of the sales to the whole community. But they don't; they hold back the profits from the sale of some land. Do you remember what happened when they lied about what they'd done? When the lie is revealed, they drop dead on the spot (see Acts 5). Now, whether this really happened, isn't the point – mine, or, I believe, the author of Acts. The point is that the early Christian community in Jerusalem shared everything; the church was their family – literally – and they recognized that everything - everything! – belongs to God, not to us.

Did you know that Americans spend \$20 billion each year on ice cream? According to the United Nations, over the next 10 years, it would take only \$7 billion to provide clean water and basic sanitation for the entire world, and another \$4 billion to finance basic health care for the same period that would prevent the death of 3 million infants each year (Source: The Christian Century quoting "Theology, News and Notes," Fall, 2007).

What would happen if the church in this country – us! – actually shared everything. 3 million infants each year would live if we gave up 1/2 of our ice cream. What a sign! What a wonder! If we were aware of how we live and how our lives impact everyone and every other living being, can you imagine the signs and wonders that would just explode through us?

If you're not up to a Ben and Jerry's fast, what is it that you will share in this community?

But do you know something? Just like the "signs and wonders," holding "all things in common" and "selling their possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to all," isn't the starting point of community; it's the outcome of this: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers." We don't start with radical sharing. The failure of the communal movement in this country came about because the ultimate goal, the starting point, was radical egalitarianism. The early church in Jerusalem understood that radical sharing emerges out of and is what happens when we pray together, uphold each other, worship regularly together and learn together.

In his book, Velvet Elvis, Rob Bell writes:

"One of the most tragic things ever to happen to the gospel was the emergence of the message that Jesus takes us somewhere else if

we believe in him. The Bible ends with God coming here. God, in the midst of all the people who can imagine nothing better, celebrating the life that we all share. The images Jesus used were of banquets and feasts and celebrations. What do we do at parties such as these? We eat and talk and dance and enjoy each other and above all else, we take our time. What does Jesus do almost as much as he teaches and heals? He eats long meals. As Christians, it is our duty to master the art of the long meal.”

Can you imagine sharing with each other like that? And can you imagine the impact the church would have on youth if there were places where they could know that the insanity of our society is not how it has to be, that there are communities where they could share long meals with people who love and care for them? What a sign! What a wonder!

If you're not there yet - if we're not there yet! - that's OK. Let's keep practicing our faith together, eating long meals, because do you know something? It only takes a spark to get a fire going and soon the sharing deepens and the signs and wonders fill the whole world with the goodness of God.

Amen.