

## Why the church?

Acts 2:42-47

May 7, 2017

Lansdowne UMC

How is it that the church exists? I'm not asking what we exist to do. I'm simply asking, how is it possible that the church of Jesus Christ exists at all? Have you ever stopped to consider how unlikely it is? Before Pentecost, which we're going to celebrate on June 4, the church was about 120 people according to Acts 1. On the day of Pentecost, 3000 people were added to their numbers after Peter preached his first sermon. Now, a group of over 3000 is a pretty good start, but there were still plenty of forces that could have stopped Christianity from spreading.

The first 300 years of the church were anything but smooth sailing. Sure, there were the relatively easy seasons in the church. At such times, Christians were merely accused of promoting cannibalism. They were merely cheated in business and in the public square. When the times weren't so sunny, there was open persecution. Christians would be commanded to curse Jesus and worship the Roman Emperor. If they didn't, they would likely face brutal execution. We have many incredible stories of Christians who chose option number 2 rather than curse the one who saved them and grieve the Holy Spirit who filled them. Woah.

There was a time in the not too distant past where it was just easier to check the "Christian" box on a religious survey than it was to do anything else. Those days certainly never existed in the early church,

and I seriously doubt that they exist in America anymore outside of the Bible belt. In fact, in some company, saying that you're a Christian stops conversation.

And yet today, it is estimated that there are 2.2 billion people who profess to be Christian. And despite the decline of the church in North America and Europe, the church is growing virtually everywhere else.

So back to that original question. How is it that the church exists? What was it about the church that made it possible that, as it says in Acts 2, "The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved."

Was it their wonderful church buildings? Well, that can't be at the core of it, because for the first 300 years of the church, there were no church buildings. There were only people's houses that they gathered in. Of course we're thankful for well-maintained church buildings like this one, that allow us a lot of flexibility with our ministry activities, but church buildings do not explain why people have historically been attracted to church.

Well, maybe it was how odd they were. This is worth a lot of thought, actually. In Acts 2, we get a whole lot of insight into just how different from the rest of the world the church was. It says in verse 42 says that "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

It says they *devoted themselves* to the apostles teaching. **The early church was a learning church.** They understood the importance of hearing the teaching of Jesus, as well as the apostle's interpretation of all

the things that had happened since God raised Jesus from the dead. It wasn't just the leaders who devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. It was everyone. That was part of what it meant to be part of the church.

Do you know that we actually have the teaching of the apostles? We call it the New Testament. The New Testament is nothing more and nothing less than the teaching of the apostles handed down to us in written form. Thank you so much, early church!

So what would it look like for us to *devote* ourselves to the apostles' teaching-- to give ourselves over to it? First things first: we spend time regularly getting to know it. We read it alone. We read it as families. We read it together in worship. We study it together in Sunday School and at other times. And when we do that we find ourselves needing to read the Old Testament, because, well, Jesus talks about it like it matters a whole lot. And the apostles are constantly referring to it and interpreting it in light of the crucifixion and resurrection. We see this in the 1 Peter passage we read today. A little phrase like "By his wounds you were healed," shows us that that passage from Isaiah 53 that had been so cryptic was really talking about Jesus. We read "you have returned to shepherd," and we think about Psalm 23, "the Lord is my shepherd." And then as we reread that Psalm, we think about it in light of Jesus, who calls himself the good shepherd according to the testimony of the Apostle John.

I really want to say a lot more about this, because I think it's absolutely crucial that we know the scriptures. But for the sake of time, I want to invite you to read the article that I recently wrote for our church email

newsletter. I encourage you to subscribe to the newsletter on our church web site and read the article on our blog.

Secondly, it was that they *devoted themselves* to *koinonia* (in the Greek). Koinonia is a hard word to translate, but it's a depth of friendship that cuts across age, ethnicity, background, and culture. It's a level of friendship that comes only through a deep shared experience of the presence, love, and power of God. Koinonia is usually translated "fellowship," but unfortunately, I think that word gets tossed around too much. I used to think fellowship was whatever you did in a fellowship hall. But it's so much more than that.

Fellowship is a bond that is even stronger than family. And so it became second nature for early Christians to radically love one another. It says that "All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them." This wasn't something that they forced each other to do. It's like this: if one of your immediate family members fell on hard times, wouldn't you say, "I'll help you"? Wouldn't you say, "you can come live in my house"? Or "You know, I don't really need that extra piece of land that my parents left me. Let me sell it so that I can help you"

The Old Testament teaches caring for the poor. In Deuteronomy 26, it teaches a regular giving a tenth of all produce to the priests, the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows. And if the Old Testament teaches giving like this to relative strangers, then how much more should Spirit filled Christians give sacrificially for one another. I'm hardly even

preaching right now, I'm just saying the way it was. **The early church was a loving family.**

From the inside, the church is a loving family. But what does the church end up looking like from the outside? Stanley Hauerwas, a famous writer on Christian Ethics says "I take it to be crucial that Christians must live in such a manner that their lives are unintelligible if the God we worship in Jesus Christ does not exist." In other words, he's saying that the church needs to be a group of people who make people scratch their heads and say "either these people are crazy, or what they say about Jesus is true."

Katie and I got to spend some time with some friends of ours this past week who make a lot of people scratch their heads. We got to know Matthew and Maggie Loftus while Matthew was in residency with Katie. Matthew and Maggie live their lives with the conviction that the Gospel is best embodied by living, working, and worshipping in the same place. In this way they are able to bless a community from the inside out. So, for example, whereas a lot of people want to send help to the people in Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore-- one of the most poor, violent, and abandoned, places in the city-- Matthew and Maggie bought a house there, made friends, and began to serve alongside their friends. They got plugged in with New Song church, a community of people committed to their values, and they began to use their gifts to bless Sandtown. They would have stayed there forever if they hadn't felt God calling them to spend the better part of the past year as missionaries in South Sudan. And they would have stayed there forever if the outbreak of violence there hadn't forced them to relocate to Northern Uganda, where they can serve South Sudanese refugees. Oh

yes, and they have three small children. But the love of Jesus is the language of their lives.

I'm not telling you about Matthew and Maggie because I think we're all supposed to move our families to Sandtown, South Sudan, or Uganda. But maybe their story does for you what it does for me: challenge me to live life in such a way that people say, "why would you do that?" Their lives invite the question, "are they crazy, or is what they preach true?" And I am convinced that Matthew and Maggie are people whose lives are unintelligible if Jesus has not been raised from the dead.

That's the type of life that I see in Acts 2. Lives of radical love that makes a little less sense to the world.

Thirdly, the Acts 2:42 says they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers. In the early church, they shared meals together. This meant sharing together in the Lord's Supper. When they gathered, that's what they did. They were devoted to it. Furthermore they devoted themselves to prayer. They understood the truth behind the bold statement that John Wesley would make 1700 years later: "God does nothing but in answer to prayer."<sup>1</sup> Prayer wasn't an optional exercise that they recognized as a good thing. It was the means by which the Spirit had chosen to work in them and for the world.

They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and prayers. In other words, **the early church was a worshipping church**. Acts says a few verses later that every day they were meeting both at the Temple and together in their homes. This was a priority for them.

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, Third Edition. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 437.

So we have three things that the church was. The church was a learning church. The church was a loving family. And the church was a worshipping church. This was the *internal* practice of the church.

But still, have we really answered the question, “why?” Why the church? Why would the church grow like it did. All of this learning, self-giving, and worshipping sure sounds like an awful lot of effort. Who signs up for that?

But here’s the thing: the starting point is never “I need to do these things to earn my salvation, so I guess I better start doing them.” The starting point is the story of what God has done in Jesus. It starts with the premise that God *loves* the world. That God *loves* you and there isn’t a thing you can do about it. God loves you so much that Jesus died for you. And if you had been the only person in the world, Jesus still would have died for you. You can’t earn love like that. You can’t earn grace. It’s freely given. You just have to either reject it or to accept it as a reality and live accordingly.

And when people really, truly receive that good news-- when the Holy Spirit convinces them of its truth-- it changes people. People’s lives get transformed by the Spirit of God, and so they start to live together in ways that look nutso if the good news weren’t true. But because the good news is true, living as Jesus lived turns out to be the most abundant life there could be. So here is my answer for the reason that the church grew: the good news is just too good not to share.

What do you do when you see a great movie? You tell other people, and you hope that they love it too. If you find a new restaurant and have a great meal there, what do you do? You tell other people, and you hope that they love it too. As for me, if the movie wasn't that great, I don't tell people. If the meal was just ok, I'm not posting a picture of my plate on facebook.

Is Jesus really all that different? If Jesus hasn't made much of a difference in my life, I'm not going to share Jesus. But if Jesus has turned my world upside down and I feel like I'm on a Spirit-led adventure, then I'm going to tell everyone who will listen. If I experience Jesus as giving me life to the fullest, then of course I'm going to share.

Or think of it this way. Do you remember falling in love? How did you act? When I fell in love with Katie you couldn't stop me from smiling. My mind just gravitated toward her. I wanted to be with her all the time, and if I couldn't be with her than at least I wanted to talk to her on the phone. And every time I did I became more and more convinced of a wonderful reality: she loved me back. Despite all of my faults and failings. She. Loved. Me! And I didn't care who knew. In fact, I wanted everyone to know.

And so, friends, I've just got to confess something to you. I'm head over heels in love with Jesus. ... This is more than a passing infatuation. Falling in love with Jesus changed my life.

Maybe this is a fresh way for you to hear the good news: Do you know that Jesus is crazy for you? Do you know that he thinks about you all the



time? Do you know that he wants to spend time with you? To talk to you?

This is the reason that the church exists. The church didn't grow because of its beautiful buildings. The church didn't grow because it held tight to the keys to the kingdom. The church didn't even grow because Christians lived wonderful lives, although they did, and it certainly helped. The church grew because Christians had had encounters with Jesus that were too good not to share.

What about you? Maybe you're someone who knows that the good news is too good not to share. What is it about the good news that you just can't keep to yourself?

Or maybe, as you think about it honestly, you realize that you don't really have a story worth sharing. You haven't really experienced the good news as good news. What a wonderful realization you've had. Because when you admit that, you're open to the possibility of God doing a new thing in your life. There is a life available to you that is more abundant than you can possibly imagine.