

This morning I am continuing in a summer series of sermons from the Book of Acts focused on the mission of the church. Today we consider the mission of Christian community.

Last week we began to look at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples as a mighty wind, pushing them out of the Upper Room where they had found sanctuary, and literally enflaming them a message to good news to the world around them. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish Festival of Weeks, which was celebrated fifty days after Passover. We are told that, as was the custom, Jews from every nation of the known world were in Jerusalem for this festival.

It was to this international crowd that the Spirit filled disciples began speaking about Jesus in the many different native languages of the people there. Some were amazed and perplexed by this. But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." When Peter responded to this accusation, he didn't say, "We're too spiritual to drink." According to the text, he said that was only 9:00 in the morning. A little early.

Then he began to preach with a sermon about Jesus that concluded by him claiming, "God has made this man your crucified both Lord and Messiah." And at the end of the sermon 3,000 people became believers and applied for baptism. As a preacher, I have studied Peter's sermon carefully. It's a good message, but 3,000 converts? Clearly, it is not about the sermon. (It's never about the sermon.) This is about the Holy Spirit moving, not only in the disciples' lives but also in the hearts of those who were ready to hear good news.

What do you think happened the next Sunday when 3,000 new members showed up for worship? I can tell you what happened. People complained: "Well, there go all the parking places." "Someone is sitting in my pew." "I hear the new people are already tying up the Upper Room." And do you think all of those 3,000 new members were sweet and pleasant? No, some of them were jerks. Converting a jerk just makes a Christian jerk, and we have to love them into being loving. That's just one of the reasons the church exists as a community where we find the power of the Holy Spirit to change our lives.

Notice how much confusion there is in this first glimpse of the new church. There's violent wind pushing the disciples outside, transforming them into apostles who are sent out. They've got fire on top of their heads, and all of them speaking a different language at the same time. We are told both Jews and Arabs came together, people of different colors, Romans, Asians, Africans. Some were excited, but others were already sneering at the leaders. The church now has children, youth, middle aged and senior adults, singles and marrieds, the eleven charter members of the church and all of these new people, and sinners worshipping right next to the Virgin Mary – all rolled into one new community. What could hold all of this diversity together? Only the truth that brought them together, which that Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah.

It doesn't take long to realize that being an inclusive community core to our congregation. It is even written in stone on the sign out front. But what can bind diversity and inclusion together? There has to be some common purpose, or a center that can hold.

As I said last week, the Holy Spirit is the means by which the ascended Christ is continuing his redemptive work. And so, the church that the Spirit created at Pentecost is always centered in the truth that Jesus is Lord and Messiah. When you are clear about the center you don't have to worry about the boundaries, or concerns about who is in or out, or the right words or even orthodoxy. Our community is held together not because we agree or are similar, but because the grace of God in Jesus Christ is at the center. And that center will always hold. This is the 2,000 year old bedrock truth of the church.

We're not claiming it is the only truth. We humbly acknowledge other religions and their truth claims. We send our kids to school to learn philosophical and scientific truths. We are awed by the truth portrayed by the arts. And we make plenty of room for doubt even about truth of Christianity because doubt and faith always walk hand and hand, talking to each other along the way. In fact, doubt is what makes choosing faith possible. And yet even if our belief is mixed with unbelief the community is centered on the truth that God was dying to love the world in Jesus Christ. And that is a truth worthy of doubt.

It is never enough, however, for the church to proclaim this truth Sunday after Sunday. There is nothing distinctive about an organization claiming that it has truth. Competing political platforms all claim the truth. Non-profits try to convince you of the truth of their cause. Advertisements peddle their products as the true answer to your search. Lawsuits and even PTA debates are all about who has the truth. But what would be distinctive is if the truth made a community loving. And so, Acts tell us, "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 needs... with glad and generous hearts." (Acts2:44-45,46)

That is a picture of who the church really is. We don't always look like it or act like it, but that is who the Holy Spirit created us to be. We're supposed to be a community that holds all things in common: the joys, grief, fears, needs, and dreams. And a community that gives with glad and generous hearts.

The yearning to belong to such a loving, glad and generous community is great today. After a couple of generations of rampant individualism and self-constructing our lives untethered to the great claims of a holy tradition, each seeking to enlarge their own borders, what have we found? Loneliness is a national epidemic. Some of us are successful but confused about their calling or purpose in life. Others are not so successful and cannot make life work on their own. All of us need a community to remember who and whose we are.

We used to speak about the various industries of society: the commerce industry, defense industry, and health industry. You don't hear those terms so much anymore. Now we speak about networks, coalitions, alliances, and the importance of being linked-in. That's not exactly the language of love, but it does reveal the yearning for community. The problem with most of these social strategies to bring people together, is that they are still motivated by individual agendas. The reason you join their network, we're told, is that it is the best way to get what you want. You're invited to belong to their coalition that will fight for you. "You have to align yourself with us," they claim, "who are worried about them. They are to blame for your problems. They're trying to take something away from you."

By contrast, when the church speaks about community, we don't promise it will meet all your needs. We certainly don't say that we will fight for you. And we never try to protect you from them. In the community called the church there is no them. There is just us – a fellowship centered in the grace of God we have come to know through Jesus Christ.

Whenever I travel on a plane, like most ministers I hope the person seated next to me won't ask about my job. That's because when they find out I'm a pastor either they are going to get very quiet and the awkwardness will hang in the air between us, or if they find out I'm Presbyterian pastor they may start witnessing to me, or they are going to tell me about their disappointment in the church. A while back I was seated next to a man who went with the third option. After listening carefully to his long list of thoughtful complaints about the church today, I finally said, "You know, I spend a lot more time with the church than you do. And when it comes to problems with the church, you don't know the half of it. Don't even get me started on the clergy." This is not the defense of the church he was expecting. So, he asked why I stay in the church. I said because I need community to find the grace of Jesus Christ.

I sometimes try also to explain that I come from church tradition that teaches the church is not a school for saints, but a hospital for sinners. Being disappointed that there are sinners and hypocrites in the church, would be like disappointment to find sick people in a hospital. Why do we say a Prayer of Confession every Sunday?

It's because this is a community where we find healing for the sin sick soul. When you hear in worship the declaration "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven," the church has just begun to fulfill its mission in community.

Of course, the church will always fall short of your dreams for it, and even its own dreams for itself. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed in his wonderful book, *Life Together*, nothing is more dangerous to authentic community than our dreams for it. For we will always love our dreams more than real community God is giving us, which is not a human ideal but a divine reality. That divine reality is that the Holy Spirit has gathered together people who are at least aware of the truth that we need the grace of God.

Then renewed in that truth, we become apostles who are sent out by the Spirit from worship with a mission to be merciful in a society where people's lonely souls are drying up with yearning to believe grace is possible. Amen.