

January 28, 2024

The Acts of the Apostles
IV. And All Who Believed Were Together
Acts 2:42-47

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Every Sunday we say it together: “*I believe in the holy catholic church.*” But what exactly are we owning up to when we make that confession of faith? Our passage this morning answers that question for us.

As we read last week, the day of Pentecost ended with over three thousand souls converted to Christ. In our passage this morning, we see what happened next – the church! And these two events – Pentecost and the birth of the church – cannot be separated. They are, in fact, cause and effect. Pentecost creates the church. The Holy Spirit coming down means the gathering together of the communion of the saints. In other words, the church is not a human idea, not a human program for the betterment of society, Rather, from the very beginning we see that the church is entirely God’s idea and God’s creation.

And more than that, that the church coming into being is actually the whole point of Pentecost. That’s what our passage is telling us: that church is not our invention, but God’s creation. And, therefore, that church is not optional for the living out of our devotion to Christ – indeed, it is the very heart and soul of how God intends for us to live out our devotion to Christ. To say it another way, in this passage, we are being invited to see the church from God’s perspective – and to see why God gave us this gift of the church, as well as what it is God intends for His church to be and to do:

That day about three thousand took [Peter] at his word, were baptized and signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. Everyone around was in awe – all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person’s need was met.

They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.¹

That translation of our passage, from Eugene Peterson's The Message, helps us hear even better the reasons for, as well as the purpose of, the church the Holy Spirit brings into being. First, the church is given to us – a gift of God – because of something God said from the very beginning of His creation of earth and its human occupants, namely that *“It is not good that man should be alone.”*² And truly it is not good that we should be alone. Psychologists and physicians and pastors alike will all tell you not only that loneliness can be crippling, but also that loneliness is perhaps the greatest problem we are facing today in terms of human health and well-being.

Long before Covid came (which was a loneliness generator on steroids), Chicago Tribune columnist Marla Paul confessed in print that she was lonely. She wrote, *“This loneliness saddens me. How did it happen I could be forty-two years old and not have enough friends?”* And she ended her column with this:

*I recently read to my daughter Hans Christian Andersen's
The Ugly Duckling. I felt an immediate kinship with this bird who
flies from place to place looking for creatures with whom he belongs.
He eventually finds them. I hope I do too.*³

That column generated seven times more response than any column she had ever written. And almost all of those responses had the same theme: *“I thought I was the only one who was so lonely. I'm lonely too.”* Most of the responses came from women, but studies show that men are in far worse shape – that over ninety percent of men report that they lack even one close friendship. And it truly is not good, say all the medical studies, for us to be so alone.

Which is why the creation of the church is such an important gift from God. In the sixty-eighth Psalm, there is this lovely little verse: *“God settles the solitary in a home.”*⁴ That is what happened at the end of Pentecost day, and that is what God is doing still through His church: *“And all who believed were together.”* That verse from our text says so very much about God's kindness and grace towards us in giving us the church. He has made it possible for our loneliness to be overcome. Gathered in Jerusalem that Pentecost day long ago were people divided by nation and creed and tongue and race. Then the Holy Spirit came –and suddenly there was community, a new community which marked the overcoming of all our barriers and divisions. A new community which had been welded together through the flame of the Holy Spirit's power.

Not loneliness, not any longer – but communion, community, belonging. And so the letter to the Hebrews admonishes us not to neglect meeting together as the church – but that's not for the sake of the church, it is for our own sake, that we should not be alone. But should instead be upheld and embraced and loved within the community God creates. Life is simply too hard for us ever to try to go it alone – and so God, who settles the solitary in a home, settles us in His church. *“And all who believed were together.”*

But there's even more to God's gift to us of the church. If life is too hard to go it alone, the Christian life is next to impossible on our own. And so God gives us the church so that we might help and support one another in the living out of our faith. Specifically, this gift comes to us through our common concern for the Word and worship of God: *“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship . . . and day by day attending the temple together.”*

We help one another study and understand and apply the Word of God to our lives, that we might better understand what it means to be a Christian. We encourage one another in putting that Word into practice, that we might do a better job of living as Christians. We share together our successes and failures, joys and frustrations in living as Christian disciples in the challenging conditions of the world around us. And this is something which happens formally in Sunday School classes and Presbyterian Women's Circles and Youth Fellowship meetings and Choir Rehearsals and in a dozen or so other settings. But it is also something which happens over coffee in the parlor, something which happens in the glass hallway between services or in the parking lot after worship is over. God gives us the church so that we can help one another to grow in faithfulness to Christ. And without that help we should be not only helpless but also hopeless in our capacity to be anything other than lukewarm in Christ.

And to that end also, of course, God gives us worship. We come together each week in worship as God's church for all sorts of human reasons, but for one very important divine reason – that worship redirects our heads and our hearts in the right direction. Out in the world during the week we lose our bearings, we get off-track, we stray from the way and the truth and the life. But then God gathers us together again on Sunday morning so that we can get refocused on those things which matter most, so that we can shed the sins of the week past and be renewed, restored, and refreshed for the week ahead. There is such great power in this simple thing we do each Sunday morning – though it sometimes seems so ordinary to us. But through this simple gathering and singing of hymns and praying of prayers and passing the offering plates and hearing the Word proclaimed – God is doing something cumulative, something profound, something which just keeps building up in something extraordinary in our heads and hearts. Our Presbyterian constitution puts it nicely:

In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God's claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God's service in the world.⁵

God gives us the church, not only because it is not good for us to be alone, but also because it is nearly impossible for us to live a life of Christian depth and meaning without the help and support of fellow Christians: *“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship . . . and day by day attending the temple together.”*

But even that's not all. God gives us the church not just because it is not good for us to be alone, and not just because the Christian life is impossible without a little (or a lot!) of help from our Christian friends – but also because there are moments in life that we can't get through on our own. Times and seasons when we need the sort of love and attention and support and care and strength which only the fellowship of the church can bring:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

What that is describing is not an early experiment in socialism. What it is describing is a community of believers taking seriously the Bible's declaration that we are our brother's and sister's keeper⁶, the Bible's commandment that we are to love one another as God has first loved us⁷, as well as the Bible's exhortation that should *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."*⁸ God gives us the church, so that when life knocks us down, there will be human hands reaching to us to help us back up. God gives us the church so that when sorrow or tragedy comes, we will be surrounded by those who will care for us and help us in any way that they can. God gives us the church so that there will be people who us praying for us when we need it most.

I've told you this story before – and I'll probably tell it to you again some day because it's just one of my favorites descriptions of this particular gift God gives to us in the church. It's a story told by Presbyterian pastor and professor Tom Long. He was leading a church retreat, and he began by asking each member of the church group to name a time when they felt God was particularly close to them. One woman began by reminding everyone of how she had been born and raised in that church, baptized as an infant there. She said that her baptism had come to mean a lot to her, mainly because of how much her baptism had meant to her father. Her father had been just tremendously moved in the Spirit on the day she was baptized – so much so that he would tell her, as a young girl, over and over the story of her baptism.

Over time, the storytelling of her baptism became a sort of daddy-daughter ritual. He would tell her about the gown she wore, the hymns that were sung, what the preacher had preached. And he would always end his retelling of her baptism in the same way – by clapping his hands together and exclaiming, *"Oh, sweetheart, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!"*

This made such an impression on her, she said, that each Sunday during her childhood, during the long stretches of the sermon, she would look around the sanctuary trying to find the Holy Spirit in the church on that day. She told the group of her fellow church members that she would look at the organ pipes or the stained-glass windows or the big cross at the front or even up at the rafters – and ask, *"Is that where the Holy Spirit is in the church?"*

*"As many of you know," she continued, "I lost both of my parents to cancer in the same week, a terrible week, last winter. During that awful week, on a dark Wednesday afternoon, I was driving home from visiting my parents in the hospital, and I was passing by the church. I felt an intense need to pray, and so I came into the church and sat in one of the back pews and began to pray. The church was dark, and in the shadows, I prayed and poured out my grief to God, and cried from the bottom of my heart. A member of the church," and here she named her, "was in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting, and she saw me praying and knew what was happening in my life. She took off her apron, came and sat beside me in the pew, held my hand, and prayed with me. It was then," the young woman said, "that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in the church."*⁹

How many times have we witnessed moments like that here in this church? Think how many times, through this church, God has given us the gift of being on either the giving or receiving end of just such love, such care, such kindness and concern. God gives us the church so that we won't have to face the hard times alone, but so that we will be lifted up and carried through by His Spirit working through our sisters and brothers in Christ. *“And all who believed were together and had all things in common . . . as any had need.”*

And there is one more reason God gives to us the gift of the church. A God-given, God-honoring, God-serving church – the kind of church where the solitary find a home, where brothers and sisters in Christ together worship and study and support one another in the living out of the faith, where joys are celebrated together and where sorrows are eased by being shared – God uses a church like that to reach out into the world to draw others to Christ. The next to last verse of our passage, about the church *“having favor with all the people,”* is directly linked to the conclusion stated in the final verse: *“And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”*

When the church is being and doing exactly what God has called it into existence to be and to do – then indeed that church will find favor with all people and draw new members into the household of faith. When the church is filled and overflowing with the love of God the Father, filled to overflowing with the overwhelming grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and marked by the deep and meaningful, loving and laughing and everybody-welcoming fellowship of the Holy Spirit, then indeed that church shall be a beacon of God's light to this darkened world – just as Jesus said we would be. Just as God has always intended for the church, created by the Holy Spirit, should be.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1971.

² Genesis 2:18.

³ Quoted in John Ortberg, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get To Know Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 29.

⁴ Psalm 68:6.

⁵ *Book of Order*, W-1.000.

⁶ Genesis 4:9.

⁷ I John 4:19.

⁸ Galatians 6:2.

⁹ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 127-128.