

In the Christian year, this time after Easter is called “Eastertide.” Bible readings include what the disciples said and did after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Peter’s letters emphasize the suffering and persecution of follower of Jesus. We know many Christians did suffer for not worshipping the Roman Emperor, and Peter himself reportedly was executed in Rome.

However, I would like to focus this morning on the reading from “Acts” (the Acts of the Apostles). First of all, that last sentence is amazing: “Day by day, the Lord added to their numbers.” The previous verse, Acts 2:41, says that thousands of people became followers of Christ one day after hearing Peter preach. (We obviously live in a different culture...Hundreds of people go out Sunday morning to the soccer fields!) We are so glad to have six to eight newer folks joining our community soon!

So In Acts chapter 2, the author (Luke) spells out the important characteristics of the early church: “The disciples devoted themselves to the teachings, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.” These things could be considered the reasons for rapid growth of the church.

First of all, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ **teaching**. Well, it seems to be a fact, in church history, that most of the teaching in churches comes via Sunday morning sermons. Understandable ... yet it does put a lot of pressure on preachers! Quite frankly, we in Congregational churches, could spend a little more emphasis on discussion groups that deal with the Bible or Theology. The majority of Congregational churches (being the United Church of Christ) do focus more on the Spirit of the Bible, and the Spirit of Christ, than on doctrines, teachings, creeds... As one of our old brochures said, (“How we treat one another” is more important than doctrines we hold”).

... However, we have almost given up the bible, or handed it over to fundamentalist Christians. We could do better at knowing the scriptures, knowing *how we interpret them*, such as the importance of historical context. Also, as “fellowship” is an overarching theme, we often say that reading the Bible is best done in community; yes we do learn from each other, and enrich each other by sharing our interpretations and experiences of biblical stories and teachings. Small group gatherings in homes for study or discussion can be very effective in strengthening community bonds.

Now, to a second point: “They devoted themselves to the **breaking of bread.**” Yes, indeed, at the most basic understanding of this, they had meals together! It’s One important way that love grows, since usually over meals, or even just over coffee, we share stories of our lives, like our deeper “joys and concerns!” Also, over meals there can be the common work of preparing and cleaning up. My mother often happily remembered Gloucester summer reunions with her relatives, when, as she said, her mom and her aunts (yes, I never heard of uncles) would enjoy chatting in their teamwork of washing, drying and putting away all the dishes! I’m so impressed with how Belleville started the practice of having tables set up after worship... it’s good to “sit down,” chat, and supportively share more of our lives!

Of course, at another level, devoting themselves to the breaking of bread can be considered a reference to communion, that they intentionally remembered Jesus every time they “broke bread,” which was indeed Jesus’ intent. I often say that every meal is an opportunity to remember what Jesus said and did. Every time we break and eat a piece of bread, at any meal! Then,

obviously we might recall his words at the last supper: A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you... Eating a piece of bread can remind us to serve one another, to be bread for one another! (Again, we are touching on “fellowship” an overarching theme of support and love for one another).

And Luke says that those early disciples “devoted themselves to **“the prayers.”** One commentator made the interesting point to note that “prayers” is in the plural, that it seems to point to certain prayers, or a set group of customary prayers. Many Protestants have “prided ourselves” in the reflection that we often pray in the Spirit, that we don’t just read set prayers, ... we can get a little judgmental of our brothers and sisters that say more ritualistic prayers. But guess what? I’m glad that in childhood our Sunday School teachers had us memorize a few important scriptures ... like Psalm 23 and the Beatitudes. It can be a good comfort to pray from memory “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want... yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” And of course, we Protestants have retained certain memorized verses for worship, like the Lord’s Prayer, the Gloria Patri, the Doxology. Let me mention again the overarching aspect of Community... that when we pray as a group (or sing as a group!) ..We can find a kind of power, in the support, the common focus on the beauty and glory of “God.”

Now, to that important and overarching theme, that they devoted themselves to **“fellowship”**... (pardon the male bias... the more modern and inclusive term is **“community.”**) We are clear that “No Man is an island.” We are clear that humans, and other species, are made for relationship. Whatever we can do to

stay in relationship with others, especially relationships of listening, understanding. Let me lift up sports for a moment (even as soccer may seem nemesis of Sunday morning church time)... Sports are indeed one great opportunity for community, so long as it does not lead to overly competitive, even violent actions. Someone the other day told me why going to Boston to watch the marathon was such a great day: "Everyone was just so happy and so positive, and so supportive of the runners and of human potential." Yes, any common focus can work wonders; a myriad of options and clubs: card playing, bowling, book groups, chess club, language clubs, etc. Here at Belleville we can say that the Thrift Shop is a wonderful opportunity for community with a common focus and service. At First Parish, their common focus and service is the Food Pantry. But the thing that really deepens friendship and support, I would say, is our common focus on the Way of Christ, the teachings, the presence of our Lord, who reminds us to love and serve one another... (Great Hymn: "Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you!")

We are made for community... and if that community is marked by love, Christ's kind of love, we will always find compassion, true caring when there is a need or suffering. And it will also be marked by courage, encouraging one another to "do the right thing, to speak the truth, even if we may sometimes suffer for doing so." Let's devote ourselves to the teachings, the prayers, the shared meals, and the community of Christ's Spirit. Amen.