

April 17, 2005/Fourth Sunday of Easter/David L. Edwards

The Church as Community

Acts 2:42-47 *The devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

John 10:1-10 *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

While I was on retreat at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse in Kentucky, I was invited one evening for dinner with some of the women there. One of them shared what she thought was an intriguing comment by a Presbyterian minister from Louisville who had been there on retreat recently. He was impressed by the life of this community in its devotion to prayer and to justice and peace toward people and the earth itself. He said that he thought more people were becoming drawn to such communities that have a disciplined life of faith. We discussed this for a while. It was a provocative statement. Communities that strive for a life of prayer, deeper community, and service to the world don't seem to be growing by leaps and bounds. Churches that are growing numerically tend to offer easy and comfortable messages that disturb no one and confirm people in their fears and narrowness of view. So smaller communities centered on a deepening spiritual life and concerns of justice and peace in the world face a dilemma. Do we panic because few seem to respond to the kind of vision and life we hold? Do we start fretting over how we are going to "stay in business," as it were? Or do we simply remain as true as we can be to what we believe is an authentic way of being the church, letting God take care of whether or not we survive? What I have learned through the years is that when we sacrifice authenticity for survival, we tend to lose on both counts.

The lectionary for this Sunday offers a timely reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It gives us an opportunity to reflect on the church as a community of the followers of Christ. Acts is Luke's companion volume to his gospel and tells the story of the apostolic church in its earliest years. It begins in Jerusalem with Jesus' ascension and continues through the ministry of Paul as he shares the Gospel beyond the boundaries of Israel into the Gentile world.

Luke's portrait of this early Christian community is simple and brief: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Then Luke expands his portrait somewhat as he describes the community's life together and how others responded to it. It is certainly an idealized picture of the church. As we read on in Acts, we find stories of suffering and struggle, betrayal and tensions,

jealousy and selfishness, all the real stuff that happens in any community, the church included. But Luke still wants to lift up this portrait of the church as it really is and is to be. We must hold onto both the ideal and the real.

Growing up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I heard this passage read often as the model for what we were to be in our churches. My father being a minister, I knew well enough how far short of the ideal the church could fall. Yet there was always something inspiring and compelling about this vision of the church as a community of the followers of Jesus. So I want to share some things this morning about what we today as a community of Christ might glean from Luke's portrait and vision of the church. It can re-orient us, remind us who we are and are to be. It can also affirm and encourage us, that what we are about in this strange business of being the church is in fact urgently needed for the sake of our society and world.

First, the followers of Christ **devoted themselves**. We are a community of **devotion**, or as we might say it, **commitment**. In Christ, we first of all receive the gift of God's unconditional love. But we respond with a commitment to let ourselves be shaped by and filled with the love of God. Grace comes first. Then commitment, or devotion. The kind of life to which Jesus calls us doesn't just happen. It asks an intentional re-orienting of our lives around that call, that new life. That's where the practice of spiritual disciplines comes in. Adopting practices of prayer, study, giving, mission, and expressing love and forgiveness with one another are not laws or even goals we try to achieve, like spiritual merit badges. They are the practices that keep us rooted and growing in God, with lives that flow out of God at the center.

Devotion, or commitment, is not for its own sake. We must avoid falling into measuring commitments as though commitment itself is a moral or spiritual virtue that separates "real" Christians from others whose commitments we consider less rigorous. That only leads to pride and self-delusion. Our commitment is for the sole purpose of following Christ more closely into the fullness of life he promises. In John's gospel, Jesus uses the figure of the true shepherd and the sheep. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd and follow only him. He is trusted because he is the one who has their well being in mind. Our devotion is so that we can keep listening to Christ and following him. It is our attentiveness to Christ as the one who knows the way to abundant life. Jesus isn't talking about the hereafter; he's talking about the here and now. Full, abundant life as God created us to live it. Our devotion is that effort we make to listen to Jesus' voice above all other voices in our society and world.

The community of Christ devoted itself **to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**. Now Luke says a bit more about just HOW these folks devoted themselves. The apostles were

those who had been with Jesus and were able to share the stories and teachings of his life. They also knew the scriptures and their faith tradition. So those who were coming into the community sat at their feet, learned from them what they needed to know in order to be faithful. Study and learning are essential for us to keep listening to the shepherd's voice and following. Study of scripture and other writings that convey the meanings of the life of faith keeps us open and growing closer to God and our true life. We commit ourselves to study not so that we will know a lot. Our study is not for the purpose of accumulating knowledge but for greater faith and faithfulness, a richer living out of our true humanity as persons and a community of faith.

They devoted themselves to the *fellowship*. What does this mean? Everything about Luke's description of the earliest church speaks of **community**. The word "church" has become filled with unfortunate meanings because of what the church has become through the centuries. Institutional structures. Hierarchies of power and male domination. The pouring of energy and resources into self-perpetuation and self-defense. Alignment with political and economic power. The New Testament word for church is *ecclesia*. It is a good word meaning the gathering of those called out to be Christ's community. But Jesus described a community of his love and service. Over the years and now more than ever I see the church as community. It is a better term for our day and time and circumstances. We are the Church of the Covenant Community, made up of Covenant Members and those who are not, all devoting ourselves to a different kind of life in this world, centered in God and trying to listen as closely as we can to the voice of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ.

The New Testament word translated "community" is *koinonia*, the word Luke uses here. It has a richness of meaning: fellowship, association, generosity, altruism, contribution, participation, sharing. It is people being together in a profound and deep way. To be a Christian is to be in community in the spirit of Christ. It means participation in the community and in the lives of one another. It means needing one another and caring for one another.

Community in the sense of *koinonia* also means sharing and giving, contributing what we have for the good of all. When Luke says that they devoted themselves to the fellowship, he might also have meant this kind of contribution, as basic and practical as the offerings that were received for those who were in need and for the life and work of the community. This becomes more evident when Luke later says that they held all things in common, selling private possessions whenever a need arose. This is not "early Christian communism," as some have thought. There is no indication that personal possessions were not allowed. However, what one had personally always had a prior claim upon it—the needs of others and the community itself. This kind of community, which we are also called to be, is

in stark contrast to the situation we live in today in which individual and corporate wealth are promoted as being good for the whole society. In actuality, personal and corporate greed reduces more and more people to poverty and destroys the creation. Whatever I have personally must be held with absolute tentativeness, as though it does not belong to me. The needs of others and the community and the creation itself always come first. If we are living on this basis, all will have what is needed.

They devoted themselves to *the breaking of bread and the prayers*. Worship is the heartbeat of the Christian community. The "breaking of bread" came to mean the sharing of the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist as we call it. This was the most important act of worship for the community. Though we don't know the precise practices, there is no doubt that the sharing of the bread and cup of Christ was for the church the clearest and most vital presence of Christ with his community. Therefore it was shared frequently, probably as part of actual meals as the community ate together *with glad and generous hearts*.

The prayers means simply that the community was a praying community made up of praying individuals. Prayer is our communion and communication with God. It is our intimacy and presence with God. It is the opening up of our life together and our personal lives to the presence, guidance, and sustaining power of God. It is the honest and humble speaking of our concerns, thanksgivings, confessions in God's presence. But it is also our listening together for God's voice, for the voice of the Good Shepherd, so that we can follow the particular paths God gives us to walk today. Luke speaks of the relationship of the community of Jesus to those around it. This earliest

community still worshiped as a Jewish community; that's how they saw themselves. So they *spent much time in the Temple*. Only later did tensions become so great that the Jewish Christians began separating from the Temple and reluctantly became a distinct group. But here the followers of Christ did not separate themselves. They did not withdraw into their own fellowship, seeing themselves as special or better or holier. The intensity of their commitment and devotion, their study and worship, led them to try to be in the world for the sake of the world, to be light, leaven, and salt.

Luke says that they *had the goodwill of all the people*. He didn't mean they were a bunch of back-slappers and glad-handers. He didn't mean what has happened in so many churches in our society today, the blending of the Gospel with nationalistic interests and ideologies, uncritically affirming the wealth, competition, and power orientation of our society. He meant that such amazing *wonders and signs* of Christ and his love were happening in and around that community, that their devotion was so genuine and unpretentious, that their life together was so full of peace and generosity, or at least the striving for such, that the wider world, the city they lived in, could

not help but notice and be affected by it. What Luke says here is similar to what God said to Abraham when calling him to a journey of faith—you will be a blessing and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12). A community of faith that is continually deepening its life together and its ministry in the spirit and love of Christ will be a blessing in the wider community and world. By the witness of our life together, we will change people's views, challenge their perspectives, and speak to them of their truest identities as children of the living God, meant to live in peace, justice, and compassion.

The passage ends with Luke saying that *day by day God added to their number those who were being saved*. God took care of the additions, of calling people into this new community. It was the community's business to be as faithful and devoted as it could be so that it could become more and more transparent to God and God's transforming love. It's future, it's very existence would remain in God's hands. Preserving its own life, being focused on perpetuating its own existence would lead only to the community's death, either actual or spiritual. This doesn't mean that we don't share the Good News of God's love we know in Christ. It doesn't mean that we don't extend the invitation to others to respond to this call. Quite the opposite; we are to share everything, including the call to take on this new life. This needs to arise out of our own struggles to be as faithful, devoted, and committed as we can be.

While away, I read a recent collection of Wendell Berry's essays. Some I had read before but it was timely to be reading them again. Berry is a farmer, poet, essayist, and novelist who lives, farms and writes in Kentucky. He is convinced that the deepest problems facing our nation and world today are rooted in economies that are centered around personal wealth, power, and competition, destroying people and the earth. He knows what he is talking about; he sees it in the lives of people and in the land itself. What is the solution? It is spiritual and it has to do with our character as a people. And it has to do with **community**, nurturing, defending, and valuing our local communities. We need to abandon an economy that is built upon escape from hard work, one that enslaves most people and gives fewer and fewer great wealth and comfort. Caring for the earth and caring for people is hard work. It is the hard work of love that preserves all creation, human and non-human. And this hard work is done in communities. Berry writes:

There is no safety in belonging to the select few, for minority people or anybody else. If we are looking for insurance against want and oppression, we will find it only in our neighbors' prosperity and goodwill and, beyond that,

in the good health of our worldly places, our homelands. If we are sincerely looking for a place of safety, for real security and success, then we would begin to turn to our communities—and not the communities simply of our human neighbors, but also of the water, earth, and air, the plants and animals, all the creatures with whom our local life is shared...Our place of safety can only be the community, and not just one community, but many of them everywhere.

(from "Racism and the Economy," The Art of the

Commonplace:

The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry)

These are the same concerns and values and aims that we have as a community of Christ. In fact, I believe that Berry, as a Christian who is highly and rightly critical of the church, is pointing to the abundant life Jesus was talking about, life here and now as God made it to be, as well as life that is forever. That is what we are about as a community of faith. And what could be more needed by our world today than our continued devotion to being this kind of community?