

energized each time we share the bread and cup of Christ. In this communal act, Christian communities through the ages have experienced most vividly the presence and spirit of the living Christ in their midst.

They devoted themselves to the prayers. We don't know exactly what Luke was referring to. The earliest followers of Christ still saw themselves as Jews. Luke tells us they spent much time in the temple. This is prayer. When they met together for meals and the breaking of bread, certainly prayer was an important part of their gatherings.

I think we could say that prayer was laced all through the life of the early church. Specific prayers and times of praying. Prayer as part of each person's daily life. For me, prayer is simply but profoundly the opening of our lives to God's presence at all times, being attentive to the movements of God's spirit in our lives and our life together. It is sitting in silence, letting our inner life settle into a listening quietness and peace. It is praying for what we need and what we sense the world needs, lifting up in simple, heartfelt sincerity what we most deeply seek for ourselves and the world. And then it is listening for what God would say to us in reply, how God may be leading us in our own response to those things for which we pray. Prayer is all that, and more. It is to the community and its members what breathing is to the body.

Learning and growing. The *koinonia* of spiritual and material sharing. Table fellowship, especially the breaking of bread which is the Eucharist. And prayer as the very breath of our lives and life together. We do these things each time we are together for worship. We do them in our daily lives as persons and when we are together as mission groups. In just a few words, Luke has given us a portrait of the life of the community itself. And when we are devoting ourselves in this way together, then we are a fertile garden for the birth and nourishing of the ministries to which God in Christ calls us.

April 13, 2008/Eastertide/David L. Edwards

The Community of the Good Shepherd

Acts 2:42-47

...they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

John 10:1-10

...the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

The Church of the Covenant came into being as a worshiping community to nourish a ministry already under way--an after-school recreation program that grew into Camp Kum Ba Yah, and an association of churches called Lynchburg Christian Fellowship, later renamed Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship to include Agudath Sholom Synagogue. The spiritual wisdom of this is that the church does not exist for its own sake, to build itself up, but to serve the world. I have said this before many times because it is such an important thing for us to remember and to share. The wider Church seems increasingly preoccupied with its own survival and structures, forgetting to live by Christ's call, to live by faith and trust and doing the right things regardless of the cost.

This morning, however, I would like to explore how important it is for the church to be a community of persons always growing and deepening in our relationship with God and one another. A mission group, for instance, needs be as committed to the group's inward journey as to the outward work of the mission. The outward expression of God's love grows out of and is sustained by the inward life of the group. Without the fertile soil of a small community of persons growing in love, the mission falters, loses its essence, and withers away. But this is also true of us as a whole community. Our life together is to be the fertile soil for the various ministries carried out in groups and in individual lives. The garden of our community needs as much attention and care as the ministries to which we are called. The two are integrally related.

Over the past five years, I have been very involved in two outward ministries in particular—the Festival Center and the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center. I realize, however, that I have spoken most about our life together as a community of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. The various things we are involved in and are giving ourselves to are very important. They are the ways we respond to the call of Christ in our lives and use the gifts God has given us to enrich the life of the world. Yet the outward must be rooted in the inward. As deeply and powerfully as we may feel called to our particular mission or outward journey, we each must be mindful of our life together as a community—value it, nurture it, and be aware of how we affect the life of the community.

The passage from the Acts of the Apostles is fruitful for reflecting on being a community of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Luke, besides his version of Jesus' story—the Gospel of Luke—also wrote a sequel—the Acts of the Apostles. He picks up the story from Jesus' ascension, and tells of the growth, struggles, and work of the early Christian community in Jerusalem and Paul's venture into the wider Mediterranean world. Today's reading is one of Luke's summaries of the community's life. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." For Luke, these seem to be hallmarks of the community's life and worship.

They devoted themselves to the teaching of those who had been with or close to Jesus in his earthly life. This probably included two things: the exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, and the remembered stories about and teachings of Jesus.

Learning. Listening. Reflecting. Not to simply accumulate knowledge, but to understand and be transformed by the good news about God manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Our learning, studying, reflecting, listening are so that we hear more clearly the voice of the Good Shepherd and become increasingly aware of and alive in our relationship with God as persons and as a community. This is why we make a commitment to daily reading of scripture and other writings that help us focus on our lives in relation to God, others, and the world. It is why we come together for worship, together listening to scripture, reflecting on the sermon. Even the singing of hymns and songs is a way that we continue this learning, listening activity. For Luke, the Christian community was devoted to the kind of learning that awakens and nourishes a living faith.

They devoted themselves to the fellowship. "Fellowship" implies to our minds pleasant get-togethers, not a bad thing in itself. However, there is more to it than that. The word is *koinonia*. It means a "being together" that involves mutual sharing of lives and even material resources. The Apostle Paul uses this word when he asks the scattered communities to take up offerings to help the struggling Jerusalem church. Later in this reading, Luke tells of the meeting needs in the community. Personal possessions are held tentatively, ready to be shared for the good of others. When there was a need, someone sold something off to meet the need.

We try to cultivate *koinonia* in two ways. First, we see ourselves as a spiritual community, not a religious organization. It is important for us to be willing to share our lives with one another, to be known and to know, to be understood and to understand. It is difficult to know everyone at this depth even in our rather small group. That is why being part of a smaller group, a mission group, is important, not only for the sake of the mission, but in order to experience *koinonia* as Christ's own love manifested in our life together. If we are not part of a mission group, we need to make an effort to get to know others in this fuller way. Spending time together not only in worship but around the table in the Lodge or on other occasions is very important for cultivating this

koinonia. In general, there needs to be a willingness to be in community with others, to recognize that our own fuller growth as persons can happen only as we make the commitment, as we devote ourselves to being in community.

Love being lived out in community does not mean that we like everyone or get along all the time. It is certainly not pretending that there are not real differences or conflicts. The *koinonia* of Christ is a caring respect that we have for each person. It does not try to bind others to ourselves or expect them to fit our idea of what they should be like. Dependencies and expectations are two of the biggest community killers! The *koinonia* of Christ sees the other person as one who, like me, is known and called by name by the Good Shepherd. Each person is unique and precious, and belongs to God, not me. I have refrained all these years from using an illustration from the movie *Forrest Gump*! However...the other night I was watching it again. There is a poignant, painful moment, when Forrest is sitting at the bedside of his dying mother. She has sheltered, encouraged, and defended him all his life. "What is my destiny, Mama?" asks Forrest. "Forrest," she says, "you're going to have to figure that out for yourself." The painfulness of the scene was that, on the one hand, I really wanted her to tell him what his destiny was, to answer his question, to show him the way. On the other hand, however, I knew she was right. It is the difference between caring for others and taking care of them. The former guards their freedom and dignity, their belonging to God, not to us. The latter robs them of their own deepest connection to life, to God, and keeps them from finding within themselves their own place and way.

We also try to practice *koinonia* in the material sense. Membership here includes a commitment of our material resources at some level to the community and our ministries. With Covenant Members, it is to begin with a tithe, a tenth of our incomes. With Community Members, it is not specifically defined. The practice of material giving is at the heart of the "fellowship" of a spiritual community like ours. It is the understanding that what we have is entrusted to us by God, not to be held onto, but made available for the needs of others and the world. Not all of us practice this at the level we would like. Some have little. Some have much. The spiritual economy of the community, however, is that when each of us shares out of our relationship with God, there will be enough to do what we need to do.

They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. On one level, this seems to mean simply the meals shared by those in the community. Jesus shared lots of meals—with his disciples, those friendly to his cause, and those who were against him. Table fellowship is one of the most basic ways that we experience community. When we eat together, we rediscover and affirm our common humanity in needing and receiving our food from God, the Creator.

However, this is also the "breaking of bread" in which Jesus is known in his community, what we call the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or simply Communion. Christian community is Eucharistic community, community renewed, restored, and