

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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First Sunday of Lent

Acts 2:27-47

Church: How It All Began!

(Second in a Six-Part Series: *Adventuring Through Acts*)

What is it about origin stories? It's as if we have a human need to rifle back to the past to find out the place and the time that something or someone big started off. There's the "prequel" phenomenon in movies. We really want to know what Bruce Wayne was like before he was Batman. And how Han Solo became a renegade. And how did the crew of Star Trek come to serve together on the Enterprise. And how did the Wicked Witch of the West become Wicked.

I think it is human nature to want to know where we've come from and what or who has gone before. More and more people I talk to have jumped into the DNA ancestry world, discovering where they're from and who came before.

Reading the Book of Acts is like reading the church's genealogy, going all the way back to find out how we got started, the first days of the church, what happened at the very, very beginning of it all for us as Christians. And this is some unbelievably amazing stuff that we see in the Book of Acts!

Last week we saw how it all got started, with the Holy Spirit gathering the first followers, arriving like a mighty wind and tongues of fire. People are bewildered and amazed and perplexed, and the crowds think that it's a huge, open-air drinking party because it's so loud and so large and so out of control. Then Peter stands up and gives the kind of sermon that preachers can only dream of giving. He weaves in the Hebrew Scriptures with Jesus' life, and three thousand people join the young Christian community.

And this is just the beginning! This morning we get a glimpse of the church at its very beginning - and it sounds wonderful, almost idyllic. They are sharing meals, they are doing theology, they are taking care of each other, they are praying together, they are generous with each other. And doing it all with gladness and joy.

This is the Church alive and on the move. No wonder they were called People of the Way. Imagine our little church here in Groton, Mass., we trace our roots back to that!

And imagine, in one day, the church going from the size of a Sunday School class to 3,000 people. The truth is, we've traveled so far from our first days and weeks as the church, that I wonder if we even can imagine it.

It was a risky design for a church start. Jesus left the faithful without a building, without a constitution or by-laws, without committees or even a pastor. Jesus left them no staff or structure, no budget or mission project. But Jesus did leave them with two things: each other and the Holy Spirit.

And we do see how they structured themselves and formed the soul of the early church: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers." And they began a tradition of sharing their possessions with those who were in need.

Teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers, and giving. Until they learned to care for each other, they were not going to be much help to the larger world.

Teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers, and giving.

This early church covenant sounds so simplistic, yet every faithful and healthy church will be rooted in these simple practices.

Congregations all over the planet have taken a sprig from this early Palestinian church and used it to replant - and the same thing grows again. All over, there are faith communities that tie their history back to this same beginning - rooted in this same story gathering every week to do the same things, which make them our brothers and sisters and first cousins, all because we share a family tree.

In my previous church there was someone named Becky. Her parents had just retired and were driving across country in their RV. Well they were in South Dakota when they had a terrible accident. Their injuries were life threatening and would require months of hospitalization and rehab...in South Dakota...where they knew no one. Of course Becky flew out there immediately, but then (of course) had to return to her family here in Massachusetts.

So I found a church in the town where they were hospitalized, and I called the pastor asking if he could go visit them. Of course he would. And that church cared for Becky's parents while they were there, visiting them in the hospital, taking flowers to them. It was beautiful!

They were caring for kin - people who share DNA because we trace our heritage back to the church of Acts 2.

Another pastor has said: "Contemporary religious life is plagued by momentary enthusiasm, periodic outbursts and superficiality ... a short-term high that does not take root in long-term commitment... It takes just a few months to grow a squash. It takes 100 years to grow an oak tree." (William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation Commentary*, p. 39)

He's right - but, while some churches never seem to be able to move beyond superficiality, there are plenty of churches who are still connected to their first-century roots, whose corporate life / shared life is marked by these core habits of teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, and giving.

Don't be fooled though - the early church was not some perfect fellowship where everyone got along and nothing went wrong. It didn't take the church very long to drift away from "glad and generous hearts." Just a few chapters later a husband and wife defraud the Jerusalem church.

And Paul, who planted and encouraged many of the first churches, wrote just a few years later "It has been reported to me...that there are quarrels among you. By the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, be in agreement and let there be no divisions among you" (I Corinthians 1: 10-11) Quarrels and factions.... also sounds like the church.

I actually find it comforting that the Bible shows us the flawed nature of the first believers and their struggles to achieve and maintain unity in the church. We're in good company!

But here's the thing, when the church is faithful, rooted in its history, and connected to her ancestors, it will ask you to give away your money and eat together and share the Lord's Table together and study and pray together. And remember, we do all these things together, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The church at its best - a place of justice, worship, and deep sharing - is not the accomplishment of extraordinary folk. We are a gathering of people who understand ourselves as united in purpose and identity - not just a collection of individual churchgoers.

And our purpose is *Sharing Christ~Changing Lives*, which is shorthand for a community that exists not for its own sake, but to show the love of God given in Jesus.

Sharing and caring, celebrating and laughing, praising God with glad and generous hearts!

Back when I was a youth minister, we did an activity with the kids designed to experience world economics. We gathered the 30-plus youth in the fellowship hall and presented them with a feast. But

before the kids were allowed to eat, they were divided into groups representing the size and wealth of the people in the world.

Two kids were selected to represent the economically wealthy nations of the world, and they received one hundred dollars in play money to share between them. It was more than enough money to fill their plates up with anything on the menu: steak and potatoes, hamburgers, fries, dessert, drinks.

Ten more of the youth were selected to represent the less wealthy of the world, and they were given forty dollars of play money to share amongst themselves. It was enough to buy some food, but they would have to share and agree what they wanted and then receive smaller portions.

The twenty or so who were left - well you guessed it - they would receive only a few dollars and really the only thing that would be affordable and easy for them to buy and share would be rice!

The parents worked hard setting it all up. And so the evening got underway. The "wealthy" kids got to go first of course. But from there it didn't quite go as planned. When the kids who were supposed to be middle class and poor got to go through the line, they pulled out more and more money from their pockets.

It turns out that one of the youth had been tipped off in some way to the experiment, had found the play money we would be using, and photocopied it and shared it with all who were the poor.

Those who were supposed to receive rice were filling their plates, picking up hamburgers and hotdogs, slaw and baked beans. They even bought the white table cloth and the candelabra from those who were sitting at the table set for the rich. The kids were laughing, and celebrating, and sharing.

I thought the night was ruined. But one of the parents shook his head, chuckled and said, "Just look at this!"

And I did, and there were all those kids, laughing and smiling and throwing the play money in the air, giving and receiving, shaking their fists at the world order.

Sharing and caring, celebrating and laughing, praising God with glad and generous hearts!

Then there was what happened here, in our church just before Christmas.

On December 19 I receive two separate calls from people I didn't know. Two single moms (unrelated to each other) with health issues contacted the church seeking Christmas gifts for their children. I shared their requests on Facebook, asking if anyone could shop and wrap gifts for them. This was the Wednesday before Christmas, and we needed them in the church office by Friday noon so the moms could pick them up before the weekend.

And you wouldn't believe the outpouring.... shopping bag after shopping bag appeared in the office. And you made sure there were gifts for the moms as well. I wish you could have seen their faces when they came to get them.

The church at its best!

With each other and the Holy Spirit there will be sharing and caring, celebrating and laughing, praising God with glad and generous hearts!

Thanks be to God for churches that do just that - including our own.

Amen.