



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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October 10, 2010
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Text: [Acts 2:37-47](#)
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: [Acts 2:37-47](#)
Second Lesson: [Ephesians 2:11-22](#)
Gospel Lesson: [John 17:6-23](#)

Make Time For God's People To Grow in Faith Together To Grow Closer Together

It was probably 3 or 4 years ago when we had a Bible Study in our church regarding the ideal congregational light of God's Word. If I remember correctly, it was 8 or 9 lessons, 8 or 9 different characteristics of what the ideal congregation would look like in view of what God says in his Word. I thought it was a pretty interesting class. I thought it was pretty fascinating and kind of eye opening. I'm pretty sure that this is pretty close...1.6% is the percentage of our membership that went through at least part of the course. So I guess we get an abridged version by looking at Acts 2 and what the early church looked like and picking out some of these ideal congregational characteristics that were present then, and taking a look at ourselves and seeing how on this side of heaven we can get closer to the ideal before God takes us to the ultimate ideal, the perfection that is heaven.

The words that we read are just a general description of what life was like in the church at Jerusalem after the Festival of Pentecost. They were marked by devotion...devotion to God as revealed in his Word and Sacraments, and devotion to one another. I think you could say this was a congregation that we are looking at in Jerusalem that, at least in this paragraph summary of it, sought to do what Jesus said when he was asked, "What is the first and greatest commandment?" He said, "The first and greatest commandment is this. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. And the second is like unto it. Love your neighbor as yourself." If you look at the congregation, you can see that there, can't you? The devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.

They came together often and they listened to what the apostles taught about Jesus, who he was, what he did, what he said, and then the applications that would make for their life. They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. In this context of the apostle's teaching, fellowship and the breaking of bread into prayer sure sounds like he's talking about worship life, right? So in this case, I think it's feasible to say this breaking of bread is the Lord's Supper. On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and broke it. That would probably be the way they would repeat the Lord's Supper to one another...the breaking of bread. Jesus broke bread, so they broke bread as they celebrated the supper that Jesus had given them for the forgiveness of their sins.

They devoted themselves to the fellowship it says there, and this I think isn't how we so often just throw the term around as getting together and having coffee and cookies or something. Literally this is the bond, what bound them together. They devoted themselves to the things that brought them into unity with one another. That's what we've been looking at in all of our readings and in what we've sung so far today.

This fellowship, this closeness was that they who were once distant were now brothers and sisters in Christ. They were bound with one another by Christ, not necessarily by blood. They weren't all blood relatives, but they were all brothers and sisters in Christ. That's the fellowship they are talking about, this unity, this bond of peace and of love in Christ.

You see them devoting themselves to Word and Sacrament, to one another, and using that Word and Sacrament together and then responding to God with prayer...prayers of praise, prayers asking God to give them greater insights, asking God to bless them as they live their lives in 1st Century Jerusalem. They were devoted to the Lord their God with all their heart, all their soul and all their mind.

What's amazing is to see how this transformed them and that they devoted themselves to one another. They loved their neighbor as themselves. It says, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." And then they continued to be devoted to one another and come together more and more, and in this context, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts" meant they just spent time together. They got to know one another better. They broke bread in their homes. This doesn't sound like the context of worship. This just talks about eating together, agape meals, love meals. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts. The phrase there for glad and sincere hearts is kind of interesting. It's kind of what you would expect. You can think about it this way...did you ever have to stand for wedding pictures and smile for a seemingly endless amount of time until your cheeks hurt? Those last half-hour smiles, are they really genuine? Or does your face just hurt because you are faking it so bad? If you can picture that in your mind, this is the exact opposite. Glad and sincere hearts...they were happy to be there. This wasn't putting a false smile on their face and saying, "Oh, Hi Pete. Nice to see you. I'm glad to see you. How have you been doing?" And all the while thinking whose around here so I can get away from him so I don't have to talk to this guy. Have you ever done that? This was glad and sincere hearts. A genuine, deep and abiding love for one another that showed itself in action.

Can you even fathom this? They sold what they had and put it all together so that whenever anyone was in need, they'd have enough? We read that today and think what a bunch of commie freaks, right? Their love wasn't words. Their love wasn't just a verse and a hymn. Their love was palpable, right? You could touch it. You could see it. It was right there.

I'm not telling you that it was that way all day every day for these guys because they had sinful natures also. There's no doubt they screwed up just like you and I screw up.

But the thing that I find amazing is that even though they were still sinners, it says that everyone held them in high regard. Even the unbelievers looked at what these guys were like from the outside and said, "I don't know what it is, but they have something special there." No doubt they screwed up and they sinned against each other and against God. There's no denying that. They were breathing. They had to do that. Yet, outsiders looking in were still amazed at it. That's pretty fascinating.

The results of all of this, the results of this congregation that sought to live its love for God and its love for one another? It says "the Lord added daily to the number of those who were being saved." God still does the saving. It's still Jesus' life and death that saves anyone. It's still Jesus' life and death that builds any of us up in our faith. And it still better be Jesus' life and death in our place that moves us to love one another.

Yet, the Lord worked through all that so that daily the number of those being saved, those being delivered from hell into heaven increased. Literally it says the number of souls that were being saved, not just the number, but people. Souls that are in heaven right now were added to their number daily.

Just like I told you that I'm sure they still screwed up, I think it's kind of obvious as you start applying this to us here today that we don't do this all perfectly now, do we? You are probably sitting there as I'm going through this and talking about all those things bracing yourself thinking "pretty soon he's going to let us have it for where we've screwed up," aren't you? The fact of the matter is that of course we have. We too are breathing. And while we are breathing, we still have a sinful nature. Unfortunately our sinful nature gets the best of us all too often. So the thing that we as a congregation have to do is to look in our history and look in our lives, our past and our present, and see where the challenges are for us to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind. Where are the challenges for us to love our neighbor as ourselves?

Sometimes I think one of the greatest challenges we have as a congregation is that we seem to be walking under the impression that loving the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind is important until you are 13. Then after that once a week is good enough, or once every other week, or once every third week is good enough. That seems to be where we walk as a congregation because we pour our heart and soul into ministry to our children. That's a good and Godly thing and it's something to be thankful for, but the devil doesn't stop once you turn 14. The devil doesn't stop once you get confirmed. I heard a member say recently, "I think by the time they've been confirmed, they've had enough religion." Wipe your shoes off before you track that into our church, would you? That isn't right. That stuff kind of smells.

There isn't any one of us that's had enough religion if by religion we mean God's Word and God's Sacraments. There isn't a single one of us in this room that knows all that God would have us know about his incredible love for us in Christ that we looked at last week. There isn't a single one of us that is as close to God as he would want us to be.

I don't care. As close as we are today, we can get closer tomorrow. That's his goal and that's his purpose for us. We exist as a body of believers we say to glorify God by growing in the Gospel as a lifelong thing. That's what God has called us to do.

Sometimes I just wonder if we take to heart what God said in his Word when he says, "Be holy as I the Lord your God am holy," or "Be faithful to me." Sometimes I hear our members saying, "You know, other churches don't have all that many people in Bible class. Other churches don't have all their members in worship every week." It's as though God's Word is giving us the command "be a little more faithful than St. Joe Blow down the street and you're doing what I called you to do." That's not what God has called us to do. He's called us to be faithful, each of us individually.

That's the other thing...as we go through the challenges we are going through right now as a congregation, just be honest with yourself. Have you ever thought to yourself, "If only the rest of the members were doing what I'm doing, we wouldn't be in this problem." Have you ever thought that?

Where is your focus? When those thoughts come into our minds, where is our focus? It's not on loving the Lord with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind. It's not on Christ in the Word. It's not on Christ in the Sacraments. It's on our own bellybuttons, isn't it?

God calls us to look at him, focus on him and love him with all our hearts and find in him our strength and our comfort and our forgiveness. All too often we are looking in the wrong direction.

God's Word certainly is a mirror. It shows us our sin. So let's take our eye off the other mirror and quit staring at ourselves and get into the Word.

This love our neighbor as ourselves, this whole idea, they sold all they had and put it together in common...I can't wrap my mind around that at all. I'm sure if you are honestly thinking about it, you're thinking "That's nuts. That could never work. We could never do that." I don't think God has told us that we have to do that. But I do think God has told us to love one another.

I haven't been here all my life like most of you or many of you, but as I have talked to people and probed and tried to find out more about the history of our congregation, I really think this is an area where at times we are challenged to truly love one another, even those that don't have the same ideas that we do, or even those that we view as the problem on why our church doesn't grow or doesn't thrive. As I dig into the history of our congregation, I see times where various individuals have become the targets of people's focus on why things aren't better. "It's their fault. That way I don't have to look at myself and say 'What can I do better?' Instead I can just nod my head and say 'Isn't it a shame that this person is doing this or that or not doing this or that.'" I can see it starting to happen already now. As we struggle with all these issues as a congregation, I can see us not saying we are united around the Gospel and want to further God's

kingdom and further his love and encourage one another and build one another up. At times, Satan's getting us to see one another as the problem. "If only people don't listen to him or to her, then things will be alright." We have to be on our guard that we don't bite and devour one another because Satan will cackle in hell if we start doing that.

When it comes right down to it, this side of heaven, there is no ideal congregation. There is no perfect congregation. If we go through life trying to find one, we are going to be sorely disappointed. Our goal is to be a faithful congregation, not a perfect congregation. We can't be perfect on this side of heaven.

So what does a faithful congregation look like? A faithful congregation looks like this...it sees its flaws and it says, "Lord, have mercy on us, for we are sinners." Then it flees to the Word and it flees to the Sacrament and it finds forgiveness. In that forgiveness, it finds the source and the strength of love for one another. Then it finds whatever way it can to show that love for one another. That's what our God has called us to do. So be faithful. Don't strive for the perfect. We won't be perfect. But strive for faithfulness and when we sin, repent. And when we repent, forgive one another. And when we forgive one another, build one another up, love one another, encourage one another, and God will add daily to the number of those being saved as we share his Gospel.