

Let's begin today by talking about last week for a moment. What an awesome day we had at our church picnic and baptism celebration at Camp Massapoag! The food was great! A big thanks to all of you who prepared food and helped serve all of us. The day couldn't have been more beautiful. The weather was perfect and I watched kids swimming in the lake and people in canoes- which is a far cry from the previous year when we experienced a cold day and everyone was freezing. Last weekend was truly picturesque. And the exclamation mark of the whole thing was watching 24 of you step into the water to be baptized. We were moved by the stories you shared. Your faith was put on display for all to see. We were, many of us, reminded of our own baptisms, and it afforded us a chance to reflect on our faith in Jesus, and to rekindle our dedication to Him. We were thrilled as four of you decided, spontaneously, to go all in, and waded into the water wearing the clothes you came with. (I certainly hope you dried out enough before you left so you didn't soak your car seats.)

The beauty of what we shared in together as a church last weekend provides us with the perfect backdrop for what we will be studying today from the book of Acts.

***40** Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation!" **41** Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.*

***42** All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.*

***43** A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. **44** And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.*

***45** They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. **46** They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— **47** all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*

Today we look at the aftermath of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. It's much easier for me to picture what this actually looked like in light of what we experienced as a church last weekend. Is it for you? Peter, one of Jesus disciples, preached a sermon, and we're told that on that day 3,000 people believed (which is a few more than 24, but just give us time.).

There were only 120 followers of Christ up to that point, but afterwards there were 3,120. Within a couple of days, if you read further, another 2,000 people join them. There was explosive church growth, and it didn't end there. We know that faith in Christ swept through the Roman Empire and it continues to grow today. Why? What accounts for that kind of power? What causes this kind of receptivity? The early church experienced the same thing that we experience, and last week is an example, but it's not confined to church picnics. New life. Jesus has made it possible for us to experience new life- life to the full. And new life in Christ is as contagious and invigorating today as it was 2,000 years ago.

If you're here investigating faith, and asking questions about who Jesus is; if you're curious about what life in Christ might look like for you- or even if you were just dragged down to the basement of an old mill by a friend who promised you a meal afterward- my hope is that today will provide you with some insight into what it looks like when a person is reborn in Jesus. \*\*\*

The question is, how do we know that new life is here? How do we know it's present in us? How do we know that we've actually been cut to the heart by it?

This passage we've just read is filled with the signs of this new life. But today I just want to draw our attention to one. There's an entirely new ability to love that grows in those who have been reborn in Christ, which is unexplainable without the presence of this new life. Around Harbor we describe this as the ability to "love deeply"

In verse 44 and again in verse 46 we learn that these new believers were together. I want you to see the strength of this. They were together. Where did they meet together? Everywhere. We're told they met in the temple but also in their homes. They met together everywhere. When did they meet together? Constantly. Relentlessly. It says, "each day" they met together. Do you see that? The followers of Christ came together every single day in the temple and in their homes. What does this mean? These people loved each other. They came together every day. Regular life was seen as an interruption. They couldn't be kept apart. That's the reason why the word, "together" is not so much something they did, it was something they were. They were together. There was unity among these early followers of Christ. It was a whole new mode of existence for them. It was a radical change in their lives..

If this new life in Christ is flourishing; if it's active and growing, you don't have to implore people to come together. We don't gather in response to a command, or as a form of duty. \*\*\* No, we come together as a response to the life Christ has sparked in their hearts. That's the sign that new life is at work in your life.

Now, what do we learn to explain this, especially since a lot of us have to immediately admit that this sign is not very evident in our own lives? In fact some of us, if we're honest, have to acknowledge that we actively avoid participating in community. Let's face it, our culture does not nourish this practice. Barriers to community are all around us. We have computer screens to dominate our workspaces, smart phones to dominate our interactions wherever we find ourselves, and if that wasn't enough, we have smart tablets too. Not to mention television, video games and movie theaters. We have saturated our lives with immersive, passive spectatorship. As a result our conversations trend toward the generally shallow. Our ability to share time with others, even people we love has such competition that we have to be diligent just to maintain relationships, let alone love deeply.

If this type of love that brings about togetherness is not very evident in our own lives, if it's not there at all, it should be cause for introspection. It's time for some soul searching. Take a hard look at your life and ask yourself, is the love of Christ at work in my heart? Because if it is, this love for each other, this desire for togetherness should be stirred up inside of us. And if it is not, then something's amiss. We need to ask God to instill this love in us.

So let's take a close look at this love that creates community.

First, who are these people that cannot get enough of each other? They're in each other's homes every night, they're breaking bread together, and they're enjoying each other's company. It says they shared meals with great joy and generosity. They had glad hearts. In verse 43 it says, "a deep sense of awe came over them all." Whenever they got together there was a sense of God's presence. There was awe and yet intimacy.

Who were these people getting together all the time? For this you need to look back on the rest of chapter 2 from Acts. This was not a normal Jerusalem crowd that Peter preached the gospel to on that day. It was a particular time of festival, and people were in Jerusalem from all over the world. We're told, literally in verse 5 of chapter 2, that Jews from every nation were present that day. Let me read it for you.

**5** *At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem.* **6** *When they heard*

*the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.*

**7** *They were completely amazed. “How can this be?” they exclaimed. “These people are all from Galilee, 8 and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages!*

**9** *Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, 10 Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!” 12 They stood there amazed and perplexed. “What can this mean?” they asked each other.*

Now, some people say, “I know what makes people religious. Religion is an expression of a personality type.” Right? Some of you might suggest that there are “religious types,” or “religious personalities.” There are types of people that enjoy this kind of stuff or even need it. It takes a person like that to enjoy all of those gatherings. “Not me, I’m not the touchy feely type. I think religion is a personal thing.” How can that be in light of what we just read? Every single kind of person was present.

And here’s the other thing. Many people say that religion is an expression of culture. “Religion is just an expression of the culture you’re from. If you’re Italian or Irish you’re probably Catholic. If you’re from Israel you’re into Judaism. If you’re Arabian you’re into Islam and if you’re Indian you’re into Hinduism,” and on and on. That couldn’t be in this case, because there was every culture possible. Every race. Every class. Every temperament. And here’s what’s so impressive. These are people that seemed to have nothing in common. They don’t have a common culture. They don’t share the same personality type. They’re not from the same social class. And yet these are the people who immediately are in each other’s homes every day. They were together.

When Christ enters our lives it shouldn’t surprise us that suddenly the things that used to divide us from others no longer apply. (I live in Chelmsford, you live in Lowell; I’m a blue collar worker, you’re a white collar; I’m from New England, you’re from somewhere else) these are no longer barriers to our ability to experience togetherness. You guys are Pats fans and I grew up in Denver so I love the Broncos and we can still be friends! (Except for maybe on November 2<sup>nd</sup> when they face off at Gillette.) The things that once separated us and were barriers to fellowship-in Christ, those things diminish to the point of irrelevance. He goes deeper than our political affiliations. He’s deeper than family ties. He runs deeper than Red Sox versus Yankees for crying out loud!

I want to ask you a question. Do you have people like that in your life? Are there people in your life that the good news of Jesus has brought you into relationship with, that before you would have avoided or even despised? Do you have people like that in your life?

Next, we have to ask, what did these people do when they were together? I want us to see not just who came together, but what did they do when they came together? Here are the things these new believers did when they gathered. Whether they were in a large group or a small group, here’s what they did, verse 42, *“All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer.*

They studied the apostles teaching. They devoted themselves to it. They reflected on it and put it into practice. They were not enjoying some kind of mystical experience that led them to despise their minds or shun deep thinking. These new believers were hungry to learn.

They also loved each other. It says they devoted themselves to fellowship. Now you may ask, "what do you mean they devoted themselves to fellowship?" Well, though they had this great thing in common- the new life- they worked it out. They had to work on and work at their commonality in Christ. These people in the early church did that when they were together. They bore each other's burdens. They were able to be honest about their sins in a way that they could never be honest before. To someone else who thinks that the way you make it in life is by hiding your flaws and never letting them see you sweat, they think that's the way of the world. But when you deal with someone who has experienced new life in Christ- someone who has humbled themselves and admitted that they don't have what it takes and thrown themselves on the mercy of the Savior- well that creates an entirely different situation. Finally we're able to be completely open with another person. These early believers bore one another's burdens and confessed sins to each other. That was the fellowship they worked out amongst each other. \*\*\*

Then lastly they shared meals (including the Lord's Supper) and prayers. What they were doing was participating in worship together. They were corporately remembering what Jesus had done for them and offering Him praise. So they learned together. They loved each other. And they worshipped Jesus together.

That's what they did, and as a result, we're told that they began to minister to each others' needs. Verse **44** says, "*All the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.*" **45** *They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.* They were generous with each other and we learn elsewhere they were also generous with those who did not share their faith. It could be said, that the more they learned how to live fully and love deeply the more they began to give freely.

Then we learn in verse 47 that, every day the church grew. It says, "*And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*"

Why did this happen? It happened because they had favor with all the people. Take note, this did not require some outreach program to be put into place. No, it was simply that their lives were so attractive and their sense of community was so gracious that they found people joining them.

Signs of life- that's what the early church was demonstrating. We need to look at ourselves and ask, "Are we participating in large group and small group gatherings like this early church did?" Do we? That's what the early church did. Do you? \*\*\*

Now we've seen what these early Christians did when they gathered, but there was a power engine driving this. That we see at the end of these verses. **46** *They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—* **47** *all the while praising God.*

That's what they did when they were studying the apostles teaching. That's what they were doing when they shared meals and gave generously to each other. Praising God is the engine that drives all of this and I'll tell you why.

C.S. Lewis has a very interesting thing to say about aesthetics, which is appropriate for us to think about right now. Lewis says, "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy, because the praise does not merely express, but completes the enjoyment. It is a pointed consummation. It is not merely to compliment that lovers tell one another how beautiful they are, the delight itself is incomplete

until it's expressed."

That's very profound, but it's something we all know. When you find a piece of music or a song that you love; when you see a painting or a piece of art that you love; in fact, when you watch a great athlete and marvel at their ability; when you see something beautiful, Lewis says, there's something about the beautiful thing itself that makes you want to grab someone and pull them in and say, "Look!" "Listen!" You have to, he says, because beauty demands praise. The joy you get from beauty, when you experience it, has to be expressed. It has to liberate itself in praise. You say, "Look at how great that is!" We praise it, because we do not find that our joy is complete until we've done so. And when somebody else says, "Yeah!" our joy finds itself. Do you see what Lewis is saying? He says you don't just express your joy, you complete your joy when you praise the object of beauty.

If you don't understand this, you won't understand anything that followers of Christ do when we get together. Do you know why we get together? We've experienced the beauty of God at work in our lives. We've learned that God loves us.

So here's what we do, when we gather here together, we're joining with others who see God's beauty and say, "Look at that!"

Why do you see Jed or I up here each week teaching with passion, attempting to be eloquent in what we say; what do you think we're doing up here? We've seen something beautiful and we have to share it! It's the same reason you pull off your headphones and say, "You've got to listen to this track!" Because the more beautiful the object the more that joy in you surges to get out- and the more perfectly you can praise it the higher the joy.

That's what Christians are doing when we get together. We don't gather for the same reasons that a club gets together or a political party gathers- we're not trying to affirm our shared interests amongst each other- that's not it.

Why did the early church meet every day? Do you know what fellowship is? How do we comfort each other? We don't just say, "There, there." We say, "Praise the One who was broken for you. He's acquainted with sorrow. He will see you through." We're praising the one who was broken for us. That's why we celebrate communion together each Sunday. We say, "Praise the One who was so holy that He could die for our sin." How do we confront each other? We do it by praising God to each other. How do we comfort each other? We praise God to each other. How do we experience healing? We praise the mercy and power of God with one another. That's what we're doing. Why do we share our faith with others? It's impossible for a person on the outside to understand this. They'll say, "You know it's very narrow minded to try and convert people." All we're doing is getting the joy out. "Well," they say, "It's nice for you, but you shouldn't try to persuade someone else." What are you talking about? We don't just see Jesus as nice for us, we see Him as absolute beauty. Of course we're going to want to share that with others.

That's what we're doing, and that's why we're doing it. That's what drives us. We want to help people find their way back to God because we have seen such unfathomable beauty in who He is that we can't help but share it. Surely everyone deserves the opportunity to know about the beauty of our gracious, merciful God. How could we possibly keep Him to ourselves?

Did you notice in our text that it said the early church was "devoted" to this? Are you devoted to fellowship? Are you devoted to being one with other followers of Christ? Some of us are indifferent. We look around the room and we see some people we identify with and others we don't. Some of you are my kind of people, and others of you aren't. Listen. We cannot praise the sacrifice of Jesus and at the same time content ourselves with running in little clicks or isolated circles of friends. You cannot praise Jesus' death on your behalf and be indifferent to others at

the same time. You can't. Oh you may know that He died on the cross but what creates fellowship is praising Him for doing it. Rejoicing in His act of love; focusing on the degree to which He has extended Himself on our behalf.

Look at Jesus and we will break all the barriers of culture; we'll break all the barriers of race; we'll break all the barriers of temperament. Indifference, sensitivity, hurt feelings, anger, passivity- all these things go away because we praise the One who was broken for us.

Be devoted to fellowship. Stir up this sign of new life in you and in this church!