

Front porch fellowship
Acts 2:41-47
4/13/08
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Scene 1 God in Jesus rescues and saves us through teaching and fellowship

2000 years ago, the First Church of Jerusalem starts meeting after Peter's Pentecost message. Can you see them?

The public gathering space for the first Christians is in the court of the Gentiles, in the enormous outer court of the Temple (1470 feet by 975 feet in dimensions). In fact, the first Christians meet in a covered portico or porch along the 490 foot east wall of the Temple compound. Solomon's Portico. A place of much activity, business, and general visiting by the population of Jerusalem and visitors. You see, far from isolating themselves from everyday life and everyday people, the first Christians, the first church of Jerusalem, live out their faith in the middle of everyday life. On the front porch of the Jerusalem temple.

In an era when everyday folks were denied access to authentic faith by the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Priests, the first Christians lived their faith right in the middle of them. Christians didn't have to learn all the special traditions of the Pharisees, or be rich and powerful like the Sadducees, or have the birthright of a Priest or Levite, or separate themselves totally from society like the Essenes. They could do their jobs, love their families, call on Jesus as Lord, and admit their need for cleansing through confession and baptism. And they lived out their life of faith on the front porch of their culture.

Maybe this is just the image we need to remove the defensive, anti-culture, retreat from society, and elitist thinking that threatens many of our churches today. Or maybe that's too harsh a judgment on today's churches ... what do you think?

And what do you think about seeing ourselves as God's front porch to a culture hungry for Jesus and yet turned off by what they think churches stand for?

If you think about it, Starbucks has become our modern day version of the front porch. I like to think the church is something like that, except it is also a place where folks can come to meet Jesus. I believe we are called to be the front porch for God's community. Where Peter teaches and fellowship occurs.

The early Christians had great fellowship. They broke bread together, they talked together, they laughed together, they sang together. "See how those Christians

love one another," observers declared. It must have been a joyous experience being part of that first church. Any church that's doing what it ought to be is a joyous place to be. Potlucks, coffee table, visiting with each other between Sundays. These things may not seem very spiritual to many people, but we would be making a terrible mistake if we were to minimize the importance of fellowship to the life of the church.

Christian fellowship is one of the greatest gifts that we have to offer the world. I remember a PEANUTS comic strip many years ago. Charles Shultz has a way of looking into our hearts. He has Lucy saying, "It's my life." Sounds like Lucy, does it not? "It's my life and I'll do whatever I want with it. I'm my own person. It's my life and I'm the one who has to live it." In the last frame she grins and adds, "With a little help." We all need that little bit of help from our friends.

When we were baptized into the Christian Church, we did not become an island unto ourselves. We became part of a body the body of Christ. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian, except perhaps under the most unimaginable circumstances of deprivation.

You need some place in your life where you can trust other people where people will accept you just as you are and will not seek to take advantage of you. The world is so often taking advantage of us. Church is a place where you can be loved just because you are a fellow believer in Jesus Christ.

Of course there are dangers, even in Christian fellowship. The greatest danger is that we could become just another clique a group of people who are so turned inward that we are blind to the needs of others. There is the story about a fellow who toured a factory. "This is the world's largest grease factory," the tour guide said as they started through the gigantic plant. They walked through rows of machines with gears turning, wheels revolving, cylinders whirling, belts running, huge motors roaring away. Toward the end of the tour the fellow asked the guide, "What do you do with all the grease you make here? To whom do you sell it?" The guide said, "Oh, no. We don't sell it. We have to use all that we produce to lubricate the machinery here at the factory." That grease factory is a metaphor. We can put all of our energy, all of our time in church to lubricating our own machinery if our fellowship causes us to turn inward and ignore the needs of the world outside.

The number of those being added to the early church was increasing daily. That meant that they were constantly enlarging the fellowship. There is not much joy in a church that is not enlarging its circle of fellowship. If you keep fellowship to yourself, fellowship dies. When you keep enlarging that circle of fellowship you have life, hope, meaning, purpose and joy. The early disciples met together for study and worship and for fellowship. They broke bread together and they praised God with joy.

Scene 2 God in Jesus rescues and saves us through worship

What was worship in the Jerusalem church, the first Christian church, what was that like? Acts 2:41-47 tells us.

κηρυγμα – Preaching and welcoming the Word, Acts 2:41

εβαπτισθησα̃ν - Baptism, Acts 2:42

κλασει του αρτου ταισ – Breaking bread, Acts 2:42

προσευχαισ – Prayer, Acts 2:42

αινουντες τον θεον – Praising God, Acts 2:47

Do we do these things? Well, you are listening to the Word preached right now. We are having a Baptism on May 4 in the Harpeth River. We are celebrating the Lord's Supper in a moment by breaking bread. We have offered and will offer more prayer to God today. And we praise God in prayer and song. So are we worshipping God like the Jerusalem church? You betcha!

Have you ever wondered what the church service might have been like in Rome in the first two centuries after Jesus died? Justin, the Christian apologist, has given us a description of the Sunday service at his church in Rome around A.D. 150.

“On the day which is called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the countryside gather together in one place. And the scripture is read as long as there is time. Then, when the reader has finished, the preacher, in a message, admonishes and invites the people to practice these examples of virtue. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as we mentioned before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is presented, and wine with water; the president likewise offers up prayers and thanksgivings according to his ability, and the people assent by saying, Amen. The elements, over which thanks has been given, are distributed and received by each one; and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who are prosperous, if they wish, contribute what each one deems appropriate; and the collection is deposited with the president; and he takes care of the orphans and widows, and those who are needy because of sickness or other cause, and the captives, and the strangers who sojourn amongst us -- in brief, he is the curate of all who are in need.”

Justin's description is of an intimate and joyful act of thanksgiving, one done not individually but in community. Justin is describing a corporate experience here, a Communion of community, the action of an intimate group of believers -- and perhaps non-believers or others struggling to believe or to search out their faith -- who all share together, pray together, live together, and eat and drink and give thanks together. They're active, not passive, in their ministering as the Body of Christ. They have a sense of who they are together as the “family of God.”

One contemporary writer makes this observation:

“You have heard it said that the family that prays together stays together. I say to you that the family that eats together stays together.

Could the contemporary breakdown of many of our families be attributed to our families' so rarely eating together?...

Little wonder that love and unity are difficult for us. We cannot share something even so basic as bread.

And if mealtimes are basic for the unity and maintenance of human families, how much more basic is this table fellowship for the family of God. Something sacred happens to people who have shared food and drink.”

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“All across cultures and faiths, the act of eating together is a universal sign of unity and love. Jesus knew this. One need only recall the progression of meals in the Gospels in which he ate with saints and sinners to be reminded of the centrality of table fellowship and the symbolic power of sharing food and drink... Nor is it surprising to find the early church, when it gathered for Sunday worship, gathered not in the temple but at the table.”

The small church has been shortchanged of late, sold out in favor of the numbers game and hurt by unfair comparisons to the large church. A mistake has been made, because the small churches are the right size for meaningful worship, for genuine community, for experiential education, for lifegiving support -- in short, for true, intimate, spiritual communion.

This morning, as we join together for the Lord's Supper as the family of God, you'll not be afraid to smile at the elder who serves you, or to look at your neighbor beside you or behind you as you partake. And when you do, give thanks. For that person individually and for the Communion of saints.

Conclusion

There was once a preacher who visited a certain man to urge him to come to church. They were standing and talking in front of a fireplace when the man said, "I do have faith and I do believe in God, but I don't think I need the church."

Without saying a word, the preacher reached into the fireplace with a poker iron and pushed one ember off to the side.

The two of them stood there for several minutes and watched the ember in silence. It burned brightly for a while, but then it began to fade. It grew more dim until finally, it went out. The solitary ember was gone, but the fire kept on blazing.

Suddenly, the man understood the preacher's point. The religion of "God and me" is not enough. It may be popular, but it is not Biblical. Real Christianity remains what it has always been: a religion of "God and we."

The secular vision is wrong. We are not meant to be in this society as "a thousand points of light" - each of us separate by ourselves, flickering precariously in the night. A thousand points of light can easily be blown out by a hard, strong wind.

No, we Christians are meant to be a giant flame together, a light which the darkness can never overcome (John 1:5). We are meant to be together in Christ, a flame of faith, hope and love which is large enough to make the whole world bright.

How do we respond to Jesus' sacrifice and his resurrection by God? We respond by gathering together for study and worship, as we are doing this morning. We respond by having genuine fellowship together to laugh together, love together, sing together, give thanks together. It is to remember what is the source of the church's vitality and mission the awesome power of prayer.