

Uncommon Faith, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. x4050417
Acts 2:42-47 and 1 Peter 2:19-25
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 17 April, 2005

We gather here on the first day of each week to proclaim the Easter faith that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Sunday has traditionally been called “The Lord’s Day.” It is a day devoted to God and to the celebration of the Good News of God’s love. We gather here to worship. We praise God and we listen for God’s voice and direction in our lives.

We do this as part of a longstanding tradition. According to the record in Acts, the first disciples did so shortly following the resurrection of Jesus. As Luke wrote, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”¹ Luke indicates that there was joy in that early fellowship. The believers shared everything in common and gave as each had need. Luke says they had “glad and generous hearts.”²

There were four simple elements to the congregational life of the early disciples: listening to the teaching of the apostles; fellowship; breaking of bread, and prayers. Listening to the teaching of the apostles meant hearing people like James, Peter and John tell what it was like to be with Jesus. They probably shared his teachings. That way, newcomers to the group learned in more detail what Jesus was like and what he meant. They shared his commandments like loving one another. This was the proclamation, or *kerygma*. What were its implications for daily living? We continue the tradition of that aspect of congregational life as we hear the Scripture Lessons read during worship and as we study the Bible in Sunday school classes and groups like Companions in Christ.

The early Christians shared fellowship with each other. They shared each other’s companionship and got to know each other. “Fellowship” in the New Testament consists of a two-fold relationship: a vertical relationship in and with Christ and a horizontal relationship of the sharing together of Christians in and with Christ. Our word “fellowship” translates the Greek *Koinonia* which means “sharing.” The word can be used in the New Testament as a synonym for financial contributions: the act of sharing one’s material possessions with others. We imitate this aspect of congregational life as we greet each other before, during, and after worship, although what we do here in this room does not begin to scratch the surface of really getting to know each other. We are learning what joys and sorrows we have so that we can offer support to each other.

The disciples broke bread together. This happened in two ways. First, they celebrated the Lord’s supper with each other. They remembered Jesus sacrifice: his broken body and shed blood as he was crucified. Second, they ate meals with each other.

Some of my family’s most gratifying meals have taken place as we would call over the back fence to our neighbors to bring their meat over and we’d cook theirs and ours on the back yard grill. Then our families would eat together without worrying about hosting, cleaning, or menus. A last-minute call to some friends to come over for dinner can often lead to an enjoyable evening. In the early church, dining together created a tie or bond among the diners which in turn created an ethical obligation toward them. We recall the early church’s breaking bread together as we share communion and as we eat fellowship meals in the parish house.

Those early disciples prayed together. Together, they would raise their hands and voices to

¹Acts 2:42

²Acts 2:46

the one they knew created them. New Testament examples of prayer, according to Fred Craddock, include “prayers of thanksgiving for their experience of divine grace, prayers for deliverance from tight circumstances, and petitions on behalf of their own members.”³ One by one, members of the group would share their thanks and their concerns with God. As they became aware of God’s great presence around them, they were spiritually nourished by God’s spirit within them. Prayer is the recognition that there is a God: a higher being who has given us life, love, and meaning. Prayer implies common prayer where a group prays for one another and individual prayer where individuals keep in daily contact with their creator. Both public and private prayer involve lifting the needs of the world to God. The church at its best is, as Craddock says, “faithful in teaching; active in sharing; devoted to eating, praying and worshipping together; fearful before the Divine; and exuberant in its praise of God.”⁴

In the lesson from Acts, we are told of the early Christians’ generosity toward one another. This was an uncommon faith. We do not generally see generosity like that in the world around us. It is generosity and love for each other that will make us different from the rest of the world.

I wonder where along the way between that early church in Jerusalem and today, Christians began to say to each other, “This is how you’re supposed to worship.” “That is not acceptable in worship.” Do you think that Mary Magdalene ever sang in the presence of the other disciples? Do you wonder whether James or John would say to Mary, “That song wasn’t appropriate to worship.”? I wonder why Christians think we have the right to determine what pleases God and what doesn’t please God as we worship. How do we know what is in the heart of another— or what feelings or sense of the divine wells up from within a person’s soul? We come to this place on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We do not come here to critique the ways in which others proclaim that Gospel. God did not put us on this earth to judge the ways in which others show the value of God in their lives.

Shortly after Luke wrote this description of the community of faith, the Eastern Church split from the Western Church over the primacy of one of the Apostles, Peter, who was declared the first Pope. Since that time, followers of Jesus Christ have split his body into hundreds of denominations, drawing boundaries around themselves, casting others out or willfully withdrawing themselves. How does this petty bickering appear to non-Christians? How does this reflect the glad and generous hearts of that early church? Instead of being healed by Christ, we wound Christ again and again, by splintering, judging, bickering, and complaining!

The call for us this morning is to follow the lead of the good shepherd. We humbly follow Jesus, knowing that sheep come in many varieties. We welcome others with glad and generous hearts, and with encouragement.

The book of Acts also tells of the steady work of God in the life and growth of the church. This fourfold devotion to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayers, had positive results: All who believed were together and had all things in common. They spent much time together in the temple/church. They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, they praised God, they had the goodwill of all the people, and day by day the Lord added to their numbers those who were being saved.

³ Fred Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year. Year A*, © 1992, Trinity Press International, p. 264-265

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 266