

More than Just a Prayer. More than Just a Table.
Homily for Sardis Baptist Church
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9th Sunday after Pentecost (Communion Brunch)
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Acts 2:42-47

The book of Acts, especially the first few chapters, offers us a look at the earliest Church, long before it became institutionalized. And the first line of today's text jumps out at me for its simplicity.

Not long after Pentecost, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the Jesus movement encompassed several thousand people. But we don't hear about a strategic plan, or an annual budget, or the size of its staff, or the construction of some grand space. Nor do we hear the articulation of some subtle theological point that signifies this church's difference, or superiority, or self-proclaimed righteousness. Matter of fact, we don't even know if they had a sign, or a logo, or even regular worship hours.

We just hear that this was a devoted, healthy group, focused on the apostles' teachings and fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

In the life of Jesus, the apostles had experienced God in a new way. Something had fundamentally transformed them, and connected them, and they were eager to share and to process their journey with new people. And their neophytes were eager to learn, and to share in that experience.

And they ate. Together. Breaking bread is as human as breathing. And yet when done in community, it takes on power. These earliest church-goers found both spiritual and physical bread. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, they longed to hear about, and to follow a God who offers love and grace. And like those Israelites, they found manna, not from the sky, but from generosity derived of the spirit.

And they prayed. Prayers of old. New ones, too! Because they believed that the God who had transformed the past, who'd been present in Egypt, and Babylon, and even just a few months ago in Jerusalem, was present right then and there, too, and would be present in all the days to come. So they gave thanks. And they cried for help. And they shouted *amens* for all the ways God wowed them, both big and small.

And day by day, the Lord added to their numbers those who were being saved – not saved from sin, not saved from brokenness, not saved from some damning flaw they could not overcome. No. Those who were saved – ones who needed healing from woundedness; ones who needed to be reminded of their worth as created beings; ones who needed rescue from the blah and monotony of Caesar's wheel; ones who needed affirmation to live into their blessedness; ones who needed just a little help in reimagining the goodness of God in a world bent on ignoring it; ones who needed permission to acknowledge just how awesome they are, just as they are: Children of God.

Friends, I know that we are living in tumultuous times, with overwhelming problems to solve. I imagine the same was true for the Acts church, too. But I find myself increasingly frustrated in this ever-more secular world, with the popular sentiment that our thoughts and prayers are not enough, and that in too many instances our thoughts and prayers ring hollow. Indeed, I also believe that it will take action, tangible action, to resolve gun violence, environmental issues, humanitarian crises, nasty isms, and so on and so on. But such action, to me, rings hollow without the thoughts and prayers that undergird our

faith, and indeed this community. It seems to me that the power of the earliest church was bound up in the fact that they integrated prayer AND action. The Acts of the Apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, channeled in prayers spoken and lived.

Prayer. Thoughts. Advocacy. Hard Work. Love. None of these things are in a silo all to themselves. No matter how many trolls on social media want to tell you it is so.

When we follow the example of the Christ, and of the earliest disciples, we make a radical statement: Every creature – that is humanity, and our plants and animals and ecosystems, all the components of our universe – Every creature is made in the image of a good and wonderful God. And therefore, every creature is to be valued, to be affirmed, to be welcomed into the community of believers.

When we tell the story of Jesus, we celebrate and confirm God's community. When we gather as believers, we keep that spirit alive, and God is present. When we break bread together in this room, we model what every table should be, and we leave with a challenge of broadening our own personal tables. And when we pray, we acknowledge God's presence, and God's ability to make us instruments of God's transformation.

But more than anything, when we follow the examples of that earliest church, we discover our connectedness to God, to one another, and to all of creation. And when we are connected, we are transformed, because any assault on creation – pollution, violence, racism, greed – it's an assault on all of us. Therefore, doing what is right is no longer a burden, but is instead a calling.

Let me rephrase it. Do you adhere to the Ten Commandments – that is do you avoid killing people, stealing from people, breaking up relationships – because it's coded law? Or do you refrain from these things because you understand that your neighbors are entitled to the same dignity and respect you would expect from them? In other words, do you have a heart connection to your community?

Do you recycle your soda cans, or buy organic produce, or refrain from purchasing clothing made in sweat shops, or call your elected officials to advocate for the marginalized, or modify your pronouns because you are shamed into such practices? Or do you take on these healthy disciplines because you see them as a tangible way to express your love, respect, and connectedness for your neighbors?

We talked about a lot of traditional words last month: salvation, and sin, and atonement, and prayer. I think what all these words are trying to get at is this: Jesus reframes the world for us. Caesar has made resource-sharing a burden, a weakness, a thing of nonsense. But Jesus tells us that our worth as created beings outweighs any advantage we may find in political, economic, social, or other humanly-constructed gains. And Jesus invites us into a lifestyle of empathy, and compassion, and love, manifested in a million micro-actions: conversations, meals, encounters, prayers, gifts, etc. And those encounters change the world. They do. They really, really do!!!

And all of this is a round-about way of telling you that the table before us matters, and matters inherently. God welcomes you, whoever and however you are, into this sacred, timeless space. These resources, this community, this bread, this cup, these words are for you, because we are connected. And if even an inkling of this spirit seeps beyond our walls today, then the world is better for it. Because this table, and indeed this community of faith, is not a brain exercise, it's a heart exercise. And when hearts are transformed the healing of the world begins, and the intentions of God's creation take shape.

Long, long ago, a rag-tag group of believers decided that community was important. They decided that praising God, breaking bread, sharing resources, being empowered by the Holy Spirit, living with empathy, modeling the life of Jesus, and holding their vulnerabilities and intimacies in a safe environment – heart-living – would all contribute to making their little corner of the world a better representation of God’s intended world. And they also knew that doing such things would make them ever more aware of God’s presence, and of their ability to transform the world.

Would that ours might be a community like theirs. Would that the table before us provoke our hearts to transformative action. Would that we dream so big, and pray so authentically, and live so full of love, and act so boldly that tomorrow’s headlines reflect the world we long for. God’s world.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.