Sermon – Loving the Church of Right Now

Scripture: Acts 2: 42-47 Sunday, October 29, 2017

Last Sunday we looked as Haggai’s prophecy to Zerrubabel and Jeshua that the glory of the Second temple they were overseeing would exceed the glory of the first. I asked you all the question. Do you hear God speaking these words to you about Argentine Church? I think what God is going to do in our midst will be greater that what he has done so far, because we have the opportunity to build on top of what has gone before. As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I spent a lot of time praying about the next step and what message God wanted me to bring to you today. And the message I got from God relates to what was happening in the early church in the portion that we read in Acts 2:42-47. So let take a little trip back in church history before we come back to where we are today.

So to give you a little bit of a context to our Acts passage, we are looking at a time just after the Pentecost moment. 120 people had just been anointed with the Holy Spirit and received the ability to speak in all kinds of tongues. Initially there was a little confusion about this power among the visitors. But then Apostle Peter gets up and explains what has happened in terms of God’s larger plans and purpose. The combination of seeing the miracle of the tongues and a very clear explanation of God’s purpose by Apostle Peter caused the people listening to be cut to the heart and they could not wait to respond. So they cry out, “what must we do, Peter?” So Peter tells them, to repent of their sins and be baptized. Three thousand people repented and were baptized that day. And that experience was so unique that all who experienced that became a new community, and that community was called the church. And if you think that growing the church by 3000 people on one day was an incredibly big thing, well, that kind of growth continued for a long period and even 2000 years later you have explosive church growth still happening in different regions of the world.

Powerful stuff don’t you think! But here is the fascinating thing about all these periods of explosive growth. When the church grew explosively at the very beginning of church history or at any other period, do you know the one thing that the church in those periods were not focused on? Any guesses? The one thing that the church was not focused on was “explosive church growth”. You heard me right. When churches have grown explosively, it was not because they had the best explosive church growth strategy ever. Whenever churches have grown explosively, it is because they were focused on being church in every sense of the word. And that is what we are seeing in the Acts 2 church. So what did being church mean for the brand new church? I am glad you asked. It just meant 4 things. Focus on the Apostles teachings, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. Just four things. Get these 4 elements right and you get church right. In our church we a very focused on scripture and the apostles teachings.

We have also made a great stride forward in our weekly prayer and I will be coming back to the topic of prayer from time to time. But I am excited that we have 6 people praying weekly for our church and all the prayer requests in the bulletin and much more. This has also shown amazing results like the addition of Abraham and our brand new worship team. I know that this is only the beginning.

The third thing on the list is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We are celebrating the Lord’s supper today and I am excited about that. Next Sunday I will address why celebrating the sacraments is so important for the church community. But today I want to focus on the idea of fellowship. What does it mean to have fellowship? Where does this idea come from and what are the elements of fellowship and what is the purpose of fellowship?

To get us started I want to go back towards the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry when he was hanging out with his disciples and giving them his last critical instructions. At that time one of the things he told his disciples in John 13:34 and 35 is this. *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

So who was Jesus giving this commandment to? His disciples. And which is the institution that houses his disciples? The church. So the church then becomes the first place where Jesus’ John 13:34 commandment gets carried out. “Loving each other as he has loved us”. So how is this “loving each other” actually supposed to work?

The first think that we see in the Acts 2 church is that they had a lot of meals together. They ate together a lot. In fact verse 47 says, “they shared their meals with great joy and generosity”. Why is this a big deal? We also love to eat together and we do it in our church too, quite often. And that is great. But in Acts 2 there is something going on that needs to be pointed out. You see there is a statistic that many in the US are probably not aware of. In the US the percentage of our income that is spent on food is the lowest in the whole world. It is just 6.8%. The average in the rest of the developed world is between 10-15% and the average in the developing world is a whopping 30%-40%. Of the three basic necessities of life, food, clothing and shelter, the developing world spends more than a third of their income just to put food on the table. And this statistic in important because this 30-40% number would have been closer to what the ancient world spent on food. And when you have to spend 5 times more of your income to put food on the table than what we are used to in the United States, you can imagine that food is really a bigger deal to them than it is to us. Think about this. When you have a group of people with a lot of income disparity, the kind of food that they can afford to eat varies much more in developing countries than it does in our country. With this information, now I want you to picture what it would mean to actually come together as a community and share your meal with joy and generosity. This was not something you would see a lot in the ancient world. You would not see a lot of people of different income levels sharing meals. So the early church disciples were modeling something the world had not seen before by sharing meals together. And Acts 2 verse 46 in the NIV says “they eat together with glad and sincere hearts”. They had joy in their hearts as they were sharing these wonderful meals. Something like our meal together for Abraham’s commissioning last Sunday 😊

Now the fellowship that the Acts 2 church had did not stop at just eating together. Verse 45 says they also took care of each others needs. They had concern for each other and actually acted as family. They gave to everyone who was in need. Let me give you a context as to how important this was going to be in the days to come. You see, at this point in church history, you can call it the honeymoon phase of the church, the church was looked at very favorably by outsiders. But things would change very soon. Within a few years, Saul the Jewish leader who would one day become Paul, would facilitate the stoning of a church elder Stephen. That event would initiate a tremendous persecution of the church by the Jews. Later on by AD 64, the Romans too would also start persecuting the Christians. And when the church is persecuted, it is very difficult for believers to get jobs and feed their families. Now imagine how critical the church community and their habit of eating together and meeting each others needs would become. In fact at that point it would be a matter of life and death. People survived because they had a community to go to where those who had resources would gladly share with those who were in desperate need because of the intense persecution.

But before all this persecution began, the way the Christian disciples conducted themselves was seen in such good light by those around that Acts 2 verse 47 says, the church enjoyed the goodwill of all people. In other words, the disciples themselves were actually living out the John 13:34 commandment to love each other as Christ had loved them. Outsiders saw this and could recognize the distinctly Christian love demonstrated in their group, and that caused God to be praised. And all kinds of people started saying, we want what you all got over there man! Whatever you have, we want some o dat.

You see the Acts 2 church had powerful fellowship because the community of believers were greatly encouraged by hanging out with each other. You see when you hang out with each other you come to know peoples needs and when you know peoples needs you have an opportunity to take care of those needs. And they did that. They were generous and sincerity and had joyful hearts filled with praise for God. And guess what happens as a result. The one thing that they were not actively aiming for. Because Acts goes on to record literally thousands of people being added to the church almost on a daily basis. Pretty amazing don't you think?

So, having said all that, we always come to the point where we have to ask ourselves, so how do Jesus new commandment in John 13:34 and the example of the early church in Acts 2 speak to us and our situation and our church, right?

So this is how I see it. If we want to facilitate God making a Haggai 2 kind of prophetic vision come true for our church, our main focus should be in here and not out there. What does that mean? It means that we need to be focused on loving each other like Christ loved us. That means making sure we hang out with each other, spend enough time with each other to know each others needs are and seeing what we can do to help. I want to give a shout out to Judy who last Sunday saw that Anna had a really bad injury on her finger and was able to take her to the Urgent Care and get her taken care off. I think that is a perfect illustration of what I am talking about. But is also means that a lot of the kind of hospitality and mutual care that Acts 2 is describing is actually happening in our congregation. This should be a great encouragement to each of us. As we take care of each other, others will see the love that we have for each other and get curious to know why and they will also want to find out how they too can experience what we experience. That is when John 13:34, Jesus words, :they will know you are my disciples, by the love you have for each other.

And when I say we need to love each other I mean the congregation needs to love the leadership and the leadership the congregation. But it does not stop at that. We need to love our history, because our history gives us our identity and our history is the record of what God did in our midst. But even that is not enough. Besides each other and our story, we need to love the community that God has placed us in. The Argentine and surrounding neighborhoods are our special territory. This is our community and this is the community that God has placed us here to love. So we need to become experts on our community and then we need to woe our community. We need t love our partner churches, the neighboring schools, our neighborhood library, our neighborhood social entrepreneurship projects like Snack Shack that Abraham is connecting us with. We need to love the ministry opportunities in the neighborhood that God has allowed us to participate it all around us. We need to love each other, our history, our neighborhood and our ministry to this neighborhood and beyond. In other words, we have to love the church of Right Now. And when we really love the church of Right Now, who knows God might start adding to our numbers till we have to cry out for help like Jesus’ disciples whose nets were suddenly filled to breaking point. Loving each other is our responsibility. When we love each other, we will make sure that each of us is growing in our faith and becoming disciples who have the capacity to disciple others. When that happens I know that God will be sure to do him part and bring us the right kind of growth. So love the church we have right now, because God has given us much to love. Then we make room for God to do His part. Let us pray.