

Acts 2:42-47: Community Life I

Preface:

Well friends. Let me start with this:

I'm intimidated by talking about today's passage.

I'll talk about why in a moment. But I am. My prayer is that I can do justice to not just this passage, but that Church that stands behind it, and the Spirit who enables all we see here. Let's pray!

Prayer:

Reverence

So, again. I'm intimidated when it comes to talking about today's passage. And my intimidation has to do with reverence.

Today's passage has been for me one of the most inspiring passages in the New Testament. It's been a charter sort of passage, a mandate passage, one that on top of which I've built all sorts of derivative theology, all sorts of understandings about what the church or any congregation can be, how the Church can function both for and against the society around it. Today's

passage is special to me, so I want to do it justice, right?

To preach on it is something like introducing a good friend you know from one place to a group of friends you know from somewhere else, and you really, really want them all to get along, and want your group of friends to think your other friend is as awesome as you think they are.

Location:

Remember where are in Acts.

Luke just described to us the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus' first followers, the 120 of them who were gathered together praying and waiting like he told them to wait. It was Pentecost, and there were a people from all over the known world who had faithfully pilgrimaged to Jerusalem to worship. When the Spirit was set loose on Jesus' followers, everyone started speaking about God in the native languages of all these pilgrims, a total miracle, and people were either shocked or thought they were drunk. Which is still, shamefully, our response to miracles: We think a person was either out of their minds on something, or we're intrigued. To those who stuck around to listen,

Peter had stood up and described the way this Spirit being given in this moment was the fulfillment of God's Promises to His People, Israel, and had been caused through Jesus' faithfulness.

And we read, then:

“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

Three thousand!

On The Three Thousand:

Now: These are the most faithful Jews, right? The ones who were at the Temple, who were up for the long pilgrimage to Jerusalem, who saved for it, planned for it, ensured it could happen. In some ways, these are the ones who were most interested in living for God and organizing their lives around God. Does this make sense? These were the ones who organized their lives around their identity as God's People.

And this has implications. It means that they're interested in what Peter has to say. They're a little less skeptical of miracles. They're probably more likely to

draw on God when they're trying to make sense of a situation in front of them. They are interested in living faithfully.

And they're in Jerusalem during a festival. Pentecost was a special pilgrimage festival, a time when faithful Jews came back to Jerusalem to remember how God gave them Torah. There's reconnecting with friends, and exhaustion from feasting, and the excitement of the crowd and the people and they .

Given all this, I'm not totally surprised 3,000 people convert right then. Peter has offered them the thing they've been waiting for, a deeper experience with God and a greater way to live for God. What they see is a miracle at work, and they're given an explanation for it that makes sense of not only of the miracle, but makes sense of their entire way of life, the identities they've nurtured. I'm not surprised this pile of people go to be, as Peter puts it, "baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of their sins." It's what they've been waiting for, positioned for, and their conversion just makes sense.

What follows, though, which is today's passage...it doesn't make as much sense to me. It shocks me, for

all sorts of reasons.

What Luke is Doing:

Today's passage is one of three moments where Luke gives us a little update on how the Church is doing. This is the first of these: This is the first time we see the Church gathered together, because this is the first time we see the Church. Before now there was no Church: There was only a group of Jesus followers, waiting for the Spirit. Now, the Spirit has brought these people together, bound them together into a new corporate life, offered to each of them, as Paul talks about at length, the gifts that they can use, together, to get done what God asks of them.

Most of Acts is the stuff the Church is doing, the ways people are responding to its message and its messengers. But now and then we get these glimpses of how the Church is organizing itself, handling the shared life the Spirit has brought about, and living up to what God wants the Church to be--the body of Christ on earth until Jesus returns.

This is the first of those scenes. And it goes like this:

The Scene:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Relevance?

What do we do with this picture of the early Church?

Most of us would say, if we thought about it for a bit, that this picture Luke gives us of the Church in its earliest days is one that should somehow function as a model for us, a sort of charter. "This is what the Church is supposed to be like." This is an assumption we hold.

Relevance? Society = Church

That's a relatively new idea, though, say, 500 years old. Relatively late in the Church game. For most of the Church's history, this was a beautiful picture of the early Church...and that was it. I mean, there was a time in Western societies when to be born was to be immediately baptized, and thus, a member of the Church.

When people then read "the Lord added to their number daily," they had no framework for thinking this is something they ought to expect. At best, it would be a commentary on birth rates, you know? They wouldn't see this as something the Church should hope for. As far as they were concerned, to be a part of society was to be a part of the Church in those times in history. The idea that this could be about conversions, about people choosing to enter the Church, because they had come to trust Jesus and those who bore witness to him, that was unfathomable.

The Brethren Church, as part of the Anabaptist movement, was part of the early reaction to this "automatic Church member" society. To be

“Anabaptist” is to be “Re-baptized,” “Baptized Again.” They were those who were baptized as children, entered into the Church rolls, and then later as adults came to believe and trust Jesus.

But there was a time when every single person in society was baptized when they were born. Society was equal to the Church, as far as most people reckoned it, and when they read “the Lord added to their number daily” they didn’t read it as inspiring them to go share the good news about God’s Kingdom and Sin’s forgiveness and Death’s defeat. They read right past it. Today, though: We tend to read this as an encouragement: Let’s get back there. Let’s do this! Let’s be a part of that kind of revival.

Or, say, Church history is riddled with priest-kings, when the state and the church became one, completely paired, two sides of the same coin, the idea that possessions were in common made no sense. Possessions were ultimately the king’s, from each person to each thing that person possessed, all goods were the king’s goods, the emperor’s goods, and since the king was also the head of the Church, well, then...things weren’t “in common,” so much as “used by the gracious benevolence of the king,” who

could, if he wanted--it was always a he--take them back. I mean, there might be protests, but you'd just kill a few women and children and it'd settle things down.

Relevance? Signs & Wonders:

Or, say, there was a time when many people who read this in our society assumed "miracles and signs and wonders" weren't meant to be a part of the Church's life anymore. That these were meant just for then, just during the Church's baby-steps, as a specific witness for a specific period of time of how the Holy Spirit was real. And what we've got, now, is other miracles, the miracles of applied sciences and physics and math.

Actually, that time is now.

Relevance? In Common = Ridiculous:

There was also a time when most people who read this in our society assumed "having everything in common" didn't mean some sort of socialist pooling of everyone's assets, a rejection of private property, but rather a strong commitment of mutual care. During that period of time, personal possessions were personal; any hint of socialism, communism, was rejected out of hand, because it was a threat to

capitalism. Capitalism itself was such a basic worldview. This idea that everything from a child to water and air had a price, that profit was a moral good, that money equaled power, and people born into it deserved more than those who didn't--it was so basic, that the idea that the Church ought to do now is literally have everything in common was considered unrealistic and idiotic, if not unfaithful, somehow.

Actually, that time is now, too.

A Fundamental Problem:

A fundamental problem with today's passage is that most of us believe both that it is a map, a charter of some kind. What it presents is an ideal that the Church, today, ought to live up to. We believe that.

But we also believe that it's impossible, if not irresponsible, for us to live this way.

And if you're an outlier, here. If, say, you believe that this scene was never meant for us to live up to, or if you believe everything in today's scene is possible, then be patient with the rest of us, and maybe there'll be something for you in the next few minutes? I don't know.

But what the rest of us do, those of us who both believe this is somehow meant to be a charter, an ideal, for us, even as we believe it's impossible or irresponsible to live up to it, what we do is interesting.

What We Do:

What we generally do is follow a similar path when it comes to today's passage.

If we have a fair amount of personal agency and freedom when this our trust in Jesus comes along, we will try to live up to today's passage. We'll try to take it seriously. We'll move in with other Christians, we'll engage in all sorts of Church programming, we'll go for it, as much as we're able to go for it. We do all we can to approximate this way of life that we see mapped out for us in this passage of the earliest Church.

But life, then, fills up: careers and mortgages and moves and children serve to, oh, simmer us down. Our attempts at approximating what we read today become more tepid, more reasoned. And we've talked about why before this morning: We obligate ourselves to others out of love, which is so good, and we can't simply abandon such obligations. Fitting an

approximation of today's passage into relationships and all their demands in a world that thinks, by and large, what we see here is ridiculous is a difficult thing to do.

So what?

Here's the passage:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

When it comes to today's passage we end up in three places. We either treat with defeatism, treat it with triumphalism, or with, let's say, accommodation.

So What? Triumphalism

We triumphantly say that every aspect of this passage can be realized right now. And we do what we can to live every aspect of it out.

In practice, there's nearly always a special emphasis that gets taken up out of this passage, though.

There's the signs and wonders way, which is a part of much of Pentecostalism, which expects miracles, practices miracles, and participates in miracles. You can go deny these things to someone whose experienced them if you want; I won't. There is a part of the Church that expects to see these things as basic to the Christian life, not an addition to it. And that part of the Church is, by and large, just as messed up as any other part with failure, but also...experiencing more of the miracles that they expect. They might devote themselves to teaching in some way, they might share things in common with each other in some way, but if they look for themselves in this passage, and treat this passage as an ideal to live by, they'd point to the signs and wonders and say, "Ah. There we are. Aren't we faithful."

There's a common-sharing way, which is foundational to groups like the Bruderhof Communities, the Hutterites, certain smaller Anabaptist groups. They have, by and large, made bubbles for themselves inside Capitalism's co-opting power, and within these spaces, they share more-or-less everything in common, and they rise and fall economically as one. If they treat this passage as an ideal, they look at this part of it, and say, "There we are. We're living up to the example of the early Church!"

We read, today, about how the early church "Devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer." And there are groups who take so seriously the devotion to teaching, that everything they do as an organization is oriented toward study, toward teaching, toward exegeting the Bible together. Those groups say "We're following the pattern set for us. We're doing what the early Church did!"

And each of these ways of treating this passage is more or less triumphal, it emphasizes a particular aspect of this early Church's life, this first scene in Acts that Luke gives us of the Church, and it says, "We're doing what the early Church did!" Are there

blind spots? Yeah: Enormous ones. But triumphalism takes this bit of the Bible seriously, you know? It's only worth poo-pooing if you're a jerk.

And, unfortunately, the defeatists do tend to be a little more prone to jerky-ness than others do.

So what? Defeatists:

What I'm going to call, in a great straw-man attack, defeatists, are those who come to today's passage and say, "Nah. Most of what we see here isn't anything we should expect. We shouldn't expect God to add to our number daily. We shouldn't expect signs and wonders. We shouldn't pool our possessions and property." A defeatist will still agree that there's some pattern for the Church here in this scene: We should still pray, take communion, eat in one another's homes now and then. But the big things? We shouldn't expect those, or really even try for them.

The problem, of course, is that to do this is to be, well...defeatist. It's to give up before you've started. If we assume something is impossible, or not for us, we are unlikely, at least, to ever experience it. We give up the ghost, in more ways than one. And, you know, if you've ever met a really strident defeatist, they are

really good at justifying why the only things you should accept are the things that they accept.

Those who I think we're most familiar with are the accommodationists. And I call them--us, maybe--that because those who operate this way still do believe this passage is supposed to be some sort of ideal, some sort of charter, for the Church today. They expect it to be realized somehow in the life of their congregations. And yet, they haven't made every effort to accommodate this passage, make room for this passage to be real, in their lives. Rather, they've accommodated the world as it is around them, and then invited the passage to fit into the spaces that are left over.

There's not a huge amount of "devotion," because...there's not a huge amount of room for it. They care about the Apostles' teaching, care about Scripture, care about fellowship with other Christians, about the Eucharist, about prayer. They'll care enough to do these things. They'll believe in signs and wonders, maybe not for themselves, but maybe for those around them, now and then. Maybe. They'll be generous with their excess, but "having everything in common" and selling their stuff so they can provide for

others in the Church feels a little much. But no one would doubt their generosity. They'll meet now and then. At least every couple weeks. Or few, during cold season. They'll eat with other Christians, and sometimes do it at their houses. They'll praise God, and receive the occasional favor of others, and will expect to see some growth in their congregations. Not new people every day; that's a little much, but some people.

They'll think the defeatists give up too easily, and the triumphalists don't take a broad enough view of things. They love what's lovely in today's passage; find it inspiring, and beautiful. But they can't imagine how any group of people could possibly try to live up to it all now.

Today's scene is more than something left in the past only; but it's not something fully in the present. It's...meant to inspire, you know?

I don't mind this. What I fear is this: If this scene is simply meant to inspire. If today's passage is an ideal for us that we can never, ever meet – which is the attitude this middle-ground takes – if it's an ideal we can never, ever meet, then how much of a jump is it to

say, if this is the attitude you hold, that Jesus himself, and obedience to Jesus, is an ideal that we're never supposed to meet? Will we just say Jesus is a standard that we'll fail to achieve, no matter how hard we try?

If we both accept that today's passage is an ideal for the Church now, is a charter of some kind, if we accept that, and also accept that no congregation will ever meet it, then I think we open ourselves up to believing the same things about what Jesus says. I think we open ourselves up to believing that Jesus is a standard that we can never meet, and obedience to him is, ultimately, impossible.

What do you think about that? If we both accept that today's passage is a window into the "ideal Church," but also believe we can never do it, what does it say about how deeply we believe we can be like Jesus? One who models an equally challenging standard of behavior?

And I care about this, because if we believe living up to Jesus' standards are impossible, then why bother?

If we believe this example of the Church is just some sort of inspiring example for someone else, then I

think that we open ourselves up to excusing ourselves from it.

Earnest Approximation vs. Resigned Accommodation:

And, look: There's faithfulness in earnest approximation. There is faithfulness in earnest approximation. I don't want to go back to undergrad and my own days of daydreaming about moving to a Christian commune. I don't think I'm particularly faithless for not wanting that. But if we resignedly say that this passage just doesn't fit the way the world works, which we have accommodated ourselves to, then I think we are not that many steps from saying that this passage is irrelevant to us, and we're not too far from making Jesus irrelevant, too.

Inspiration that doesn't inspire is worse than nothing, because it demotivates us saps the energy we need for the most basic acts of faithfulness. We become jaded. We become defeatists, who give up on things, or triumphalists, who celebrate only one thing to the exclusion of all others.

I get tired of not being able to believe in signs and wonders and miracles, because to really believe in

miracles, miracles of healing, of tongues, of all sorts of things, is to, of course, invite something wild into my life, which feels wild enough with trouble, sin, and hassle.

I get tired of accepting the premises of the economy around me, and having to remind myself that goods are not good if they are used only for ourselves, and that humans are priceless and taking care of them is worth everything, and that maybe the Church here wasn't foolish, but far, far smarter than we realize.

I get tired of how little energy I have for devotion...and I'm employed by the Church, you know?

Conclusion:

But I don't want passages like today to simply inspire me to greater devotion and a deeper pursuit of radical experiences of fellowship and of the Spirit. I don't need to be inspired; I cry at sappy moves. I don't need moved; I need to move. What I mean is this:

When we come to today's passage, *if, if*, we accept that it is a charter, an ideal, that we ourselves are meant to live up to, then we must reckon with how narrowly we believe it.

What in today's passage are we scared might actually be meant for us today? Why?

What in today's passage do we think has no hold on the life of the Church anymore? Why?

What about today's passage reveals the limits of our faithfulness? Our creativity? Our accommodation to the world as we've inherited it?

I love today's passage. I love it. I value it for what it meant to me when I first started following the Lord. I value it for the ways it challenges my understanding of what is possible in the Church today. I value it because it confronts me. It confronts me. And I think we need all our triumphalism, all our defeatism, all the ways we're accommodated ourselves to the shape of the world as it is, we need to let this passage confront those things we've accepted, and consider what it means to believe that the Church can be this way, here and now.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with

awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

We can approximate this in whatever faithful ways we're able. That's not terrible. But it might be better to weigh our expectations of the Church against it, and find where our belief falls short. What do we need to do, if we believe this passage is meant to be the Church's way of life still today?