

A New Community

Acts 2:42-47

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two Sundays as we have met in this temporary space, I have introduced you to two of our sister congregations in the North American Lutheran Church:

1. Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Charles, MN, a congregation that meets each week in a community center.
2. Faith Landing Church in Grand Blanc, MI, a body of believers that meets on Sunday evenings in the conference room of a Best Western hotel.

Both churches are about two years old, and both, each week have to set up and tear down their meeting spaces because they do not have exclusive access to those spaces.

Today we meet a church much closer to home. Abundant Grace Lutheran Church is part of our own Southwest Ohio Mission district. It is located in West Chester, OH.

- There are 10 churches in our mission district. This is the newest one, and the only one that does not have a permanent home.
- In fact, they are what we would call a “house church.” That means each week they meet in the home of one of their members. Imagine that responsibility if you are the home owner!
- Their first service was January 5, 2020. This is a photo of their Easter Sunday a couple of weeks ago.
- They have no pastor. They are led by a team of five lay leaders.
- Their mission statement is: Our mission and reason for being is – always has been and will continue to be – to share the good news that Jesus is Lord. In Him we have the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life and the Holy Spirit’s life-giving presence to guide us, direct us and bless us.
- A recent outreach effort included generating supplies to take to Madisonville, KY to help in the aftermath of the tornados there.

A house church. Can you really be a church in a house? The answer is “absolutely yes.” The Church is the people, right? Church is not a building. Church is a community – a gathering of believers who come together to worship God and to care for the needs of one another.

This is not a new church planting model. Not at all. It is 2000 years old. The first Christians were “house church” Christians.

Nearly everything you read in your New Testament was written to a group of Christians who were meeting in the homes of other Christians. When the Apostle Paul would write one of his letters, he would often include greetings to the homeowner where the church met, with words like these:

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus... Greet also the church that meets at their house. (Romans 16:3, 5)

The location of the first church building is a matter of debate but most historians believe that the oldest known purpose-built Christian church building in the world is in the country of Jordan, built between 293 and 303 AD.

- So for about 300 years those first Christians were “house church” Christians.

That served them well because a key element to their health and growth was the sense of community that was developed in those house churches. From the very beginning, the Christian faith was shaped and supported by “community.”

One of the grave dangers that came along with church buildings was the mindset that faith and religion was something “out there,” apart from where the rest of life was lived.

- When I need groceries, I go to Meijer on Hillcrest Avenue.
- When I need gas, I go to Speedway on North Street.
- When I need God, I go to Grace Lutheran on St. Paris Pike.
- But the rest of my life is lived in my home and in my neighborhood.

Ask most people in this city to identify their community, and they will respond with “Northridge” or “Northern Estates” or “Ridgewood.” But for those of us who follow Jesus there is another community that identifies us: the Body of Christ. Specifically, for us, it is the part of the Body of Christ that is Grace Lutheran Church.

Notice how this passage describes those first Christians:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. (Acts 2:44)

There are the two phrases that describe their NEW COMMUNITY

PHRASE #1: THEY WERE TOGETHER

Look the verse carefully:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. (Acts 2:44)

One writer called this “the first miracle” of the church. He writes:

You may wonder why I call this a miracle. It is because I know human nature.

Think about it. Among these first Christians were eleven of the twelve disciples. (Judas had already killed himself.) Those eleven were constantly bickering among themselves, each vying for prime seats and personal recognition. Take Luke 22:24 for example:

A dispute also arose among (the disciples) as to which of them was considered to be greatest. (Luke 22:24)

Now here they were “together.”

Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, we do not naturally live in close, harmonious relationships. Human nature makes us far more like to prefer isolation to being with other people. But when the Holy Spirit is at work is a drawing together that results in the gift of community.

Every New Testament description of believers requires multiple people to make it happen.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house. (1 Peter 2:5)

Even the word "church" (ekklesia) means a "calling out together."

And that together concept was true of the Old Testament Jews too. They were:

- The people of God
- The children of God
- A nation

It simply has never been a part of the plan of God for His people to live their faith in isolation.

Which leads us to phrase #2.

PHRASE #2: THEY HAD EVERYTHING IN COMMON

Look at verse 40 again:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. (Acts 2:44)

Having everything in common is different from communism in one very important way. In communism the government owns everything and decides who gets what. In Christianity, you still own what you have but motivated by the heart of God you share what you have with others who may need it.

- You see that in action every time we take up a love offering for someone's medical expenses.
- Or give furniture when someone's house burns down.
- Or take a meal to someone who has just had surgery.

You aren't being forced to do that by anyone. You simply become aware of a need and you are moved by the heart of God to respond to that need.

When I was just starting out in the ministry the parsonage of a small rural church outside of Hope, IN burned completely to the ground. Pastor Gerald Faurote and his wife lost absolutely everything. They got out with only the pajamas they were wearing.

- Within a day or so a nearby pastor invited Pastor Faurote over to his house. They were about the same size. This pastor opened up his closet and told Pastor Faurote to take half of everything in it. Suits, ties, pants, shirts, sweaters.
- The two pastors' wives were no where near the same size, but she called the women of her church were approximately the same size and they too responded generously.
- The other women who were not that size went out and bought undergarments and shoes for both Pastor Faurote and his wife.
- With 48 hours after the fire their entire wardrobes were replenished.

The opposite of that attitude is what concerns pastor and author John Piper. He observes:

"If God designed the Church to function like a body with every member ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit to other members, having everything in common ... then should we be surprised to find that failing to do this cripples the body in some of its functions and causes parts of the body to be weak and sick? Isn't that what you would expect?"

"Psychological problems, marriage problems, parenting problems, self-identity problems, financial problems, career problems, loneliness, addictions, phobias, weaknesses--I wonder if the epidemic of emotional and psychological woes is not the symptom of an organic flaw in the way most Christians experience corporate church life."

You see genuine Christian community is not about what you receive from it. No, it is about what you bring to it. When you are not engaged in the community of faith, something vital is missing.

- God has given gifts to each believer, and if you are not connected those gifts go unused and the body as a whole suffers from its absence.

APPLICATION

When we become believers, God calls us to live out our faith in community.

This passage teaches us that we should be connected in such a way that we know and are affected by each other's experiences.

- The result will be that we do life together.
- The result is also that each of our needs are met right here in this community.
- You have a unique ability to contribute in ways that no one else can to the ministry of this community of faith.

And notice the result:

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47)

Amen.