

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

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“THAT’S WHAT I CALL A CHURCH”

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John 10: 1-10

¹⁰Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Acts 2: 42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Some of you had the opportunity to meet my brother John when he came down for my installation service. I am happy to report that while he was here he was very impressed with this church. I have to tell you a story about when John first came to visit me in West Bloomfield when I was serving Pine Hill Congregational Church. I drove him

around to some interesting spots in the community. We went to the cemetery where Norm Cash was buried and to the restaurant where Jimmy Hoffa was last seen alive. I knew he would like that stuff. Finally I drove into the parking lot of Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church. If you’ve ever been near there, you know that Kirk in the Hills is a

magnificent cathedral, with well manicured grounds along the shore of a beautiful lake. At the time I couldn't resist. As I pulled up in front of the huge church I pointed at the impressive building and said to my brother, "And this is my new church!" He swallowed hard and said, "Wow! Now that's what I call a church!" He then looked over at my face and quickly realized I was pulling his leg. I tried the same thing when he visited me in Salt Lake. I took him to the LDS Temple. That joke didn't work quite as well!

I am impressed when I read about the first few days of the Christian church in the book of Acts. If I were to re-write those words in a modern fashion, it might read, "They spent their times in Christian Education classes, children and adults alike. They took part in fellowship activities- serving, playing, and working together. They got together frequently to eat, having potlucks and breakfasts, even an Italian meal sponsored by the Music Committee. And they met regularly to worship and to pray. They were amazed at what they could do together. They praised God and enjoyed one another's company. And every single Sunday, they attracted new members and friends."

To quote my brother John, "That's what I call a church!" Given the current status of the church in society, we might get a little nostalgic for the good old days. If only the church today could have the same kind of importance in people's lives as it did in that early Christian community. If only faith could have the same kind of relevance in people's work and play, schedules and decision-making, priorities and ethics.

What was it that so inspired the early church? What was it that made that

experience together so important and so exciting? It might seem like an oversimplification, but it was the experience of Christ's resurrection. For that early church, Easter was not just an observance of an historical event. Easter was an every Sunday activity. Easter was a celebration of new life to be experienced each time the community of faith gathered. They came from different backgrounds and different interests. They had much to do and little time in which to do it. But when they gathered together, something really happened. A new power was let loose. Christ was risen in their midst. They felt empowered.

One verse seems to say a lot about how the power of Easter was let loose within the early church. Listen to it again, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." I believe that in that one simple verse, the writer of Acts offered four important activities that could make of us a more Easter-looking church, a body of believers in the power of God's possibilities. This isn't deep theology. It is more like "church for dummies." This is the "how-to nuts and bolts."

They devoted themselves to learning. While the early apostles were eager to spread the gospel message to those who had not yet heard it, they also relied upon the continued teaching of those who were part of the early church. They continued to learn. Everyone learned. Through learning, they sought to discover where the church must go next. By teaching one another, they attempted to control the energy of a burning faith so that it would not flame out, but draw others to its light. Through teaching and learning the early church kept straight about what it was and what it was supposed to be about.

I recall an earlier time in my life when I was asked to coach Maren's soccer team. I knew nothing about soccer other than I didn't like it very much then. I didn't know the first thing about it- the rules or the skills involved. But I tried to coach. I tried to muster some enthusiasm for myself. I tried to encourage my players. But it was hard. I grew to dread going to practices. It was a real chore! I didn't know what I was doing and it showed.

I think the members of the early church recognized the same thing. It did little good to speak with energy and conviction without first considering what had to be said. The lesson is clear for us today. It does little good to come to this place and work ourselves into exhaustion and burn out, if we do not understand why we worship and serve here in the first place. It is fruitless for us to plan for our future without first reflecting on the application of the gospel to our life and to the life of our church. Without a proper exploration of one's own faith, one really has no story to tell. Without learning yourself, it is more difficult to teach. We must study and learn and internalize the story to want to tell it again and again to those who would follow.

They took part in fellowship. Fellowship needs to be lifted up in a time when people prefer to do their own thing. It is apparent that this early Christian fellowship was not just some half-hearted brotherly and sisterly love. It was something beyond conventional friendship. This Easter church was a fellowship that produced some astounding "signs and wonders." The Scripture account said that the community sold all their property and possessions and split up the money equally. This might sound a lot like

communism to those of us who embrace capitalism. The point is that the fellowship of the early church inspired people to believe that the world was different. Outside the doors the world might be cold and cruel but inside the church was a place where new life was modeled and change could begin. Their fellowship inspired them to let go of their self-interest. Sharing of time and of goods was a sign that something important had happened to these people. Christian fellowship was a place where one began to see what was good for all.

DeToqueville, in writing about early America, once said that democracy was an inspiration for people to reach out their arms to find their destiny. And in reaching out they would discover that their hands were linked with others around them. I think this is also true of the church. It is to be a place where we reach out to find the presence of God for ourselves. And in reaching out we find that God can only be experienced through community and serving the good of all.

This Easter community shared in eating together. Here at Meadowbrook, we seem to have that mastered. I swear I've gained ten pounds since September. Want to get the church decorated? Bring doughnuts. Want to have a better crowd for a Lenten event? Have meat at the meal. Want to get twenty real men to the church at 6:30 a.m.? Have Charlie Hokett make quiche. But eating in church is nothing unusual or new. We are simply carrying on the tradition of our spiritual ancestors.

The early church ate together. Most of Jesus' important messages came while he was at table. He was heavily criticized for the sorts of people he

shared food with- either they were too rich, too poor, too sick, or too sinful. Miss Manners tells us that social boundaries and rules are most rigidly enforced at the dinner table. Eating together freely then is a sign of one letting their hair down, opening up to others, being free to be ourselves. If we eat together, we accept one another.

When we eat together, even if it is Fellowship Hour, it is a sacred activity. Our eating isn't pointless. When we sit down to a meal together, the table is a holy place. We should look at our eating together as a time of revelation, a time in which the spirit of the Risen Christ can come to us in our conversation, our laughter, our meeting new people, in our learning about one another. We are the Easter church when we break bread together.

Finally, the Easter church shared in prayer. Regardless of what else the early church did, they did not forget the traditions of worship and prayer. There is the story of the modern day saint who left her home to go to church. She was so busy thinking about her meetings and her obligations at the church she said this as she walked out of her home, "Goodbye God. I will see you later. I have to go to church now." Unfortunately, sometimes we are so busy here that we forget that this is foremost a place to pray and worship.

Dr. C. Oscar Johnson says that there are two different groups in his church. One group rushes into church after the service has begun. The other group rushes out of church during the closing hymn. His tongue in cheek description is really a commentary on us all. We tend to rush. We tend to hurry in our time before God. There are more important things for us to do. We have trouble sitting, listening, meditating,

reflecting, praying, and waiting upon the Lord. Our nature tells us to get up and do something with our time! The early church spent much time doing nothing but praying. We tend to forget that although Easter may have made us new, we cannot forget old spiritual disciplines and keep opening ourselves up to God's revelation for our life.

Learning. Fellowship. Eating together. Worship and prayer. It all seems relatively simple. According to the book of Acts, these four activities marked the life of the early Church. This was the church on its best behavior. In these four activities, we see an authentic embodiment of the Risen Christ. When we look at our own hectic schedules and misplaced priorities, one might get the idea that we think warm-hearted busyness can substitute for the power of the Spirit. From time to time we need to reflect upon just what it is that makes our gathering in this place sacred and peculiar. What is it that we embody in a unique way? We can find the answer by going back to the basics: learning, fellowship, eating together, worship and prayer. Now that's what I call a church!