

## **Acts 2:42-47**

42 They 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. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day 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, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

As I was writing this sermon, I knew exactly what God wanted me to say and I wrote it down. Unfortunately, it was only about ten words long. And while I am sure that you wouldn't mind me being a little brief and getting to lunch a little early, we don't want to go to extremes. So I did my best to turn those ten words into a sermon.

This passage tells us of the early church, still led by the apostles who had a personal relationship with and walked with Jesus Christ. This is before mass persecutions, church councils, creeds, denominations, scandals, and splits. This was sort of like the garden of Eden for the church, as good as could be imagined. That is not to say that there aren't wonderful churches now, but this was the point in history when the Christian church was the most united, the most focused as a whole, and saw the most growth. At no other time in history would the church grow so dramatically, and soon theological differences and squabbles would follow. But for these few verses, we see the church as it was intended, when it was as close to Jesus as it will ever be in this world.

Of course, two thousand years later, most churches don't look much like this. We can't agree on what color the carpet should be, let alone deep theological issues. Church membership is at an all-time low. Denominations are frequently splintering over matters incomprehensible to outsiders. Fewer and fewer churches have a healthy budget, and new members are hard to come by. The happy times of the early church seem impossibly far away.

In response to this sorry state of affairs, churches are trying a variety of things to get new members. The pastor tries wearing skinny jeans to appeal to the youth. Churches change up worship styles. Church host endless events and programs to appeal to the community. The rough edges, the difficult parts of our faith are filed down to be more appealing, and the Christian faith is reduced to a vague one-time sinners' prayer that is basically fire insurance. All this because churches tend to believe that if they just make the gospel easier, more accessible, remove all barriers, the members will flow in.

In many ways the quest for higher members becomes an idol. It becomes the goal of a church. Now I'm not saying that evangelism is not important. It most certainly is, and is mandated by God: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." We are called to spread the Gospel. The problem comes when we are focused not on making disciples, but on simply gaining numbers.

One of the most successful evangelists of our time was the late Billy Graham. I actually attended one of his crusades in Indianapolis as a child, and I still remember his sermon. I can remember him talking about the demons Jess cast out wishing to go into the pigs, because that was better than hell. I remember the flood of people who went forward to receive Christ.

While Billy Graham undoubtedly did tremendous things for God and helped lead many souls heaven, he guessed in 1990 that only 25% of the people who came forward lived any sort of intentional Christian life, and studies from the early 2000s reveal only about 3-6% of those people became part of a worshiping community. Scot McKnight wrote that "Most of evangelism today is obsessed with getting someone to make a decision; the apostles, however, were obsessed with making disciples."

When we are willing to sacrifice aspects of our faith to get people in the door, or when we are focused on new members to the exclusion of making disciples, we have made an idol out of new membership.

Often, I hear people pointing to the Acts 2 church as the solution to the membership crisis of the modern church. After all, the Acts two church saw tremendous growth. So what does Scripture say about the Acts two church and the wonderful growth they experienced?

Well, the people devoted themselves to the teaching of the Gospel. They engaged in fellowship, prayer and communion together. They gave generously to those who had need. They attended temple and practiced gratitude. They praised God, and conducted themselves in such a way as to gain favor with people outside the church.

Well, that's all well and good, but what about growing the church?

Well, Scripture tells us that the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The early church did not engage in any gimmicks, they did not stress over visitors and new members. They devoted themselves to God, and God added to their number.

I have had many colleagues hired on to bring in new members. Often, they hold new and exciting events, evocative sermon series, add fog machines and dress in skinny jeans all in hopes of attracting new members.

Of course, this rarely attracts more members than the usual drizzle of people who might stumble upon the church, leading to a disillusioned pastor and a disappointed church. On paper, it seems like they are doing everything right. They're getting their name out there and engaging with the community, but nothing they do seems to work.

The reason for this is that new members are added by God. Now, God may well use you to bring that new member in, by placing you in the right place at the right time, but attracting members is not where our focus should be. Our focus is to be devoting ourselves to God, to our own spiritual growth, to strengthening our faith community, to living the Christian faith authentically and without apology. I will never apologize for my faith. I will be the first to tell you there are difficult doctrines and difficult Scriptures. The Christian life is counter cultural in many ways. But it is true, and it is good, and I won't dare change one word.

When the early church focused on themselves, on becoming disciples, on learning Scripture and praying and throwing themselves fully into the Christian life, God added to their number. They didn't need to chainsaw watermelons or distribute Scripture tracks that look like parking tickets. They focused on their part and trusted in the Lord to do the rest.

Trinity, would you like to see new brothers and sisters here with you? So would I. And I admit, it is difficult to trust God when you have the pressure of declining membership and budgets to meet. When we humans feel like the ground is unsteady our first instinct is to grasp tighter, not to trust and let go.

But if we want to see our ministry grow, we cannot put the cart before the horse. At no other time in the church did we see growth as in Acts two. But at no other time was the church as whole so devoted to the teachings of God, so singularly focused on God, and becoming disciples. At no other time, was the church so unconcerned about maintaining a budget or getting new members.

If we want to see Trinity grow, if we want to see our ministry change into something greater than we even imagined, we have to start where the early church started. In devoting ourselves to the teachings of God, to fellowship with one another, to communion, to caring for one another and giving of our time, talents and resources generously. There is no greater witness to the world than someone who truly lives the Christian life, who practices peace, love and contentment, even in the midst of the storm. That is the way that we gain favor with our neighbors. And then we must trust that God will add to our numbers. God will guide people here, or guide us to the people who need to hear us.

Now, I'll be the first to tell you this is not easy. We humans want to control. It is hard to let go. But our God is faithful. When we are focused on the things of God, when we seek the Kingdom of God first, all the rest will be added to us. God will add to us.

Gandhi once said if you want to change the world, start with yourself. If you want to change Trinity and our neighborhood and community, start with yourself. Devote yourself to the teaching of God, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to generosity, and watch how the world will change around you. Eleven men did just that, and changed the entire world. Imagine what could happen if everyone in this room did the same? I bet the Lord would add mightily indeed.

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April 30, 2023

