

Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

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[0 : 00] Here in the West, our individualism is on hyperdrive. We curate our clothes, our fashion, our looks, our likes, our friendships, even our spiritual beliefs.

And often this is done with the motivation to be seen as unique or distinct, as an individual in a sea of conformity. And yet for others, their type of individualism feels non-existent because of the demands of family, of children, or other responsibilities.

This is difficult because the loss of one's autonomy often feels like a loss of self in our current cultural moment. It's a very unique time in human history where the self has been elevated to almost God-like status.

And at the same time, we cannot shake our deep human desire to belong. We want to be noticed and we want people to ask where we were when we didn't show up.

That means something to many of us. We want to share in experiences, to be with others who also share our interests, to feel like we are part of a family.

[1 : 17] And yet, even this good desire, and it is a good desire, seems to be infiltrated by our, I'll call it hyper-individualism. So much so that we only want to be with those that hold our very curated views.

People that maybe look the same as us or have the same socioeconomic bracket that we are in. And to be a part of a group with people that are different can feel uncomfortable.

There's great irony in our desire to belong if that desire to belong only pushes us to people that are just like ourselves.

So on one hand, we have this hyper-individualism. On the other hand, we have this deep, deep, deep desire to belong. How do we remedy this situation?

How do we curtail that hyper-individualism that kind of pervades our cultural moment and yet not lose our personal identity? I mean, the scriptures speak of the importance of individualism, in a sense, when it comes to salvation.

[2 : 31] And yet, at the same time, a connection to the group or a body of believers that do not look like us, but share in the same faith.

So in the scripture, we have, in a sense, this image of a balanced individualism with a sense of belonging.

But how does that practically play out? Acts chapter 2, the last portion, 42 to the end, 47, will help us understand that.

But the answer might be a bit alarming to us. We'll get to that near the end of the sermon. So Luke records Luke chapter 2, 42 to 47, as the first of three summary statements of the church.

You can find the other two in Acts chapter 4 and Acts chapter 5 as well. And in these summary statements, we get a picture of the vital importance of shared life together.

[3 : 35] A picture of what the church is or what it ought to be. And yet, in no way do we get a sense that membership in the church means abandoning one's individuality.

So we're going to jump right into Acts chapter 2, 42 to 47. And we're going to see three things that describe and, in a sense, paint a picture of what the church ought to be.

Describing three bits of the church. The first one is Acts chapter 2, 42 to 47, will show us the devotional life of the church. The second thing it will show us is that there's a common life of the church.

What that looks like. And finally, the third piece will be the joyful life of the church. So in this section, the devotional life of the church, the common life of the church, and the joyful life of the church.

So look with me, verse 42. This is a very famous verse. If you've been around the church for a while, it is, in a sense, what a lot of churches want to aspire to, and rightfully so.

[4 : 46] And this is how it begins. And they, that is the church, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship to the breaking of bread and prayer.

These have historically been called the four marks of the church, with some adding a fifth mark. Evangelism. And I think it's safe to include evangelism as a fifth mark.

And we see that in verse 47, the last portion, the second half of verse 47, where it says, And the Lord added to their number, day by day, those who were being saved.

God's people had a life of devoted study, communal fellowship, eating together, whether or not that was the Lord's Supper at this point, as we understand it, as it came to be articulated by, say, the Apostle Paul.

We're unsure. For sure, it was a gathering together, remembering Christ in some kind of way, the breaking of bread. And then there's also times of prayer.

[5 : 50] And then, like I mentioned, a committed, a commitment to sharing their faith with those around them, in fulfilling Christ's command to bear witness to his resurrection. So we'll briefly touch on all of these marks.

I've actually collapsed the breaking of bread and prayer into one mark. So we have four, all total. So we'll jump right in and we'll look at the devoted study of the church.

So we see that, the first mark. They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching. The church is not a gathering that is foremost concerned with experience. It's not. That's not to say that experience doesn't happen in the church.

It doesn't mean that you can have a spiritual experience where it just feels like God's very presence is there. There's something tangible in the air. There's much room for that in church.

However, the church is not primarily concerned with experience. But rather, the study, the knowing of and understanding of who God is and what he came to do.

[6 : 57] And that is, in a sense, described here as the Apostles' teaching. Which is to say, God's word. Our faith must never be anti-intellectual.

We must always be people that are trying to learn more about who God is. For those of you that have had the privilege of being married, or being in a relationship for that matter, things go downhill when you stop taking interest in the person that you are with.

It's a problem when you stop learning your spouse, or learning your partner, or learning your significant other. It's a problem. Likewise, in the church, if we fail to engage in God's text, we will fail to understand who God is and grow in our knowledge of him.

And then, we will fail to grow in our love for him. Our love will grow cold. It will dwindle. In the same way that you might neglect or forget about certain bits of, again, your significant other, your heart will inevitably grow cold towards him or her.

So our faith must never be an anti-intellectual one. In fact, anti-intellectualism ought to have no place in the church. And that doesn't mean that we have a room full of Bible scholars.

[8 : 26] That's not at all what I am suggesting. And nor am I suggesting that after X amount of years in the faith, you ought to know, you know, A, B, and C.

You need to be able to, if I'm going to test you on it, you know, you better pass. Or else, you know, what have you been doing for all this time? But what I am saying is that there has to be a trajectory of growth in knowing God's word.

There might be seasons where busyness takes over or coldness towards God happens. It happens. Right? A marathon, nobody is running whatever, a super good time per mile the whole way.

But the point is, the trajectory continues forward. And I think this is what is identified here when it says that the church is devoted to the apostles' teaching.

The call is to commit ourselves to the teaching of God's word, both as individuals, but especially together. And because it's a good thing to be together and to study God's word, but also because you and I have blind spots, or we lack insights.

[9 : 42] And other people in our congregation, they might have wonderful insights that you do not have. They have blind spots, but not your blind spots. And all of a sudden, as the Proverbs say, iron starts to sharpen iron.

And that's how we grow together, as we open God's word together. Again, that is not a call to have some next level seminary Bible studies every single time, but a commitment to growing in our knowledge of God's word.

The second thing that it mentions is a devotion to fellowship. And this is connected. There's a lot of interconnections here, but a commitment, a devotion to fellowship. So I'll say more about this on the next point.

However, I'll just simply say that the church must be committed to loving and partnering with one another, showing concern for one another, for our well-being, for our spiritual well-being, our physical well-being, but to also then to partner with one another as we seek to obey God and the things he's called us to.

Studying his word, sharing the faith, being a comfort in difficult times, sharing our resources.

[10:58] The next bit is to worship. And remember, I've collapsed breaking of bread and prayer under the point of worship. So although it does not specifically name the breaking of bread, like I mentioned, to mean the Lord's Prayer, certainly this is a shared meal of remembering the sacrifice of Christ, but also to remember that for 40 days, Jesus dined with his disciples.

And I'm sure those were wonderful meals. And also wonderful because Christ, who died and was buried, rose again, and we got to spend time with him in the flesh.

So every time we gathered, we trusted that by his spirit, he was there. And this is what it is pointing to when it says they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread.

When we have potlucks, we try to mimic that. I mean, we're trying to get to know each other and enjoy a meal together, but we are gathering as Christ's people together over a shared meal, hopefully remembering Christ, speaking of him, sharing our lives together, growing so that we may show care and that we may extend our helping hand to our brothers and sisters, or maybe partner with them in sharing the gospel.

Notice also that their prayer time was both in the temple and in homes. We see that in verse 46, and day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they receive their food with glad and generous hearts.

[12:38] We see that worship was both structured and unstructured. It was both in a large group as well as in smaller groups.

There was worship and prayer in both the fear and the joy of the Lord. We see that in verse 43, an awe or fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. So worship here is this beautiful picture of shared concern, shared fellowship, shared worship, at the table, at church, in the case, you know, they didn't have the church, it was the temple, but you understand what I'm trying to communicate.

It was in large gatherings, it was in small gatherings. It was, in a sense, with great reverence and awe, but also with great joy and spontaneity.

That worship for the early church came to define their lives, both in public and in private. That it permeated their whole being.

[13:49] And finally, the last point is evangelism. They devoted themselves to evangelism. And it's really easy to take verse 42 out of context. This is what the church is about. I've heard many sermons or read articles that, I mean, it's just Acts 2.42.

We're going to be at Acts 2.42 church, and that is very fantastic. And if you're going to go towards any kind of vision of the church, that's a fantastic vision of the church. But it's, to just talk about verse 42 is taking the text out of context, and forgetting that Jesus commanded the church to bear witness to the resurrection in chapter 1, verse 8.

It also fails to remember that the church is themselves a collection of evangelized to converts. We see that in verse 37 to 41 in chapter 2 as well.

Verse 47, The Lord was saving many, presumably through the evangelization of the church. This is maybe the hard part for us today.

I will say for myself, it is a hard part. I can have fellowship meals till the cows come home. I can pray with folks. I enjoy it.

[15:08] I enjoy opening God's word. Evangelism seems a bit scary. It seems a bit much sometimes. It can be difficult for us, because, again, we live in a culture where there's a hyper-individualism, and it's also mixed with a pluralism intolerance, where any opposition to one's belief is an infringement upon their very person.

It's offensive. It can be very offensive to share the faith, because you're implying that your beliefs are not true. To present the good news of the risen Christ can be seen as deeply offensive, and who wants to be somebody who offends?

But look with me. Again, verse 47, the second part of verse 47. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

So this is what they're committed to. Bearing witness to Christ, trusting that whether it falls on ears that want to hear, or deaf ears, it's actually not up to them to move the ball any further.

That it's God and God alone who saves. We simply bear witness to Christ, but it is the Lord who saves, and also the Lord who welcomes into his church all whom he calls.

[16:33] So it's a good work of God, not us, to change the hearts of people. We are called only to bear witness to him, to share with others what we ourselves have witnessed.

And he invites us as his church to participate in this wonderful, and at times unnerving ministry of saving the lost.

It is not an easy thing, but then we go back and remember, hold on a second, I'm a part of a community, I'm a part of a church, I'm a part of spurring one another on.

I don't have to do this myself. So we have the church that supports us, we have Christ who supports us, we have the Holy Spirit who enables us, and then we start to see that the mark of the church is to bear witness to the cross.

And we ought to expect, in a sense, that here, just like here, that day by day, whether that is maybe month by month, or throughout the year, those, that their number was added to, those being saved, that the Lord added to their number.

[17:48] That we ought to see and expect God to do a wonderful work amongst us, as we are faithful and obedient to him. So the devotion to study, for fellowship, for worship, to evangelize, they're all marks of the church, and not just the individual Christian.

We are called out of our sin and brokenness, and into belonging and mission. And friends, to live a devoted Christian life, disconnected from the larger body of believers, is actually not to live a devoted Christian life.

So we are called, in a sense, to, yes, devote ourselves to scripture, and to praying, and to evangelize, as individuals, but make no mistake, this is given to us in the context of Christ's church. And this leads us to our second point, where we will explore the second mark, of the church's fellowship, in greater detail.

So the second point, the common life of the church. Our common life together, takes two main forms. The first is, our common faith. We've looked at it already, but I'll add one additional thing, to this.

[19:06] We are in fellowship with everyone in this church, that has claimed to, that has professed Christ, and has been baptized. But we are also in fellowship with believers across the globe, with saints in every continent, that are breathing right now, that have prayed to Christ today, this morning, as they gathered to church, whether that be in a church, or in a home, because they've had to go underground.

We are also in fellowship with the saints that have gone before us, that have departed. Whether it be last year, or a millennia ago, we are in fellowship with the apostles.

We are in fellowship with St. Augustine. We are in fellowship with Wilberforce, and Simeon, and Billy Graham, and whoever else is a saint in Christ Jesus.

That is a part of our heritage. That is a part of our fellowship. We have saints that we can look to as the means by which we ought to understand the scriptures a bit more.

We can see how people have understood the scriptures, and learn from them. So we have inherited this wonderful faith that is so much bigger, and broader, and diverse, and older than we are.

[20:32] And it means also that we have roots that run deep, and connections that span the globe, and of all time. Our supports are strong.

And we are weaker when we forget this. Our fellowship is deep. And all of this is because Christ Jesus broke down the walls that divide, so that all who are united to Him are a part of a family. So the other aspect of our common faith is a profound generosity amongst ourselves. So notice in verse 44 and 45 of Acts chapter 2. And all who believed were together and had all things in common, and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need.

This is not a move towards a kind of communism, a proto-communism in the New Testament. Private property is not forbidden in the New Testament.

I mean, we'll see here a bit later on, the next verse, it says that they were meeting in people's houses for worship. Well, you have to own a house to meet in it. It would imply that private property is certainly not forbidden amongst God's people.

[21 : 48] So the next verse, oh, sorry. So although Christ does call some believers to live a life of voluntary poverty, and He certainly does, it is not a demand.

What is expected of God's people is a people that are generous, a people that will give especially to the needy and the impoverished.

And this is to be a reflection of the generosity that Christ has shown to us. I guess the call, in a sense, is like a divine pay-it-forward.

Christ gave us His life with pure generosity. So we ought to be generous to others. If we are the people who carry His name, we ought to exercise generosity like He did.

And in fact, generosity is a type of proof that we are walking with Christ. We see this in 1 John 3, 16-18, and it reads this. By this we know love, that He, Christ, laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

[22 : 58] But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet chooses his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth. Generosity will also help us to not just reflect Christ, but it will also help us to let go of the things that we are holding onto that are taking the form of idols in our lives.

Giving has this incredible ability to strip us of our idolatry and help us to look to Christ. We will not be perfect in this.

Many of us, it takes time to learn to be generous, because there is great fear that we will not have provision, that if we are to give to others or to the church, we will not have enough to take care of me.

So, oftentimes, there is a growth in generosity, and that is precisely okay. We are called to, again, trend in the right direction, to grow in obedience.

[24 : 20] So let us, by God's help, strive to be generous people. If you see a need, as maybe one suggestion, if you see a need, maybe don't ask if somebody else has met it, but try to meet it yourself.

And that might not be a monetary answering of a need. That might be your time. That might be your giftings or your abilities. But don't necessarily wait for somebody to pick up the phone or send a message asking for help until you help.

Grow in your generosity, remembering that it is Christ who is so generous to you. The common life of the church will be one of shared faith and shared need.

So, again, like I mentioned, what we see is not an ancient proto-communism, but a type of joy-filled life that flows out of the gospel of Christ. And this leads us into our third and final point, that the life of the church is a joy-filled one.

So, the church is devoted to worship. It is devoted to communal fellowship. But it is also committed, in a sense, to joy.

[25 : 41] And that joy flows out of Christ. The year of Jubilee was an Old Testament event that was a celebration of incredible joy where forgiveness and freedom became the law of the land for an entire year.

It seems almost, I'm personally a bit skeptical of it. For an entire year, there is complete joy, no working, no reaping, no sowing.

It is supposed to be a wonderful, jubilant, joyful year. Not week, not month. Okay, a month, maybe you're, I could believe it's, but a whole year.

The year of Jubilee. All needs were to be met. Slaves would be freed. No one is supposed to go without. Work suspended, feasting expected.

God was to be worshipped and remembered for his salvation to the people whom he rescued from slavery. The year of Jubilee. And this joy-filled Jubilee happened every 50 years.

[26 : 49] And what we see in Acts 2 is a kind of Jubilee. We see this community that is being freed from slavery and from sin and from bondage by Christ Jesus, freed in order to do what?

To rejoice and to free other people or to be at least a tool by which God uses to free other people and to make sure that there is no need amongst them. That generosity becomes the very thing that marks the church.

That joy becomes the very thing that marks the church. And it's wonderful in a sense that what we see here happens 50 days after Christ Jesus rises from the grave.

It's as if Luke is saying, hey listen, this is what's happening. We're starting to see bits of Jubilee take root in the church. Remember what Jubilee is like?

It points to heaven and how in heaven there will be no slave, there will be no person in bondage, there will be no person guilt-ridden with sin, there will be no hungry stomach or emaciated face or disease or pain, no tears from sorrow.

[28 : 16] And now, in the Old Testament, this was every 50 years, but in the new covenant that God, He institutes by the life and death and resurrection and ascension of His Son and the coming down of the Holy Spirit, it becomes our reality daily.

That it points us to this end of the age when all wrongs will be righted, when we will live forever in eternity in Jubilee and it begins right now.

And what's interesting, friends, is that there is no room for hyper-individualism in the year of Jubilee, in a land of Jubilee, in an eternity with Jubilee.

We can't be about ourselves primarily and also about others primarily. So to wrap things up, I asked the question at the beginning, how do we balance this hyper-individualism with our deep, deep desire to belong and I said something to the effect of the answer is actually not really easy to stomach in a way.

I mean, we're kind of, we're talking about it in Acts chapter 2 but really, here's the key. Here's the key. How do we deal with our hyper-individualism and how do we embrace this communal life of belonging that doesn't end in this life but continues on to eternity?

[29 : 49] We die. We die. That is what the Scripture calls us to do. We die. We die to ourselves which is on one hand really hard but through Christ we die so that we may live.

Ephesians 2, 1-10 I mean, this is a beautiful picture of what it looks like to die to ourselves. I won't read the full ten verses but it says in verse 1 and following, and you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked following the course of this world following the prince of the power of the air the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience among whom all once lived in the passions of our flesh carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

Verse 4 What does it mean to die to self?

It means to trust Christ for your salvation. To stop trying to in a sense live the good life on your own terms by the sweat of your own brow with a self-righteousness that will flare up or a crushing crushing feeling of guilt and shame when you don't add up.

To die to yourself means to trust Christ for salvation and it is grace that he will it will be by grace that he will save you. Why? Because he is rich in mercy.

[31 : 32] He is abounding in steadfast love because he himself is love. This is what has happened with the believers of chapter 2 verse 42 to 47.

You see in a sense these are dead people dead to their previous life and alive in Christ and we saw their their death in real time in verses 37 to 41.

Remember we looked at it last week and what did it say? Now when they heard this that is Peter's sermon they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles brothers what shall we do?

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and we see their death in real time so that we also get to see their new life in real time.

So the way to curtail our hyper individualism is to die and whatever you will lose it might hurt but what you will gain will be infinitely infinitely better because it will bleed into infinity to all of eternity.

[32 : 39] So do not despair what you will get from Christ will make what you are currently holding on to look like tatters and rags and garbage.

If you do not believe me read Romans 8 read Revelation chapter 21 and 22 Christ Jesus died rose and ascended sending his Holy Spirit so that we can die to ourselves so that we may be made alive in Christ together as a new family so that we can have new priorities and new devotions and we will see by God's strength our lives transformed our community transformed in this world eventually by God's good grace transformed.

Let us pray. Lord we thank you that you have used the church to be the tool in your hand to bring many to faith.

Lord help us to be people that are devoted to each other and devoted to you devoted to your teachings to your word devoted to fellowship with one another devoted to breaking of bread Lord to prayer and also to share our faith but also people that are devoted to laying down our lives for you so that you may pick our lives up again and give us new lives.

Lord this is hard we can't do it ourselves help us to help each other and help us to look to you we pray all of this in Christ's name Amen. TO mix with you because of you you