

New Community

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 October 2009

Preacher: Rev. Keith Ganzer

[0 : 00] Welcome back to the book of Acts.

The Holy Spirit has come in a scene of light and sound in the pronouncement of the works of God and then Peter preaching that the promise of the prophets had been fulfilled.

That the coming of the Spirit was a signpost to Jesus whom Peter proclaimed to his Jewish crowd that day that was the Messiah, that he was the King, that he was the exalted Lord of the universe. And the exalted Christ is now pouring out the Spirit upon his people. Remember that? And three thousand of them heard Peter's words and they were cut to the heart, the text says.

We are now in the age of the Spirit. These are the last days when the people of God have the Holy Spirit in their midst and it is the same for us. We who follow the Lord Jesus Christ have God in our midst by the Holy Spirit.

[1 : 19] When you walked into this sanctuary this morning, you came to a place where God dwells, that the Holy Spirit is here because his people are here. And all of this was the hope of the prophets.

You could go many places to see this. Ezekiel 36 is a good start. Ezekiel says, speaking to Israel of the future time, now realized at Pentecost, he says, Thus says the Lord God, it is not for your sake that I will act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations.

I will vindicate my great name. How will he do that? The prophet says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean and from your idols I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart. And here's the verse, I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and obey my rules.

A text like Ezekiel 36 were on the minds of this first fellowship. These Jews who received the promised spirit and turned to follow their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 38] This is the new community marked by the presence of the spirit living in them. And it is so, Ezekiel says, for the sake of the holy name of God in the world.

Welcome back to the book of Acts. Three weeks ago, we looked at the events in Acts chapter 2. And my sermon must have made a relatively good impression because this morning before the nine o'clock service, I walked in behind someone coming through this door and they picked up the folder and saw I was preaching and he didn't know I was standing behind him and would hear him say this.

And he said, well, it's going to be a long sermon today. So my reputation's set, I guess.

And that must mean there's no time to waste. So I have to get right into things because we have tremendous text to cover this morning, but they're hard texts.

[3 : 44] We're considering this new community that's been formed by the spirit. And as we do that, we want to consider what our life together can look like in the spirit. We have a split text this morning.

It's the end of Acts 2, picking up at the conclusion of Peter's sermon. But then it's also the end of Acts 4, from verse 32, all the way to verse 11 of chapter 5.

And it is, if I'll just say it up front, it is a text that will bring joy and excitement as we consider what our life as the people of God can look like.

But it's also going to bring sadness and proper fear. If you followed the readings, you know where we're going. It's not, as a friend put it to me earlier this week, a happy text to preach.

But we'll take it on and consider that black moment in the life of this first fellowship. So this sermon will follow these texts in sequence.

[4 : 50] So it really just has two main parts. The break, though, coming at the start of chapter 5. And you might be surprised by this, but the first section of the sermon will be far longer than the

second section.

And the sermon is going to end where the text ends. I'm not rearranging the material for a cheerful conclusion. But most of the time will be spent as we build up to those dark moments in chapter 5. So here we go. Acts chapter 2. 3,000 people had repented and were baptized and received the Holy Spirit. And the next word from Luke is a summary of the characteristics of this new community. A community that shared a common identity now and lived life together. Verse 42 of Acts 2. It will help you if you have your Bible there to look on as I go. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

There was a sudden wonder to this. Imagine how quickly these believers found themselves now swept up in a new way of life. From a life that had none of these things.

[6 : 04] That was not oriented around the Lord Jesus Christ. Now to one that's informed by the truth of the apostles' teaching. Lived in this radical community. Filled with eating together and praying together.

This is a new way of life. And these believers are awestruck at the change. They're awestruck. Verse 43 says, And fear came upon every soul.

But I think many translations render that slightly differently. I think better to translate fear here as being awe. They were in awe. Why?

Because God was real to them. And God was present to them. And the Spirit is at work to bring them together around these things. And Luke tells us the apostles were even performing wonders and signs as God unites them.

And he's continuing to draw more and more people to their numbers. There's an amazement at God in this community. Now let's consider the characteristics.

[7 : 06] You see them listed there in verse 42. Notice how Luke presents them. He says they devoted themselves to these things. That is they were persistent in them.

They continued in them. They did them together consistently. These were the things that formed the core of their corporate life. And remember, please, that Luke is the inspired author of this book. The fact that he would pause, in a way, pause, to provide these descriptions, I think, is his ringing endorsement of the way this community lived.

There is not a hint of criticism anywhere in this description, in chapter 2 or in chapter 4. Therefore, the Spirit of God had created a new life together.

And Luke intends this to be paradigmatic for the church. And that's exactly how the tradition has always interpreted this text. Jesus and Luke, the author, loves how this community lived.

[8 : 08] So as we move through this text, we're going to ask ourselves. You'll ask yourself while you sit there. Whether we're doing well on each of these features in our life together. Or where we're lacking as we think about what it could look like to devote ourselves to these things.

Because whatever the church should be today, it should not be any less than this. First, Luke says, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Now, nothing else is said about this here.

But it's first on the list. And it's essential in the community. And no wonder, right? They had responded to God as they heard the preaching of the apostle Peter. And you can imagine how these believers, these new converts, were clinging to every single word the apostles were teaching. God was at work through their teaching. And the ministry of the Spirit is a teaching ministry. Truth needs to be taught in the church for the transformation of the people of God.

They had the apostolic teaching firsthand. We have the apostolic testimony in the scriptures. And at St. John's, we take the priority of teaching the scriptures in the community very seriously.

[9 : 21] And rightly so. Second, though, I'm going to skip one spot. Skipping ahead one, Luke says, they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread.

That's still coming out of verse 42. They ate together. One of the core characteristics of this community was that they ate together. Look at verse 46.

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God, having favor with all the people.

These believers loved to be together. And they loved to be together at meals. They ate often in one another's homes. Some scholars think that Luke intends a reference to the Lord's Supper in verse 42.

The language there of breaking the bread sounds like what Jesus did at the Passover. And that sounds okay to me, I think, but I'm not for sure on that. I don't know that we can tell for sure.

[10:27] It could simply refer to table fellowship, everyday fellowship around a table. And you may know that in the early church, the celebration of the Lord's Supper was around a table, often in the context of a full meal as people gathered.

So even if Luke is referring to the Lord's Supper in verse 42, which he may be, verse 46 makes clear that they ate together often in homes.

And it was characterized by the spirit of gladness and generous hospitality. These people loved to be together. They couldn't get enough of each other.

Day by day, the text says they were together, not just once a week on Sunday morning, dashing in, dashing out, going on with your life. They loved to be together often.

And what better thing to do when you're together than to eat? Many reasons for that. Eating together is a mark of unity and solidarity and friendship.

[11:28] One thing I want to emphasize here this morning is that in our modern Western society, I think especially in the city of Vancouver, this takes tremendous intentionality.

Tremendous intentionality. You and I live in a fast food society. And if we let it, it will pull us apart from each other.

And we'll find ourselves living our separate individual existences, frankly with no energy left to put into life with the community. So check yourself here.

How many meals a week do you eat alone? Not that you're never allowed to eat a meal alone, but how many in the week do you eat alone? And how often do you make the effort to eat with other brothers and sisters?

Why not try to do that maybe once a week? If that's not realistic, try two times a month. Work your way up to one time a week. But eat together. Be in one another's homes.

[12:38] Share meals together. These believers loved to be together. And where they were, they often ate. Luke then says they were devoted, third point, to the prayers.

Now I see this unpacked in two places here. Verse 46, they were day by day attending the temple together. Remember, these are Jewish Christians. The temple was at this point where they went for their daily prayers.

But note also verse 47, how as they were together in their homes and ate together, they were praising God, Luke says. That doesn't have to mean that they ended every get-together with some time of formal prayer, but that as they spent time together, they knew they were in the presence of God.

So it was natural to praise God. Simply their way of life. It was their disposition. So there's probably some formal corporate prayers here, as well as this perpetual sense of thanks and praise to God as they were with one another and God was in their midst and they knew it.

So prayer characterized their life together and they persisted in that. So is prayer one of the places, one of the core features of the way you live in this community of St. John's?

[13:58] I don't mean if you pray individually on your own every day. I hope you do and will develop that discipline. But do you pray with brothers and sisters? Formally, informally, the sense of praising God as you're with one another.

Is prayer a part of your life in this church? If not, maybe you can help us think of ways to creatively help you to make it part of your life, but we need to think about that.

And now the last characteristic Luke lists here, the one I skipped. You probably noticed I skipped it. I skipped it because Luke devotes the most space to this.

And I think it's his focus. It is the predominant characteristic of the text in chapter 4. So this will be the bridge for us to go from chapter 2 to chapter 4.

It's that concept translated here as fellowship. You see that in verse 42. Now what's fellowship? I was in a church at one point in my life.

[15:00] I won't tell you when so you can't figure out what church it was. I was at a church at one point in my life, not this church, where after every service, they had fellowship donuts.

And you could go and get your fellowship donuts in the fellowship hall. Right? You've been there. So after the service, the congregation would go and have fellowship donuts together and talk with one another until the donuts were gone, I guess, and then fellowship's over, and then they retired and they go home.

Now there's something wonderful about lingering with others after a service of worship and talking, hopefully, about deeply substantive things, at least sometimes. And Luke is not against that.

But by fellowship, that's not what he means. The word translated fellowship here is koinonia. I say that because many of you will know that word. You've heard it somewhere in some context. And the key to understanding what Luke means by koinonia here is in verses 44 and 45 and then also in chapter 4. So let's read those and then we'll comment.

[16:07] Chapter 2, verse 44. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And that word translated in common is the word koina.

You hear that? Koina is from the same root as koinonia. So these are the related concepts. Luke's fellowship, koinonia, means they had all things in common.

Then verse 45. And they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need. This one's not quite as comfortable for us.

To get the full picture, go to chapter 4 now. Beginning in verse 32. We'll stay in 4 now, mostly for the rest of the sermon. Beginning in verse 32. Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul.

And no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. There's that word, koina, again. Then verse 34, stunning. There was not a needy person among them.

[17:14] For as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet. And distribution was made to each as any had need.

So, koinonia means having things koina. It is not fundamentally what we mean when we use phrases like fellowship donuts and eating together.

In this text, koinonia is about having things in common. And here's the point. These people cared so deeply for one another that if one of them was in need, others who saw that need responded this way.

You have a need. I have lots of possessions. I can sell some of those and meet your need. It's not complicated.

So as circumstances came up like that, they'd sell something and they'd use the proceeds to help the needy member. That's how it worked. And it was obviously so extensive that Luke can say of this multi-thousand person group, there was not a needy person among them.

[18:27] This was incredible generosity and incredible indifference to one's own possessions when others are in need.

Now, please recognize that these believers loved to do this. You say, how do you know that? Because this whole text is soaked with the language of joy and generosity.

And there's that amazing phrase in verse 32 of chapter 4, where Luke says, the company of those who believed were of one heart and one soul. And then he explains what that means.

And it's not agreeing with one another on the issues. It is that no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own.

But they had everything in common. That's not where we tend to go when we talk about unity. Is it not where I tend to go when I talk about fellowship and togetherness?

[19:36] And this text, I think, threatens us. Because we own a lot of stuff. And I own a lot of stuff.

And we believe in private property. And I think the Bible endorses that. Ownership in private property. So no argument there. But our response to this text. Well, I don't know what your response to this text is.

My response to this text. Is to say this. Well, I can't really mean this. Can't really mean that I'm going to have to give up anything.

Can't really mean that my life together with someone else in St. John Shaughnessy Anglican Church. Might have implications for me personally, economically.

And might impact my lifestyle. And might change my comfort level. Can't mean that. So, we find ways around it.

[20:33] At least I tried to. You know, this wasn't a command. It was just what they did. So we don't really have to do it now, right? Or, this was all just voluntary. There's no coercion here.

I don't have to do this. Or, this is just an experiment. We don't see the church behaving this way at other points in the New Testament. We're just incredibly defensive about this, aren't we?

I am. I'm defensive about this. Why? It's been a rough week to figure all this out. Because I love things far too much.

Or, more to the point, I love possessing things. Because that gives me some kind of imagined security. And this society makes financial security a god, doesn't it? Security in money. Security in things. It's an idol. So, if it's not security then, because maybe you have enough, you're not even really worried about security.

[21 : 39] Maybe comforts the idol for you. Whatever it is. And I don't assume that you are like me. But, listen to your heart that responds to this text.

What is your heart trying to do with this text? And if you're as defensive as I am about it, then you've got to confess that. And say, Lord, you have to help me.

Because when I come to this text, I try to take the sting out of it. Help me not to do that. Open my heart. Now, let's look just a little more carefully at what Luke is saying here.

I'll read a phrase from chapter 2. You don't have to go back there. Chapter 2, verse 44. Luke says, All who believed had all things in common. And then again in chapter 4, he says, They had everything in common.

Now, there's just no way around this. I tried to find the way around this. That there's nothing, there's nothing that believers in this community were not willing to share with one another.

[22 : 51] That's hard to say. And then look at verse, well, you don't have to look there. It's back in chapter 2. I'll just read it again. It's verse 45. There's a bit of a problem here.

Because the RSV says, And they sold their possessions and goods. And that sounds like they just sold everything. All in one shot. And they just lived communally or something.

But that's not quite right. Because the verb tense is imperfect. And that doesn't need to mean anything to you. But the point is, it's a type of verb in the Greek language.

And in the ESV and many other translations, they get it right, in my understanding, because it reads, And they were selling their possessions and goods. They were selling them.

Now, that's subtle, but it's important. These believers were selling their belongings. Not all at once. They kept doing it, bit by bit. Could be a lot at once, I guess.

[23 : 46] But the key is that it was as there was need. And not all of them sold everything. And not all of them sold all their houses either. Because we see that they were meeting in houses to eat together. And yet in chapter 4, some did sell houses and property.

So there's freedom here. Everybody's not told to do the same thing. Now, there's one more thing I want to see about this koinonia in chapter 4 to finish this picture.

Notice this. Did this puzzle you? Maybe it didn't, but it puzzled me. I spent a while trying to figure this out. Between verse 32, which ends with the phrase, They had everything in common.

And then verse 34, which begins, There was not a needy person among them. There's verse 33. I haven't read that yet. It says, And with great power, the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

And great grace was upon them all. Now, here's my question. Why, in the middle of a description of this fellowship of koinonia, does Luke tell us about the power of the apostles' testimony to the resurrection?

[25 : 03] Here's why, I think. This is why. Because the fact that there was not a needy person among them, as verse 34 says, gives concrete support to the testimony of the apostles to the resurrection.

Let me put it this way. It is only through the power of the resurrection that you and I find freedom to love others more than things.

And so, it's resurrection faith. It's the faith that brings with it the power of God and the Holy Spirit. That's why I started with that. That such faith is the faith that frees us from idolatry.

It frees us from locating our security and money and possessions. And the fact that this group shared their belongings and would even part with them out of love for each other testifies to the reality of their faith.

Something happened to these people. And what happened was that Jesus got into them. Luke chapter 12, Jesus speaking, verse 32.

[26 : 13] Fear not, little flock, for it's your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. So sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with purses that don't grow old, with treasure in heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches.

They believed Jesus was right. That they were going to get the kingdom. So what did this possession matter anyway, really?

I don't have to grasp that. The kingdom's mine. You have a need? Well, sell this thing. I don't need this thing. They were able to stop clinging to everything they could get and start sharing it, start giving it, start celebrating God's generosity.

That's the power of God at work. This is the vindication of God's name. And this is what Ezekiel promised would come when the Spirit filled his people to live free of idols and holy in the world. When we are a generous and loving and joyful and prayerful community, our life together is evidence for the resurrection. Is it any wonder that the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved?

[27 : 35] Of course not. How could you not be attracted to a community like this? The greatest testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a group of people whose life together is so different and so completely changed that there's no other explanation for it.

Now, brothers and sisters, life together as the people of God is not the bonus round you get to play if you've successfully navigated your individual spiritual life.

John 13, 35, by this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another. Christians really lived like this.

They actually lived like this. It wasn't all perfect. But here's an example of love. Here's love.

Acts 4, verse 36. This is love. Joseph, who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, that's a nice name, sold a field which belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

[28 : 53] Now, that's the first time we meet Barnabas, and he'll be back again quite a bit in Acts, and Luke kind of slips him in here. It's a good start. And here's a man who didn't love money. He was free from it.

Here's a man who didn't love his possessions more than he loved people. So if the Spirit of God called him to sell his field, well, he'd sell it. Well, he'd sell it. He could do that because the Spirit gave him the power to love others, to live for others.

Jesus, give us that kind of power. Don't you want that kind of power? Now, Acts chapter 5.

Things weren't all rosy. I'm not going to read Acts chapter 5. I'm not even going to spend very long here because I spent so long leading up to this because the only way to get the point of chapter 5 is to see it in light of this community that Luke presents in chapters 2 and chapter 4.

Everything is wrong. In Acts chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira loved their money. Maybe they sensed a call to sell their property. I don't know.

[30 : 09] But when they looked at the money that it made, they couldn't give it all away. Then they wanted it to look like they did give it all away. They wanted to appear more generous than they were.

Maybe they wanted to look like Barnabas. Maybe they wanted the apostles to give them a good reputation. Third, then, they lied. To give the impression of generosity, they lied.

No one told them they had to sell their property. Peter's questions in verse 4 make that clear. He says, Did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?

You were free not to sell it. And they were free to decide what to do with the money that you made, but their motives are elsewhere. And if you love money, and you love reputation, and what others say about you, then truth can take a back seat to that.

And if that's all it had been, if all we had to deal with here was the fact that they lied about money, that'd be bad enough, but it's not that simple. Peter says to Ananias, You lied to the Holy Spirit.

[31 : 19] To Sapphira, he says, You tempted, you tested, the Holy Spirit. Now what does he mean? Can you sort that out now?

This is why it took so long to talk about the community and the Spirit, so that this makes sense. Because this new community is made up of people who've been given the Spirit. The Spirit has drawn them together.

The Spirit has given them freedom from the love of money, freedom to love other people, and it's all for the glory of the holy name of God in this community that testifies to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And the Holy God was present there. And he's present here. And the Spirit was in their midst, and he's in our midst now.

This was the place where God was dwelling among his people. And if we come into the place where God dwells, planning to go on with our idolatrous love for possessing things and for money,

we make a mockery of the grace of God.

[32 : 23] And if we think we can fool God as easily as we sometimes can fool the people around us, we're wrong. And according to Hebrews 10.29, the author says, we then outrage the Spirit of grace.

We outrage the Spirit of grace. And then what? The writer of Hebrews says these words. They're exactly where Luke's taking us.

Hebrews 10.30-31, this is what Ananias and Sapphira ignored. The Lord will judge his people. And then the line, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

God will not be mocked. His holy name will be vindicated. Why did God kill Ananias and Sapphira? I'm sorry to put it that starkly, but it must be put that way. Why did God kill Ananias and Sapphira? Why did he judge them in this shocking way?

[33 : 36] Others have surely done worse in the church and lived. Why did he kill them? The only answer I have is the one Luke records so that his people would fear him.

Their sin deserved judgment, no doubt about it. God does not always judge this way. Thanks be to God, he doesn't usually judge this way. But apparently God wanted to give a stunning warning to this church early on to walk in the holy fear of him.

And a fear of hypocrisy. Twice in this account, Luke records the response of the people. It's in verse 5. It's in verse 11. I'll read verse 11. Great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard these things.

This was a warning. Luke wants us to be afraid of hypocrisy. To be afraid of bringing reproach on the Lord by coming in with an unyielding, idolatrous love for money and possessions and comfort and security.

It's hypocrisy. And God hates hypocrisy. He hates it. And Acts chapter 5 is the illustration because Ananias and Sapphira are dead.

[35 : 00] Now, I trust that we desire to live as a church that was designed to live in the way that Luke portrays it.

I trust that we want to devote ourselves to the teaching and the fellowship and the breaking of the bread and the prayers. And I trust that we want the Lord to multiply this church. And if so, we must walk in a healthy fear of the Lord.

I'll close with Acts chapter 9 verse 31 because it wraps all this together. It's a key summary verse of the book. And this is it. This is what we want.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit they multiplied.

May it be so for us by God's grace. Amen. Shall we pray? Our God almighty and ever living, you command us to pray and to give thanks.

[36 : 25] receive then these are obedient prayers this morning. Give Lord your church unity in the gospel, unity in its truth, unity in its beauty.

Most especially, Lord, fill us with a deep responsibility and a deep responsibility. Amen. Amen.