

First Church

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! You know, so I'm not going to make any qualifications about that.

This morning, it's going to be a little bit atypical. I'm going to try to go shorter. That's my goal in life. That's every preacher's goal in life. And we're going to conclude with baptisms out there.

That's why you saw the trough. We don't have any horses around that we rode in. And so we just have that filled with water for baptisms with Michael, Mindy, and Melanie.

And so we should have a lot of fun doing that this morning. So Acts 2, verse 42. If you look at me there, I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

[1 : 13] If you need a copy of the Scriptures, we have some in the back. Love to give you a copy to take home and enjoy for yourself. Acts 2, verse 42.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, and all came upon every soul.

And many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds of all as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

[2 : 28] This concludes the reading of God's Word, His holy and inerrant Word. Several years ago, Pastor Tim Keller said, the church is trying to teach us, or I mean the world is trying to teach us, the culture is trying to teach us at least three things.

You've got to be true to yourself. In the end, you've got to do what makes you happy. Three, no one has the right to tell anyone what is wrong for them.

So you've got to be true to yourself. In the end, you've got to do what makes you happy. In the end, that's what it all boils down to you. No one has the right to tell you what is wrong for you.

Few pop songs capture this aspect of our culture better than the theme song of Disney's musical, Frozen. Now hold the applause.

But you know, the theme song, let it go, let it go. No, can't hold it back anymore. We could sing this together, couldn't we? Let it go, let it go. Turn around and slam the door.

[3 : 38] This song that kind of can play so much, it gets in your head and drives you a little bit crazy. But I wonder if we've taken a closer listen to what they're saying. Is it Elsa that sings it?

Sorry. It's Elsa. Yeah. Sorry. I'm not a professional. I'm frozen. But yeah, she's singing, I'm refusing to be the good girl anymore. I'm refusing to keep things locked inside, keeping the winter, I guess, locked inside.

I'm expressing myself. I'm being who I am. I am doing what I need to do. There's no right, no wrong, no rules for me anymore. I mean, that's what you sing in this song when we sing along.

So let it go teaches us that you can only become yourself by following your own individual desires, by being true to yourself, by doing what makes you happy.

Don't hide who you are. Let it go. There's nothing wrong with who you are, who you feel you are. If anything, it would be wrong to keep it inside.

[4 : 46] That's what Elsa and Frozen is teaching us. And so Elsa embraces her icy cool and lets it go. And left to ourselves, we'd go right along with her.

But this picture and these verses in Acts 2 are strikingly different. You know, we concluded last week, and we have kind of camped out on this chapter the past couple of Sundays, and Peter powerfully preaches the gospel.

You remember, he preaches to a massive group of people, and the first church is established. 3,000 were added. 3,000 were giving new life. And the new life, which is immediately evident to everybody all around, and the new life was not evident in their tongue speaking or their conviction of sin or their emotional response.

This new life was radically evident in the way they lived in a change of life. That's what these verses are all about.

It's a picture of a community when the Lord takes over, when new life enters.

[5 : 57] It's a community made new by the Spirit, marked by the presence of regeneration. That's a big clunky word that the Bible uses.

Just being recreated. Regeneration, beginning. Regeneration, being recreated. Born again, what Jesus is talking about. That's what happens in this context. It's not a bunch of individuals trying to be true to themselves or trying to make themselves happy.

It's a community where everyone's trying to be like Jesus and to make others happy. And it's a picture we must see and be gripped by.

These verses do not include three steps to becoming a happy, healthy church, but they do give us a breathtaking picture of what a healthy, happy church looks like.

And this morning, I want us to take a brief, hard look at this community, at this important moment in the life of our church, that we might be like it.

[7 : 00] So I'm just going to give you three words. I'm going to say a lot more than three words, so sorry about that. But three words. The first is awe. Awe. Awe. After the Word comes with power and transforms the hearts of these 3,000 people, they walk in new life together, and they begin to bear the fruit of repentance.

Remember, John said that, bear the fruits of repentance. Well, they begin to bear this fruit. And one of the first fruits we see is awe. Look down there with me in verse 42.

He says, And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship and the breaking of bread and the prayers, and awe came upon every soul. This mixture of fear and wonder came upon every soul.

Awe is the fruit of a community centered on God. Awe never captures our culture, except when we see something fabulous athletically.

But awe captures the community of God, because they're similarly amazed by what God does. So just what we read, they devoted themselves to many things.

- [8 : 08] They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. We see that. It was this idea that in the early church, the church gathered together to not just hear the teaching of the Old Testament, but to hear the teaching of Jesus and hear the teaching of the apostles.
- They received the Word of men, not as the Word of men, but as the Word of God. They devoted themselves to prayers.
- We see that down there in verse 42 as well, to the prayers. Prayer is a recurring theme throughout the book, and prayer uncovers a community that leans on God and not on their own understanding.
- And they just keep gathering. Look down there with me in verse 46. They gathered in the temple together. They gathered to break bread in their homes. They gathered to worship together and to pray together in the temple as a people.
- And they gathered when they were scattered in their homes. And they were praising God, having favor with all people. But the point of all those things they devoted themselves to is not that we'd go out and try to add those things into our lives merely, but that we would realize the deep sense of awe that drove it all.
- [9 : 19] All came upon every soul. I think the main thing the Lord wants to tell us this morning is don't lose the wonder of being drawn near. All is not mainly the result of an emotional experience or a musical crescendo or a key change.
- Ben had a great key change this morning. Did y'all notice that? What song was that? Oh, How Firm a Foundation. God, I surprised a little bit. You know, but awe is not the effect of those things.
- Awe is the effect, the result of never losing the sense that we don't belong. Have you ever been in a party? You know, sometimes you get dressed up on occasion.
- I remember when I was a younger man, young man, I took two girls, or not at the same time, but in consecutive years to a deputant ball, you know, which is, I don't know if there's any deputants here.
- But, you know, so I had to wear a tux and tails and gloves. And there was no sense that whole evening that I was comfortable.
- [10 : 37] You know, I felt cooped up and in a weird place. And there, yeah, I was like, I don't know about this deputant ball. We had to, like, walk around the circle, like, and kind of trot before the cameras.
- It was exceedingly odd. But it was great. If you're a deputant, I don't want to throw you under the bus. So better stop now. But the point was, I was very aware I don't belong here. There may be people born for this, but it ain't me.
- And the church, we should have that thought. Sunday mornings we don't strut into. Oh, man. Apart from the grace of God, why am I here?
- We should never lose the sense. Lewis Allen, in his very well-written book, he says, What do we deserve from God? Nothing.
- All our gifts, all we have is by grace. A sense of entitlement feeds a greedy heart, but a keen awareness that we don't deserve, or that we deserve nothing, but have all of God's love in Christ will humble us and satisfy us.
- [11 : 56] Then all of the gifts in our lives, people, circumstances, privileges, ministries, will be seen for what they are. Stunning blessings from God to be counted up and treasured with thanksgiving.
- That is so well said. If we realize we don't deserve anything, then any blessing that we have, being in a community marked by God's Spirit, should be counted up and treasured with blessings.

So we should be a church filled with joy. I want us to be marked by joy. One of the taglines we have on our website says, We're serious about God, not ourselves.

I want that to be true. I'm not impressed with myself. We shouldn't be impressed with ourselves, but we're impressed by God. And we love to laugh at ourselves.

And if you're with me throughout the week, you find plenty of reasons to laugh with me. But we should also be sobered. The church is a place where God dwells.

[13 : 00] We ought not play fast and loose with what God builds. Second word, devotion. Awe.

Devotion. I touched on this briefly in the last point, but you see that immediately. And they devoted themselves in verse 42. The devotion refers to persistence and perseverance in something.

Persistence, this I will not be stopped attitude, and perseverance following it through to the end in something, in pursuing some goal. The idea is that Luke is trying to draw our attention to the immediate and lasting fruit of repentance in the first church.

So the Spirit came down with power at Pentecost, and 3,000 people were saved. But Luke is immediately going to verse 42 to tell us that that salvation bore immediate and lasting fruit.

This was not a mountaintop experience that faded fast. It was not summer camp or a big tent revival without follow-through. The idea is the first church was established and walked together in repentance and fruit.

[14 : 14] New life came, and the evidence of it was devotion, persistence, and perseverance to specific things.

They devoted themselves to fellowship, we see there. They devoted themselves to fellowship. This word, fellowship, comes from the Greek word *koinonia*.

It describes a deep relationship in which you share with another person, which leads to giving and receiving with them. It's often used in the New Testament to describe communion with God because we have a real-time relationship with God where we pray, and He hears just as has been exhorted us today.

It's a real time. God did not just kind of set this thing into motion and stays in the cloud without any knowledge of it or interaction with it. No, God has a real-time relationship with us and us with Him, and it's used to describe also the relationships we share in the church.

1 Corinthians 10, 16 says, and I think we have that for you, says, The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not participation? That's that word, *koinonia*, fellowship, in the blood of Christ.

[15 : 28] The bread we break, is it not participation in the body of Christ? It's a partnership. It's a fellowship.

It's a participation in the body of Christ. We've said before, community is sharing honesty, our life together in Christ. I think that gets at the point that Paul's trying to make, that what threads through our relationship is not firstly like the benefits we bring to one another, but that we share Christ.

What threads through our relationships in the church is not yet common beliefs and different things or common race or different things, but Jesus Christ. One writer says, The church is not made of natural friends.

It's made of natural enemies. What binds us together is not a common or similar education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, and anything else of that sort.

Christians come together, not because they form a natural similarity, but because they've all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe to Him a common allegiance.

[16 : 51] Isn't that so good? That's what's going on in these verses. Immediately, they fellowship together because they share Christ. They begin to share meals.

We see that down there. The breaking of bread. You know, it's so easy to forget how radical it was with people of different races and different social backgrounds to eat together.

We see that all throughout the scriptures, all throughout Acts. In fact, Acts 16, I believe, Lydia is converted. She was a wealthy person. She was led to the Lord.

They said she immediately began to open her house. That's what Corinthians tells us. And so she's showing hospitality. She's rich. And she's showing hospitality. She's poor and weak people.

We also see the Philippian jailer who is converted. And immediately, Acts 16, I think it is, closes with him extending hospitality to Paul and Silas. He was saved.

[17 : 48] He was a tailor. Invites all his, invites Paul and Silas to join his family. And that's what goes on in the church. It's not natural friends. It's people that don't belong together and yet pull one another towards, or pull one another into their houses to eat together and to celebrate all that they share in Christ.

But Luke carefully points out and continues that they share not only friendship, prayer, affection, food. They share money. Look at verse 44.

And this is where you see, and I tried to emphasize it as I was reading, all the alls that are in there. And all who believed were together and had all things in common.

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds of all as any had need. So what's going on here?

The apostles organizing a communist experiment. You know? It's just some sort of commune where everybody sells all they have to live together. I don't think that's a picture of all, at all.

[18 : 56] Many, we know, continue to own houses, hence the ability to invite somebody into it and own material goods. And all that they gave in that context was voluntary.

That's what's emphasized. They give freely and voluntarily. So this is not a picture or a defense for communism or socialism.

The picture is a community that shares Christ, shares everything else. A community that shares Christ, shares everything else.

That's what's going on. Oh, you can't make that rent payment. Well, let me pay it. You know? You can't do this. You need help at the hospital or something like that. This week, we had a little hospital run and we needed help and the community is what ran to us.

Because we share Christ, they wanted to share their time. They wanted to share their money. and share all that we... Isn't that an incredible picture? I want to be in a community like that.

[20 : 08] The point is, the church ought to be unlike any community the world has ever seen. It's a community where Christ is at the center. The church must be a place that does not settle for a gospel plus community.

And what I mean by that is we cannot settle. If we're going to do this, we cannot settle to be a community where we believe in the gospel. We share that. But we also add on something else.

Oh, we're a community that's all about the gospel and you have to be a certain race. We're a community that's all about the gospel and you have to parent in a certain way or we're all about the gospel but and you have to have this much disposal income or and you have to have this way of schooling or this type of family background.

That cannot be the case. If that's the case, we'll fumble the gospel and no one in Athens will be surprised. But if we hold on to the gospel alone and allow it to bear the fruit that only it can bear and bringing together natural enemies, this town, its jaw will drop.

That's what's going on in these verses. The gospel builds a community unlike any other community the world has seen.

[21 : 44] So don't let us become centered on anything else. We must not. But to do this, we have to devote ourselves.

We're going to need resolve. We're going to need that perseverance and persistence in certain things. We're going to need commitment. Belonging in a community like this means we can't do everything we want or travel wherever we want.

It'll cost time, money, opportunities. One well-known pastor was asked, what discourages you the most about this next generation? He tweeted back, you are the generation most afraid of real community because it limits your freedoms and choices.

Get over your fear. He concludes, commitment's not a four-letter word. It's not a dead end. It's not a prison. It's a doorway. That's what's going on in this.

They were deeply committed because new life had taken over and it was just filled with joy and I just love it. Let's keep moving. Point three, hospitality.

[22 : 56] So all, I forgot my second word, devotion, hospitality. It's only three words. I mean, come on.

Devotion, hospitality. You know, after a quick reading of these verses, it just seems like the ideal community. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book says, ideal is the enemy of community.

But it seems ideal, right? I mean, if you stub your toe, everybody's like running over to Hellfowl is what it looks like. It just seems, at that place that everybody knows your name and likes you, you know?

It's a community where everybody's invited to the parties. That's the way it looks and so they're just kind of devoted to one another. I mean, they don't have room for anybody else because it's just the crew and they're together but that's not the case at all.

It's an incredible community. They are devoted to one another in these incredible ways but they're also kind of looking out. In verse 47, we see that.

[23 : 55] We see these incredible verses describing the community and then verse 47 says, and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Now, Luke does this throughout the book of Acts. He has these summary statements where he kind of tells us what the Lord's been up to and what's been going on and this is one of them but it reminds us that with all their community, all their devotion to one another and building one another up in Christ, there is this sense that they are being hospitable and the kingdom is advancing.

Here's the idea. The first church attracted folks to Jesus through their love for one another and their hospitality to outsiders.

First church attracted folks to Jesus through their love for one another and their hospitality to outsiders. It's widely documented not just by commentators or people that believe in the scriptures that the first church was unlike the world in the way it attracted people.

It was, now Taylor used the word exclusivistic. It was exclusive. It said certain things are allowed and certain aren't.

[25 : 16] It had exclusive views of sexuality in a culture rampant with immorality sexually.

It was a community that protected itself sexually. If you don't believe that, read 1 Corinthians. So he's writing to people that were deeply sexually immoral and yet the scriptures changes that.

It's marked by this relationship to money where they just kind of let money fly out of their hands. So unlike the world that tends to hold money tight and let sex go, the culture of the church is the opposite.

Their love for all the races so everyone was attracted to them. They may have been repelled a little bit at first but they were strangely attracted to this people. And if a church truly follows the teachings of Jesus it will surprise the world and attract them.

I'm sure this week you saw the trial of the Mexican or not Mexican Texas police officer Amber Geiger who was convicted of killing a neighbor named Botham Jean.

[26 : 35] You've probably seen that and there's a lot going on with that trial so I don't want to make public comments on things I don't completely understand but the videos that circulated this week as the trial was this week were of Botham's brother's comments to Geiger so the brother of the victim's comments to the killer and he's a Christian he's on the stand I can't repeat the whole thing but he says I forgive you I love you as a person I wish I don't wish anything bad for you and the amazing part the shocking part he says can I can I give her a hug he asked the tears can I give her a hug judge judge says yes he goes and gives her a hug in the courtroom as she weeps on his shoulder it's shocking and yet for those who truly follow Jesus Christ it's not surprising that's what this community was doing it was living life in a way it was living by a different playbook you know it was living life in a way all the world was scratching their heads and joining in and we want to be a community that loves one another and is hospitable towards outside we want to join

God in his mission I've said before we're on a mission trying to make strangers or take strangers making friends and friends into family I mean that that is our mission that's what was going on here I mean the idea is that God was not just kind of bringing a few individuals together God was building a church a community with which to carry forward to the end of the world the good news about Jesus Christ that's what God was up to and that's what God is doing here John Stott says it like this the church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God it is not a divine afterthought it is not an accident of history on the contrary the church is God's new community for his purpose conceived in past eternity being worked out in history and to be perfected in a future eternity is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness but rather to build his church that is to call out of the world a people for his own glory that's what we want that's what we need

I pray that this picture captivates us so that we hold on to all devotion and hospitality as we give our lives for the thing Jesus gave his life life for the church not a man not an institution but a people entrusted with the gospel to take it to the end of the world and that's what we're going to see I mean I just want to keep going in acts but I've committed to a briefer sermon because it comes alive as we continue let me conclude with prayer Father in heaven we thank you for these moments we thank you for your word we pray that you would help us now as we seek to be a community like this God give us grace we pray and help us to live together and to live on mission and to take the gospel to the end of the world in

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