

IMAGINE A WORLD WITH MORE COMMUNITY

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

August 28, 2022

TEXT: Acts 2:42-47

FACEBOOK LIVE TITLE: *Imagine a World with More Community – envisioning a faithful active church fellowship.*

BEGIN WITH SHORT PRAYER: *Open our hearts Lord that we might feel Your presence – open our ears Lord that we might hear Your voice – and may my words and the meditations of all our hearts bring glory and honor to You! AMEN*

This week I read a story about a rather old-fashioned lady, who was planning a couple of weeks' vacation in Florida. So, she wrote a letter to a particular campground and asked for reservations. Now, this woman was quite delicate and modest with her language. She wanted to make sure the campground was fully equipped but didn't know quite how to ask about the "toilet" facilities. She just couldn't bring herself to write the word "toilet" in her letter. So, after much deliberation, she thought she'd write the words: "Bathroom Commode," but when she wrote that down, she still thought she was being a bit too forward. So, she started all over again; rewrote the entire letter and referred to the Bathroom Commode" simply as the "B.C.". *"Does the campground have its own "B.C.?"* is what she actually wrote.

Well, the campground owner wasn't old-fashioned at all, and when he got the letter, he couldn't figure out what the lady was talking about. That "B.C." really stumped him.

After worrying about it for several days, he showed the letter to other campers, but they couldn't figure out what the lady meant either. The campground owner finally came to the conclusion that the lady in asking about the "B.C.", must be asking about the location of the local Baptist Church. So, he sat down and wrote the following reply:

"Dear Madam: I regret very much the delay in answering your letter, but I now take pleasure of informing you that the "B.C." is located nine miles north of the camp site and is capable of seating 250 people at one time.

"I admit it is quite a distance away if you are in the habit of going regularly, but no doubt you will be pleased to know that a great number of people take their lunches along, and make a day of it..... They usually arrive early and stay late. The last time my wife and I went was six years ago, and it was so crowded we had to stand up the whole time we were there. It may interest you to know that right now, there is a supper planned to raise money to buy more seats.... They plan to hold the supper in the middle of the B.C., so everyone can watch and talk about this great event.....

*"I would like to say it pains me very much, not to be able to go more regularly, but it is surely not for lack of desire on my part.... As we grow older, it seems to be more and more of an effort, particularly in cold weather..... If you decide to come down to the campground, perhaps I could go with you the first time you go... sit with you... and introduce you to all the other folks.... This is really a very friendly community...."*¹

Now that leaves us with *some* image of the church, doesn't it?¹

Imagine God's Limitless Love – that is our theme for our current sermon series. In fact, it is the theme of our denomination for this year as “*we are in a season of imagining anew how we do ministry, worship, care for one another and connect with our communities in impactful ways.*”² All too often, when we start to dream of what we can do as a church – we get caught up in a view of scarcity: we start to give up because we believe we just don't have enough. But what if we started imagining what we CAN do because of God's limitless love! Because God can really can “*do exceedingly more than all we can ask or think*”, as we put our trust in Him. (Ephesians 3:20)

Today, we come to “Imagine a world with more community” – looking to the early church as our example and inspiration. The early church imagined a world “*where God's limitless love shaped the way we gather, care for one another and structure ourselves to share resources*”.³

You know we live in a world where we value working hard and doing things for *ourselves*. And then we had the pandemic where we have spent much time in isolation – separated from one another. But we as Christians were never meant to be a “lone ranger” in our faith! We are made for community! We really can't do it alone!

It is so important for us as Christians to have a community of believers – the church – to walk with us on our faith journey – to give us support and encouragement – and share our burdens. A community to help us grow in faith, to be more like Jesus...and to work together, side by side, to spread the good news and build the kingdom.

We get a good understanding about what the purpose and marks of Christian community are by looking at the early church, as described in our passage for today from Acts 2:42-47. I encourage you to get your Bibles out and follow along as we take a closer look at this incredible church. I heard a pastor say one time that these verses about the church are something that should be preached on every year – just so we can be reminded again and again what the church was created to be. We definitely need to hear it, once again this year, as we imagine and envision what kind of church we want to be as we look to the future.

Let's look at this first church, as described in Acts 2, and find what characteristics they had, that we should try to bring into our church.

⁴² *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.* ⁴³ *A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.* ⁴⁴ *And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.* ⁴⁵ *They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.* ⁴⁶ *They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity^[b]—* ⁴⁷ *all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*

The first thing that stands out about the early church was how devoted they were. Literally, the church was committed fully to learning and growing in their faith and to worship and prayer. God was first in their lives – holding first priority in their lives. And notice – their commitment also included fellowship. They were devoted to being together! There was no such a thing as a solitary Christian – a Christian who went it alone. They knew that they needed time with their Lord AND with each other.

Earlier this summer, we gathered together on three separate Sunday afternoons for Pastors' Roundtables, to talk about what life-giving characteristics we saw in our church – and then to share our dreams and hopes for the future. Consistently, people who gathered around the table described our church community as a family – friendly, welcoming and accepting. There is devotion to growing in faith through our times of worship and Bible study. And we love that we are a praying church. I think we could say that we are devoted to teaching, preaching God's word and prayer and the Lord's Supper where all are welcome – every Sunday.

The early church was described as being full of great care and encouragement for one another – lifting each other up in good times and bad. Paul described the church, the body of Christ in I Corinthians 12:27 this way: *“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”* A blessing of our church that was mentioned at the roundtables is that we are an encouraging and supportive church family – praying for one another and also involving lay people in leadership in worship. And we are very open to hearing testimonies of others – and accepting of them and their difficult pasts. These are characteristics that give life to our church.

One new aspect we have discovered since we have had the pandemic is that our church community has grown! Oh – not the in-person worship attendance. That is definitely one place where we need to grow. But where we have grown is that we now have a Facebook worshiping community. We have discovered that we are church – no matter where we meet: in the church building - out beyond the church building when we go to “be the church” events, for example – and when we worship together online. During the pandemic, we literally had to record the services and then post them onto our webpage and Facebook. But now we can have “live” services and even though we can't see you all – we know that ya'll are there, watching online and sharing in communion with us – and yes – many of you watch every week and share your tithes and offerings to support the work of the church.

It was mentioned at each of the Roundtables that we want to engage more with our brothers and sisters online. One suggestion was to have a “meet and greet event” where we can get to know all of you. Already, we do that to some extent by having Sunday School and Bible Study with you via Zoom – and people attend from across the miles and even state lines! But could there be more? Pastor Greg and I, are looking into ways that we can actually create some small groups online and help our online group become even more a part of our church community. I recently heard about a church in Atlanta that has all sorts of small groups online – from book study groups and prayer groups to parenting groups and membership classes – and even to something like yoga or cooking! Could it be that we could grow our church community in fellowship, where we could *really* know each other and support each other here beyond this church building? Wouldn't that be a great way to grow the church – and make use of today's

technology? Online church – we would love to hear from you. What are ways you would like to connect and engage with the church family? On-line folks, let us know by adding your thoughts in the comment section right now.

In my prayer time and in listening to the folk who attended the pastor's roundtables share how we need to grow in our church –I believe one of our great needs to really **grow closer in fellowship** with one another. We've been apart for too long, due to the closing of the church through the pandemic. The time is now to work with our community building. And one way is through discovering new ways to relate to our on-line family.

Other ways we really are called to grow closer is to DO things together in fellowship. We need times to be together to talk and visit – to learn about each other's lives and support one another... to study together and serve together in a variety of ways. One simple, small way is to reinstate our coffee fellowship prior to worship, so we can reconnect with each other each week. Just sitting across the table and visiting can be a great uplift. We are hoping that will start again mid-September. Other ways that I am envisioning are these:

Increase our Sunday School classes. Currently have 2 adult classes. Can there be more? What about children and youth Sunday School? Prior to the pandemic we had many classes around the church. Can more be added now – and even include online folk? A lot of our education currently with children and youth will be done on Wednesday nights, beginning September 18. And we need faithful disciples to volunteer to be mentors and help guide our children and youth in faith. Could that be you?

Small groups. I believe that small groups are vital to our church. Worship in a large group is strong and powerful – life-giving. But if all of your fellowship with the church is coming to the larger gathering time, sitting in the pew or watching Online, you are missing out on the largest blessing of fellowship. Small groups give people an opportunity to serve together, study Scripture together, and care for each other. Close relationships can develop where you can share burdens with each other and pray for each other.

We know that the early church: *“Day by day, attended the temple together; breaking bread in their homes, and received their food with glad and generous hearts.”* They liked to eat together! Maybe that was when church pot-lucks began!! 😊 Some of the small groups that I believe should begin again are things like “Dinners for 8” – and perhaps even larger group gatherings like game nights and movie night and pot-luck meals together. These are great times when we can invite folks who aren't currently a part of the church to come and get to know people in the church.

And just a heads up – we are going to have four “fire pit” get togethers on Sunday nights beginning mid-September. These are great fellowship gatherings for church members as well as visitors – guests you would invite that might want to become a part of our church family.

These are just a very few ideas that we can imagine more community and draw closer to each other. I am confident you might have a few more dreams in your heart and mind and I'd love to hear them.

Next week, we will be imagining more worship – and will be sharing ways that we can grow deeper as a church family in worship and prayer. And the **following week** we will be imagining more compassion – and will be sharing ways we can grow wider in outreach to our community. All of this will be leading up to Back to Church Sunday on **September 18**. Be thinking now of who you can invite to come to worship with you – or for those of you online – be thinking of someone you can invite to come and worship in your home with you to watch the service.

Oh, how we need the church – and how vital fellowship is to build our church!

A true story is told of a church that had their closing night VBS service. In the group of kids was one young boy who'd only come to one night of the VBS, and who was distinctive because he was missing one of his hands. It just so happened that the teacher of that class was missing that night and didn't know about this little boy until the closing night activities. One of the activities she'd planned was to have the children put their hands together in the form of a church building ("Here is the church, and here is the steeple. Open it up and there's all the people.") But that night - as she told the children "Now, let's all build our churches. 'Here is the church, here is the steeple...'” and suddenly, in horror, she realized what she'd done. Here, in her group was the one boy who couldn't build a “church” because he only had one hand!!! But in the awkward silence that followed - the boy next to him held his hand up and said, "Here, let's build the church together."

You see that's what fellowship is all about - fellowship is all about building the church together!⁴

The early church built a church together in unity – and the world took notice. The early Christian writer Tertullian⁵ once quoted a pagan official as having said about those early Christians: “*Look at how much they love each other!*”⁴ This is exactly what should be said about us, because Jesus said... “*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*” (John 13:35)

May it be Lord of us! May it be!

PRAYER

INVITATION

RESOURCES:

¹Tammy Garrison, “*We Are Family*”, October 20, 2001. www.sermoncentral.org

²Imagine God's Limitless Love. “Imagine a World With More”, www.disciplesmissionfund.org

³IBID.

⁴Meg Hunter-Kilmer - published on 06/19/16, “Let People Say of Us, See How They Love Each Other”. <https://aleteia.org/2016/06/19/let-people-say-of-us-see-how-they-love-each-other/>

⁵Jeff Strite, “The Fellowship of the Faithful”, May 8, 2020. www.sermoncentral.org.