

The Power of Dreams: *Being an Innovative Community*

Biblical Text: **Acts 2:42-47**

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Today, I want to celebrate the Church!

In part, I want to celebrate Old Mission United Methodist Church.

Seventy years ago last week, about 165 pilgrims met on September 20, 1942 in the Fairway Theatre for the first worship service for the Old Mission Methodist Church. And the rest, as they say, is history - our history.

Even though it was the middle of World War II, the growing congregation, with the help of the Kansas City District Missionary Society and the J.C. Nichols Corporation, bought this land and began to plan our first building.

That first stone building was built in 1946, and a second quickly followed in 1948, with our beautiful sanctuary added in 1954, and the tower in 1959.

Classrooms were added in 1967, and thirty years later, in 1997, a major addition and renovation added 9,000 square feet. The debt is nearly paid off, and with your help we'll finish it maybe by the end of 2012.

It has been a glorious seventy years, and I am pleased to be only the tenth Senior Pastor in our history. *I also pleased to have my picture handing on the wall near our offices, and not have to die, or retire, for that to happen!*

But even more than that, I want to celebrate THE Church today; Church with a capital "C." That life-giving, innovative, spiritual entity that has been changed lives since it was born on the Day of Pentecost!

As a kid who was raised in Kansas City in the 1960's, I have special appreciation for the birth of the Church Chapter 2 of the Book of Acts. The challenges of city life then looked a lot like the challenges of city life today.

There were buyers and sellers; the rich and the poor; men and women; young upstarts and old timers; there was diversity of background and culture; there were religious and non-religious people.

There was unrest over the amount and type of taxes. There was considerable discussion over role of government. There were rival religious groups, each claiming to be the "*religious right*," so to speak.

Not much has changed in the last two thousand years!

But a Church can make a difference in a city, a neighborhood, and in the lives of people. It made all the difference in mine!

I was raised not only by my parents, but by the Church! I was not only influenced by my friends, but by Godly men and women who believed in me! ***The people I met in Church changed my life.***

I shudder when I think of who I might have become without Dr. Howard Chadwick, Mrs. Stack, Bill Foster, and Rose Marie Hinde. Later, Dr. Charles Merrill Smith, George Wiley, Marion Brown, Carl Bangs, Dale Dunlap, Tex Sample and Paul Jones each had a powerful influence on me.

So did lay people like Glenn and Dena Rae McLaughlin, Minnis and Sarabelle Jones, Mike and Lori Norlen, Pat and Oakley Ralph, Joe and Jean Mackey and Tom and Carol Fox. ***These people changed my life.***

I don't know if it takes a village to raise a child, but I know it took a Church to raise this pastor! Thanks be to God.

And it takes a Church to change the world. Not just any Church - a Church willing to practice the faith, to be open to God's powerful, innovative, life-giving, community-building, reconciling, and empowering Spirit!

That's the kind of Church we find in our text today from Acts 2:42-47. It is an uncommon, even revolutionary text, but that is not how it usually is read.

It is commonly preached and taught, as the identification of four characteristics of what it means to be the Church. We find those in verse forty-two. ***"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."***¹

Every renewal movement, Protestant and Catholic, in history has sought a return to the same characteristics to reclaim the shape of the early Church.

- 1. The apostles' teachings – Scripture**
- 2. The Christian community – Fellowship**
- 3. Breaking bread at a common Table – Communion**
- 4. Devotion to worship - Prayer**

There is much truth in the common understanding. Dom Gregory Dix wrote the definitive work on the subject called *The Shape of the Liturgy* in 1945.

¹ Acts 2:42, New Revised Standard Version, Copyright © 1989, 1995. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

It has been repeated by every Church historian and theologian since. We need reminded of those four distinctive marks which we still practice today.

But the uncommon nature of the text becomes clearer when we ask of the text, ***“Just who were these people?”*** So let’s just ask that question together. ***“Just who were these people?”*** I am so glad you asked!

There were 3,000 people. **Acts 2:41**. And notice just who they were. Of every possible diversity, language, culture and racial group. **Acts 2:9-11**. And the Good News was for everyone! **Acts 2:39**. They were rich and poor. That’s in today’s text, **Acts 2:45**.

But the Spirit of God made this diverse community into a Church where people came to see one another as different but not distant! And that doesn’t just happen everywhere! In fact, it hardly happens anywhere. **But it can, as the Spirit is at work among us.**

One of the biggest movies of the last few years was James Cameron’s ***Avatar***. One of the most powerful ideas in the film is that reconciliation, love and hope are only possible when we truly **see** one another.

Picking up on the movie, Natalie Tutu, said this: ***“If I really see you, I can’t be OK with you being treated as less than human.”***² That’s powerful!

It takes a diverse humanity, men and women, different backgrounds and ages and races, and remixes us into a new innovative community of grace.

“Remix” means to ***“combine audio tracks or channels from previous recordings to produce something new.”*** Acts 2 was a remix!

One reason Acts 2 is remarkable is because of the creative, innovative power of the Spirit to do that which we cannot do or will not do on our own.

That much is clear in our text. Look at verses 44-46:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”³

² Natalie Tutu, daughter of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, spoke at the National Festival of Homiletics, May 2010.

³ Op. Cit. Acts 2:44-46, New Revised Standard Version.

I believe the world is still hungry for a Church that looks more like the Kingdom of God and less like our separated culture.

In fact, that's what makes a Church! In his book, The Prodigal God, Timothy Keller says: ***“Want to ‘get to know Jesus better?’ You’ll never be able to do that alone. It’s only in a community of believers seeking to resemble, serve, and love Jesus will you ever get to know him.”***⁴

We need community. We cannot be fully a Christian by ourselves. Hebrews 10:25 says, ***“Do not forsake the assembly of other Christians, as some have done, but build one another up in faith.”***⁵

And never underestimate the power of genuine community in Jesus. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used to have a term for the church that God intended us to be - the church that embodied God's Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” – he called that Church ***“The Beloved Community.”***

Without the Spirit of God in our midst, working in us, guiding us and living and loving through us, we will never be that kind of community. But with the power of the Spirit, all things are possible. ***Thanks be to God!***

So how do we become that? Biblical literalists would remind us of Acts 2:42, and say, ***“The apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”*** And they wouldn't be wrong.

Other Church “experts” have other answers in our time.

Some would say *“Programs, Priorities, Policies and Procedures.”*
The more electronically enabled: *“Internet, Email, Facebook and Twitter.”*
Traditionalists remind us of *“Tradition, Ritual, Comfort and Familiarity.”*
Others would prefer *“Projectors, Praise Songs, Popularity and Politics.”*
Here's one from me: ***“How about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, and Jesus?”***

We live in a challenging world. But instead of locking arms, we often simply trade angry rhetoric – in politics, and too often in the world of faith.

To paraphrase Jim Wallis: ***“Maybe it is time to replace the gospel of Glenn, Rush, Sean, and Bill or the gospel of Keith, Rachel, Chris and Ed - with the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!”***⁶

⁴ Timothy Keller, The Prodigal God, Copyright © 2008, Dutton Press, pg. 127.

⁵ Hebrews 10:25, paraphrased by author.

⁶ Jim Wallis at the National Festival of Homiletics May 2010.

So how do we get there? One way is to start where we can. We may not feel like we can change the world, but we can change our little corner of it. And of course when we do, the systems around us are influenced.

The early Church took care of each people's needs. They spent their time together in worship and community, and in evangelism and service. They shared not just Communion, but another real kind of breaking bread, opening their lives and homes one another. They prayed together. And different as they were - slaves and free, men and women, rich and poor, of different languages and races - in Jesus they changed the world!

Pentecost gave birth to the new community – it wasn't a new message, and it wasn't a new idea. But by the power of the Spirit, there was a remix of traditions and people into the new community we call Church.

So what will “the” and Old Mission Church look like in decades to come? I don't know. Do you? But as old traditions and new ideas come together, I am convinced that God will do something amazing! Do we have the blueprint? Not yet, but we have some leadings. Let's celebrate that!

Long ago, Clyde Reid wrote a slim book that I have hung on to all these years. It's called, Celebrate the Temporary. Here are a few lines.

“Celebrate the temporary - Don't wait until tomorrow, live today. Live in the now, with its problems and its agonies, its joy and its pain. There is joy and beauty today. It is temporary, here now and gone. So celebrate it while you can. Celebrate the temporary.”⁷

If we are God's Church, we will look different for each new age, but we will have one source of power – the Spirit of the Living God. If we are God's Church, we will be unafraid of the future, and open to remixing the past to create a tomorrow that looks more like the Kingdom of God.

And if we follow God's lead, I am convinced that it will be said of us:

“The Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”⁸

⁷ Clyde Reid, Celebrate the Temporary. Copyright © 1972, New York: Harper & Row.

⁸ Op. Cit. Acts 2:47, New Revised Standard Version.