

“Glad and Generous Hearts”

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship; to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

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

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Acts 2:42-47

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Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

For the past two weeks we have been reading in the Scripture about the fallout from Easter morning. First with Jesus' arrival in the locked room and interaction with "Doubting" Thomas. Then last week with Jesus' appearance to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus.

This week, in Acts chapter 2, we take up the matter of the just birthed church. Jesus has been raised from the dead and made himself known to the disciples. In response to this, the church bursts forth on the scene with inspiration, energy, commitment...and most of all, hope.

II.

Our passage from Acts talks about many of the things which would become the foundation of the church for the next two centuries: the thirst and drive for learning, the importance and joy of sharing each other's company, the need for and vital role of prayer, the commitment to sharing resources in accord with professed values, the determination to help those in need, the necessity of corporate worship and praise in order to align oneself spiritually and replenish oneself emotionally and, the litmus test for any faith community, to do so with glad and generous hearts. Given all of this, I've obviously spent a good deal of my energies this week thinking about our church and I believe I have come to look at life in the church in a whole new way.

III.

I am not necessarily sure if there is a specific progression to one's life in a church, but there certainly are different kinds of stages or roles we occupy at various times in our life: that of stranger, friend, neighbor, and family. How many of you here today or on the stream were baptized and raised in this church? That means all of the rest of you, myself included, first came to this church as a stranger.

Walking into any church for the first time is hard work. Not only do you have to change your own routine, you must face a room full of new faces and meet a whole bunch of new people. When folks come to our church for the first time, I send them a letter of welcome. One of the things I always try to explain is that a good many of the people sitting in the sanctuary with them are, themselves, new to the church. How many people here today are new to this church in the past year? Five years? Ten? Before Linda and I arrived 27 years ago? (I am guessing this would be about half of those gathered on any given Sunday.)

IV.

Welcoming a stranger is truly one of the most important things a church has to do. The mandate of hospitality is something which runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and is echoed in Jesus' words from Matthew 24:

"Then the king will say to those at his right, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'"

I would like to think that one of the things we do exceptionally well here on the Park is to welcome people into our midst. If I am wrong about this, please make haste in telling me so because as a church nothing, and I mean *nothing*, is more important than helping people to feel welcome. One of the greatest gifts we have to impart as a congregation, is the dissolution of that uncomfortable feeling which comes from being a stranger, and replacing it with a feeling of belonging, acceptance, safety, and affinity.

V.

Now it comes as no surprise to many, that as delightful as life can sometimes be here in Canton it is kind of a tough town. After having lived here for 27 years, I have witnessed a great many people, from all walks of life and for various reasons, go through the very same struggle of "should I stay or should I go?" (The Clash). Can I really make this my home? Will I get invested, should I get involved?

Over the last quarter century I have observed that one of the most telling signs that a person has changed from the outside looking in to the inside looking around, is that they stop greeting people with words or phrases like "Hey!" "How's it going?" or "What's Up?" and they start using a person's first

name in their salutations, “Carol, good to see you,” “Morning Ken,” “Some weather, huh Bob?” When you hear someone using a person’s first name, even with people for whom they don’t particularly care all that much (or perhaps *especially* with such people) you can be sure they have made the transition to being a Neighbor.

VI.

Every Sunday we do a great many things in worship: sing, pray, proclaim the Word, confess our faith, and receive the offering. However, nothing is more significant than the welcome at the start of each service. This is especially true on “Name Tag Sunday.” Learning someone’s name is the first step in becoming a neighbor, and in building one’s neighborhood. This goes for the country road, the village street, the gated community, and the pew in which you sit in each week.

Sometimes I think it would be fun to hand out t-shirts to the congregation based on where they sit in the sanctuary: “Out in right field,” “Left Leaning,” “Front & Center,” “Middle of the Pack,” “Rocking Chair Mom,” “Back Pew ONLY!” Although we might joke about being good cows and going to our usual pew, these liturgical neighborhoods are the building blocks of our faith community. Let me ask you, who do you first get to know when you come to the church? Your pew neighbor, that’s who.

VII.

Now another of the lessons which Canton has taught me, is that there is a difference between neighbors and friends. When I first moved to town I assumed that my neighbors were also my friends. However, what I came to find out through a series of difficult “growth opportunities,” is that just because someone is friendly it doesn’t necessarily mean they are your friends. I remember distinctly the crystallization of this realization. I was speaking to my then neighbor, Stu Papaw (God rest his soul). Stu was a good catholic, retired State Trooper, and crusty town character. He used the word “neighbor” as a verb rather than a noun. He once said to me, “I neighbor with them, but I wouldn’t call them my friends.” I mean, if you were looking, you would have seen a light bulb go on over my head, just like in the cartoons. This was no LED, but a high wattage incandescent theological light bulb burning hot and bright.

VIII.

The moment Stu made the statement, the Apostle Paul's words from Romans 8 finally and fully made sense to me: "Any other commandment, is summed up in the words, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" You see, you can be welcoming and hospitable and even loving towards another, but you can't really authentically love someone until they move from being an unknown stranger to a neighbor you see and know. Someone with whom you share your life and your physical space; either joyfully or, even, begrudgingly.

Though we may relate to the common humanity we might share with a stranger, we do not start to really loving people until we perceive them as our neighbor. While fully loving the stranger is impossible until they become a neighbor, loving the friend is no work at all because loving someone is the very definition of what *makes* them your friend.

IX.

In the 5th chapter of John, Jesus says:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. I do not call you servants any longer, but I have called you friends."

Your friends are those who truly love you. They know your strengths and accept your weaknesses. Yet, friendship can only be birthed through the hard labor of time spent together riding out the changes, sharing one's joys and enduring each other's most profound struggles. That said, one of the hardest parts of our life together here in the early part of the 21st century is that we seem to have such precious little time, and this leaves us with too few precious friends.

All this past week Linda has been running back and forth to the church helping with the Rummage Sale set up, and every night she would regale me with wonderful and funny stories from the day. After one particularly poignant tale, she looked over and said to me, "I really love this church."

X.

As the pastor, I also love this church. Not because I am any kind of noble shepherd to the flock, but because I truly feel this church loves *me*, as a person, and I can be a hard person to love sometimes. At one time I believed

those old sayings, “You can change your underwear, but you can’t change your family,” and “Blood is thicker than water.” Yet, my experience here on the Park has taught me these are not quite true. All of you have become family to my family and, in so doing, you have shown me the very best of what a church *can* be, and what the body of Christ is *meant* to be.

Much like the early church we read about in Acts this morning, the vast majority of us were first welcomed here as strangers, we grew to know each other as neighbors, we have begun to make the time to love each other as friends, and now, we are becoming what Paul calls in Galatians a family of faith filled with good will that praises God with glad and generous hearts which are filled with inspiration, energy, commitment, and most of all...hope. Amen.