

**Practicing the Faith** (*part 2 of 3 in No One Is an Island*)

Acts 2:42-47

September 18, 2011 – Browns Point UMC

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

One of the things that our conference is doing to try to improve accountability for pastors and motivate churches to really work toward growth is to require each pastor to submit a number of “metrics” each year: numbers that describe the state of our ministry for the year in comparison to the year before. Now everyone knows that attendance numbers and budget figures, along with new members and number of projects to engage the mission field – even when coupled with numbers of people engaged in small groups and service activities – cannot tell the full story of the faithfulness of a church: numbers can’t describe the depth of our relationship or the growth of our faith. But these numbers *are* important, and having to acknowledge and articulate them year after year helps us to remember the people each number represents and push toward growth.

I have felt pretty good about Browns Point’s metrics so far in my tenure here. Our 52-week worship average is currently 36% higher than it was a year ago. Our 2011 finances are about 20% better than last year. We’ve got as many as 30 kids in Sunday School. We’ve had 11 people join the church already this calendar year, not to mention a good number last fall and more to come next week and later this year. I think the “metrics” show that we’re in pretty good shape.

Then I read this passage from Acts. Now you should know that Acts is a continuation of Luke’s gospel, probably written by the same person as a somewhat continuous account. That the folks who put the Bible together put John in the middle of them makes things confusing, but Acts pretty much picks up where Luke left off, with an account of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, and then continues with the story of the earliest Christians: the acts of the apostles. Acts 1:15 says there were about 120 of them – just under the number of folk we usually have on a Sunday morning here at Browns Point. And what we heard this morning is only in the second chapter of Acts: the church is just in infancy, but the Holy Spirit is moving among them, when Peter preaches what appears to me to be a fairly mediocre sermon, and in one day, that church grows by 3000 people. That’s the kind of church that wins all the awards at annual conference and makes the rest of us look bad. And then later Peter will preach his second sermon, and while it gets him and Paul thrown into jail, 5000 more people will join the church. In fact, the passage that Pam read a few minutes ago says that more people were added to their number *every day*. Those are some impressive metrics. Add to that that they were performing signs and wonders and experiencing radical economic transformation along with displaying glad and generous hearts, and this little church in Acts can make the rest of us feel a little *less proud* of our own work.

And it would be easy to write these folks off, or think about their circumstances, which were very different from ours, or even to imply that God was moving in a very different way than God is moving now, and *that’s* why we aren’t adding to *our* number day by day and I didn’t get 5000 people to join this church by the 2<sup>nd</sup> week. [Now those would be some parking issues.] But it’s important to note that the growth this Acts church was experiencing was not the product of the latest church-growth scheme or fad, nor was it the primary intention of its leaders or the sum of its faithfulness: **this incredible growth was the result of a rich, practiced, community faith.**

Now these folks all had something in common: they confessed Jesus as Lord; they believed. But that in itself did not make them the church. They could all have believed on their own. What made them the *church* was how they lived in community, what they practiced. And this community,

gathered in one heart and committed to mutual support, devoted themselves to at least four things: **the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.**

First, they read the Scriptures together – and they didn't just read them, they devoted themselves to the Scriptures' teachings. Most folks in mainline churches today can't *find* all the books in the Bible, much less do they know what's in there. Many of you probably only encounter Scripture when it's read aloud on Sunday mornings, if you happen to catch it then. That's why we read at least two different texts every Sunday, even if they don't seem to totally go together: because experiencing Scripture is important, and you may not be doing it elsewhere. Many *pastors* only read the texts that they are preparing for church – I have been guilty of this myself at times. But this Acts community was transformed by the practice of *devotion* to Scripture. You can envision that they *lived* in the text until it was written on their very souls.

They were also devoted to fellowship – not just having coffee after worship, but really working on the quality of their relationships and working to include others in those relationships. They nurtured the habits of hospitality and invited one another into their homes (even if their homes didn't look like the latest spread in *Real Simple* or *Better Home and Gardens* magazine). They made one another feel welcome, strengthening their relationships until they were close enough for genuine rejoicing, encouragement, and support.<sup>1</sup> They worked at being community for one another.

Third, they were devoted to the breaking of the bread: both what we know as communion or Eucharist and common meals. We know that communion is what John Wesley called a “means of grace.” It's an opportunity for us to experience the living God, who is host, creator, and self-giving servant in the meal. When we take the bread and juice, we are nourished with Christ's own self, so that we become more and more like him and can be his hands and feet in the world. As the bread is broken, barriers fall down and the world looks more like the kingdom, where all people gather around the same table, no matter their race, class, or gender, all of us together re-membering the body of Christ as we remember Christ's body. But we can do this every day, every week, or every month, and miss the promise of the gospel that's available to us in the sacrament. This Acts church was *devoted* to the breaking of the bread – they didn't just go through the motions, whether they were officially celebrating the sacrament or simply sharing a meal at home: they were intentional about receiving God's grace.

And last, they were devoted to “the prayers:” the terminology makes us think that they had certain prayers that they said together, perhaps at the same time every day. My family has some of these: we sing the Wesleyan grace around the dinner table each night, and before our daughter goes to sleep we give thanks for the day, ask for restful sleep, and pray the Lord's Prayer together. These aren't just words that we repeat: they are opportunities for communion with God. They shape us and how we see the world. I am able to see this most clearly in our little girl, who we ask each night, “Are there prayers you'd like to say?” And now she always responds with, “Our Father.” She is being shaped by prayer, just as we are.

The Acts community devoted themselves to Scripture, fellowship, bread-breaking, and prayer, not just *understandings* of religion, but actual practice *in community*. Their faith changed *everything* about their lives – it wasn't just something they did once a week or whenever they had time or were struggling and needed answers. They practiced these things day by day, sharing all things in common and living in awe and wonder at the way God was moving among them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gary Neal Hanson, “Acts 2:42-47 – Theological Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word Year A, Vol 2*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 428.

John Wesley, who began what became the Methodist denomination, also understood the power of *practices*, that it was not enough to say, “I am a Christian” or even to believe in certain tenets of the faith: he knew that to grow in our knowledge and love of God, to nurture that sense of awe and wonder, we have to practice faith. And he knew that the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Anglicans with whom he was in ministry, who were experiencing dramatic social and economic change as well as intellectual discovery that pushed God toward the margins, which should sound awfully familiar to us, needed one another’s support to practice their faith and grow closer to God. He knew that they had to be in community with one another to put their faith into action. So he put everybody into classes, small groups that met together every week for worship, sharing, and accountability. Each person had the opportunity (or if they wanted to stay a part of the Methodist society, the mandate), every week, to “unburden his or her soul,” building trust and allowing for the vulnerability that’s required to grow in love of God and neighbor. That’s how the Methodist movement began – that’s how it revolutionized the church in England: not by excellent, dynamic preaching (though certainly Wesley was a good preacher); not by the best PR and marketing plans or the most attractive buildings, but by groups of active Christians looking to put their faith into practice day by day, groups of Christians who understood that their faith should change *everything* about their lives, and who were committed to making sure that happened.

And we continue to follow that example. It’s not enough to just believe: if we want the awe and wonder, the incredible growth, the radical transformation that the early church experienced in Acts and that John Wesley experienced in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, we have to *practice* our faith. And the best way to do that is in community. Next month we’ll start a new system of small groups, called FaithGroups, that will allow space for each of us to explore Scripture and devote ourselves to fellowship, prayer, and the breaking of bread, as well as engagement with our community. As you hear more about these groups taking shape, I hope you’ll consider making one a priority for your life, so you can practice the faith and not just believe it. And I pray that all of us will heed the advice of the author of Hebrews, that we will “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, but encouraging one another.” Amen.