

June 14, 2009

Acts 2: 41-47

A Taste of the Kingdom

Here at the First Congregational Church of Battle Creek we are going to be Acting Up All Summer. That may not seem like anything new for us but this form of Acting Up is different. From now until the Labor Day Weekend, we will be studying the experiences of the first church that are recorded for us in the New Testament book of Acts, because they hold important lessons that we need to learn about the life we are called to live as a community of faith.

Today after worship we will be celebrating the 174th annual meeting of our congregation and distributing the annual reports of all our committees along with our financial reports. The book of Acts is about as close as we can get to reading the annual report of the first church. And as we do, it is important for us to pay attention to the things that mattered most to them. In the first church, they didn't have buildings to maintain, or staff salaries to pay, or budgets to finance. When the apostle Paul wrote his letters to the churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Colossae and Galatia, he didn't address them to a building like our church building here at 145 Capital Avenue NE. Christians didn't build churches until the fourth century, when Christianity was legalized throughout the Roman Empire. Christian churches were primarily house gatherings for the first three centuries.

And as we heard in our passage today from the second chapter of the book of Acts, their primary preoccupation was with the relationships that bound their lives together in faith. They were constantly gathering in each other's homes, eating together, praying together, studying together, and sharing their lives with each other. They cared so deeply for each other that they were willing to share their wealth with each other so that no one ever went in need.

Perhaps the most important lesson that we learn from the first church is that God has created us for community. The second creation story found in chapter two of the Old Testament book of Genesis begins with God's observation: "It is not good that the man should be alone..." (Gen. 2:18). It is against our very nature to live isolated lives. It makes us miserable and depressed and ultimately destroys us.

One of the most important lessons from the first church is that we are created for community and I believe it is imperative that we recover that lesson quickly. Today more and more of us are living lonely, isolated lives. A study reported in the American Sociological Review revealed that Americans have a third fewer close friends and confidants than just two decades ago. In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. In 2004, that number dropped to two, and one in four had no close confidants at all.^[1]

Our consumer culture emphasizes that what matters most in life are the possessions we own. A good life is defined by the value of our houses, and the model of the cars parked in our garages, and labels on our clothing. We measure net worth in dollars and cents, and even in these challenging financial times, we are way ahead of the rest of the world.

And yet the United States has one of the highest rates of depression anywhere in the world. Nigeria, on the other hand, has one of the world's lowest rates of depression. Despite the fact that the average standard of living in America is roughly four times that of Nigeria, and despite the fact that Nigeria is a country with a multitude of social problems - including dehumanizing

^[1] Janet Kornblum, USA TODAY, 6/22/06

poverty, a serious AIDS epidemic, and ongoing civil strife - it has far less depression per capita than the U.S.

So what do Nigerians have that we lack? The main thing is a strong sense of community. Nigerians know that they need one another, and that gives them a sense of belonging that most Americans lack. It provides them with a general satisfaction in life despite the hardships they endure.

Personal happiness is more closely associated with the depth of our personal relationships and what we invest in others than it is with our own material comforts. The earliest Christians understood that. It was the primary focus of their life together and it needs to become ours as well.

We all need people we are committed to loving and serving, and who are committed to loving and serving us. We all need people who are close enough to us to notice when we are depressed and discouraged and offer encouragement and support. We all need people who care enough about us to point out our shortcomings and confront us in love. We all need people who refuse to leave us alone even when we don't feel worthy of their company. This church must be a place where those deep, intimate, trusting relationships are nurtured and cherished.

In this week's edition of *The Christian Century*, an outstanding magazine for thoughtful Christians that we have available in our church library, there was an interesting review of Robert Putnam's upcoming book, "American Grace".

Robert Putnam is a political scientist at Harvard University who has written about his deep concern for the growing social isolation in America. In his previous book, "Bowling Alone," he pointed to the alarming decline in the numbers of people participating in the voluntary social networks that bring people together to serve the common good: service clubs like the Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, Parent Teacher Associations, Neighborhood Associations, and churches have all seen declining levels of participation since they peaked in the early 50's. Even bowling leagues have experienced significant decline as more and more people are "bowling alone," hence the title of his book.

But the research that he and David Campbell report in their new book, "American Grace", suggests that religious communities may be God's gift to civic engagement.

People of faith are better citizens and better neighbors, and the U.S. is amazingly religious compared to other countries. Religious Americans are three to four times more likely to be involved in their community than non-religious Americans. They are more apt to work on community projects, belong to voluntary associations, attend public meetings, vote in local elections, attend protest demonstrations and political rallies, and donate time and money to causes - including secular ones.

But the reason for the increased civic engagement has little to do with faith or theology. It is the relationships that people make in their churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples that draw them into community activism.

Putnam calls them "supercharged friends," and the more supercharged friends people have, the more likely they are to participate in civic events. The effect is so strong that people who attend religious services regularly - but don't have any friends there - look more like secularists than

like fellow believers when it comes to civic participation. “It is not faith that accounts for these,” Putnam said, “It is faith communities.”^[2]

Relationships take time to build and we live in a culture that demands immediate results. Relationships involve risk and vulnerability, compassion and understanding, patience and forgiveness. People are messy and relationships get complicated. It is a whole lot simpler to keep to ourselves and seek the pleasure of our own material possessions. But it never satisfies. We are created for community.

Last Monday, one of our members was diagnosed with advanced cancer. By Wednesday evening she was surrounded by a circle of people praying for her; she was wrapped in a prayer shawl that was knit by someone in our congregation and blessed during our Awestruck Celebration. She was approached by several other people in our faith community who know what it is like to battle cancer, one of whom passed on a copy of the book: “Crazy Sexy Cancer Tips, a Girlfriend’s Guide to Living with Cancer”.

When we risk breaking out of our loneliness and isolation, and join our lives together in authentic Christian fellowship, the same awe that came upon the members of the first church will fill us all with glad and generous hearts. Amen.

^[2] Christian Century, June 16, 2009, p. 16