



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 20, 2013

"A New Community" (Book of Acts Series)

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Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

Acts 2:44 All who believed were together and had all things in common;

Acts 2:45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Acts 2:46 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,

Acts 2:47 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.

Acts 3:1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Acts 3:2 And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple.

Acts 3:3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms.

Acts 3:4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us."

Acts 3:5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.

Acts 3:6 But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk."

Acts 3:7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.

Acts 3:8 Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

Acts 3:9 All the people saw him walking and praising God,

Acts 3:10 and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Acts 3:11 While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished.

Acts 3:12 When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"

Acts 3:13 The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him.

Acts 3:14 But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you,

Acts 3:15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

Acts 3:16 And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

Last week, I preached on Pentecost. Pentecost marked the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were in a room when they heard rushing wind and saw tongues of fire as the Holy Spirit swooped in and filled them with His Spirit. The Spirit filled them with joy and gave them supernatural power.

Suddenly, they could supernaturally speak languages they didn't know, other people could supernaturally understand them, and people were supernaturally healed. It was super. And it was natural.

On that day alone 3,000 people became believers and were baptized partly because of the eloquence of the Apostle Peter's preaching. The 3,000 continued to gather in homes or wherever they could meet. They formed a loyal band of brothers and sisters in Christ, a covenant of believers that became the prototype of the early church.

Today we will get a glimpse of how church is to be as we heard and read these verses:

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

So we come to our first question: Why did the 3,000 want to join up in this movement of Christ? It's because this new community had these characteristics:

1) It was a community open to all.

And when I say all, I really mean all. It was multicultural. All races and ethnicities were jumbled together because of their experience of knowing Christ.

You know, today it's kind of funny how we associate religious beliefs with ethnicities in the world. If you are Italian or Irish, one would guess you are Catholic. If you are Jewish, one would guess Judaism is your faith. If Japanese from Japan, probably Buddhist or Shinto. If you are Arab,

probably Muslim. If Scottish, probably Presbyterian. If Dutch, probably Reformed. If East Indian, there's a good chance that person's Hindu.

But get this: when the Holy Spirit came down with power on Pentecost, all cultures got the Spirit at the same time. Thousands of people from a variety of cultures turned to Christ. This new community, which was the First Church, was open to all people in other ways besides being cross-cultural.

It was also multigenerational. We would find after Pentecost whole families would be baptized together in faith to Christ. The Book of Acts (Acts 16:14-15) says that when a woman named Lydia became a Christian, she and her whole household got baptized (probably adults and children). When the Centurion Cornelius became a Christian, he and his relatives and friends were baptized (Acts 10:48). Same for a Philippian jailer, a synagogue ruler named Crispus, and a man named Stephanas; these people had their entire household baptized. (Acts 16:33, 18:18; 1 Cor 1:16)

This new community was also based on living in the Spirit and not on the law. Living filled with the Holy Spirit meant does not mean a life based on performance, but rather a life that's lived in response to God's grace. We don't deserve heaven. Performance doesn't save us. God's grace does!

We don't get to heaven because we outperformed everyone else or we observed the law better than others. We get into heaven because of what God did for us, not for what we did. However, what will send us to hell is when we think we can be our own savior and Lord and disregard or reject Jesus Christ.

The only thing that saves us is the realization and the acknowledgement that we're sinners

and that we need God. We can only get into heaven because Jesus has forgiven our sins.

So, if you are homosexual, does that send you to hell? No. If you are heterosexual, does that mean you go to heaven purely on that? No. I am an authority that being heterosexual doesn't mean you are going to heaven.

So when we say that the church is inclusive, we really mean it is open to all. That means a church should be open to homosexuals, heterosexuals, criminals, wife-swappers, beer guzzlers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters, Nascar-watchers, Little League dads, soccer moms, demonically oppressed people, convicts, prostitutes, addicts, greedy business people and gossipers, married, singles, divorced people—everyone is welcome to our church.

To be clear, we are not condoning sins, but rather we are opening the door for everyone to experience the love and saving grace of Jesus Christ. We're a hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints. We admit that our choices in life are not always God's original design for us on how to flourish in life.

We don't have all the answers, and instead we all have major blind spots. And because we don't have all the answers, this new community called Church is to be formed of people who are lifelong learners.

2) The new community is for lifelong learners.

To say you are a lifelong learner is saying you don't have all the answers and want to learn how to do it better.

What did verse Acts 2:42 say? They were devoted to the apostles' teachings. Today we have those teachings in what is called the Bible.

We want to learn God's principles for living according to His Scriptures. We are working on being humble enough to say we need help. We want teaching not just from Sunday preaching but also teaching from WAKO, Life Training classes, Small Groups, Fellowship Groups. We want to be lifelong learners.

3) The new community is for lifelong sharers.

Acts 2:44-45: 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.

4) The new community is for lifelong sharers.

As the early Christians tried to share all that they had with each other, our First Prez members are also committed to tithing. We're always moving towards the giving of 10% of our income for God's ministry. We share what we have. We buy and share a building. We share a budget. We give to members in need, if they ask the deacons for help with their rent or electric bill or water bill or whatever. We also share our time to pray and visit each other not only during fellowship and parties but also when one of us is sick. In fact, we have deacons and Chaplain Marianna dedicated to visiting the sick.

The new community and today's church community shares its time, talent, treasure, and prayers with one another.

5) The new community is for lifelong pray-ers.

Yes, we need people praying for one another. The church is about people praying miraculous prayers. When someone said, "I hear you have healing prayer and you are seeing

miraculous healing. But you're Presbyterian, not Pentecostal, that's not supposed to happen."

I say, "We didn't know that wasn't supposed to happen. No one told us we couldn't. I guess we're Presby-costal."

We get a clue that miraculous prayer is supposed to be a characteristic of the new community as it said in Acts 2:43: "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles."

Signs and wonders is the phrase in the Bible to mean miracles that point us to God. And then in chapter three, we see this acted out when a poor, lame man encounters the disciples Peter and John and is instantly healed in the name of Jesus!

The mark of the new community is that when we pray for miracles they happen. Not all the time, not always how we think it should go, but it does happen. I would say half the time we pray for a miracle something good happens in a way we can observe and know.

But I want to close in depth with this last point.

6) The new community is for lifelong worshippers.

Acts 2:46-47 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.

The Christians of the new community were devoted to the breaking of bread, which was the sacrament of communion and not just fellowship. They were worshipping God with their praises and generous hearts.

But to be more specific, they were worshippers of a God who has a COVENANTAL relationship with them. The new community is for lifelong worshippers because of a covenant with God.

And here comes the critical conclusion. Our worship is based on holy promises or covenants. The mark of the new community is that it is a covenantal community.

But what is the meaning of a covenantal relationship? Modern society normally doesn't understand this. It doesn't get covenants. This is a really big concept, especially for us followers of Jesus.

We believe covenants run throughout the entire Bible starting from Adam to Abraham to Noah to Moses to David to the new covenant in Jesus. To understand covenantal relationships, let me first define what a consumer relationship is. Pastor Tim Keller (of Redeemer Presbyterian Church) helped me with this understanding of covenants and consumerism.

Modern society promotes consumer relationships, which say I will be what I should be as long as and to the degree that you should be what you should be. I'm only committed to you as long as you are committed in the way I think you should be to me. If not, then it's aloha. Consumer relationships are conditional and disposable.

But covenantal relationships say: I will be what I should be whether or not you are acting as you should be or not.

To be true, it is scary to get into a covenant. That's what marriage is supposed to be. And it only works if BOTH parties say that. If only one says that, then it can be abusive. However, It's a great relationship if two people are saying: I will be what I should be even if you aren't what you should be.

It's great to have a covenantal relationship where two people say: You are more important than I; the relationship is important to me even if my needs are not being fulfilled. I am after your needs, not my needs.

If both people are saying that, that is far more fulfilling than a consumer relationship that says, I will be in this only if you fulfill my needs.

On the other hand, a consumer relationship is a transactional one in which IF you give me something, then I will like you and stay with you. Actually a consumer relationship really says, I will only like you if you serve me, until I find someone else who serves me better.

Hear me on this: Not all relationships have to be covenantal. When I choose a restaurant that is a consumer relationship. For example, I like this one Italian restaurant in Honolulu. I know one of the waiters by name, the food is tasty, and the prices are okay.

But if I find another Italian restaurant where the food is more delicious, the prices are lower, the service is better, and the restaurant is closer to my house, then I say ciao baby to the first restaurant, and start eating more often at the second restaurant.

I have a consumer relationship with restaurants. I like you only if you serve me in the way I like, but I am not committed to you.

The horrible thing is that sometimes people can come to church with a consumer mentality: You better sing the songs I like, do the prayers the way I think they should be, Dan better be funny today, the sermon better be inspiring. I will only be committed to this church until I find another church and so I will church-hop all my life.

I like my hands to be up when I worship. How can people be worshipping with their hands down? Actually, worshipping the Lord with the hands up is old-school, vintage because that's how the first church worshipped. And so if you worship with your hands down, you're actually contemporary, edgy!

Consumer Christians are often harder on church worship than on sports events. What if I treated watching sports events like the way we judge churches? We might never see a game again. We would make a list something like this:

12 REASONS I STOPPED ATTENDING SPORTS EVENTS:

- 1) Every time I went, they asked me for money.
- 2) The people I had to sit by didn't seem very friendly.
- 3) The seats were too hard and comfortable at all.
- 4) The coach never came to call on me.
- 5) The referee made a decision with which I could not agree.
- 6) I was sitting with some hypocrites. They came only to see what others were wearing.
- 7) Some games went into overtime, and I was late getting home.
- 8) The band played some numbers that I had never heard before.
- 9) The games are scheduled when I want to do other things.
- 10) My parents took me to too many games when I was growing up.
- 11) Since I read a book on sports, I feel that I know more than the coaches anyway.
- 12) I don't want to take my children because I want them to choose for themselves what sport they like best.

So here's the deal: With God you can't have a consumer relationship for He only operates out of a covenantal relationship. Society doesn't like covenantal relationship. We like being consumers.

But the new community is based on covenants with God and each other. A covenantal relationship is like marriage. It is not a conditional relationship where we say I only like you if you like me. Rather, it is one that says I will love you in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, in want or in plenty, till death do us part. I will hang in there even when you are unlovable. I will forgive you when you do unforgiveable things and let me down.

And so God throughout the Bible makes clear His covenant with humanity that He will always love us even when we are not lovable, even when we are sinners.

But here's the tension. This may seem hard to understand at first. On one hand, God is saying I will not bless a rebellious people. You must obey me or I will not bless you.

You will see hundreds of Bible verses where God says I will only bless you if you do this or that, which may sound conditional. But there are also hundreds of verses that say I will bless you no matter what. That's a covenant. That's a tension between two seemingly opposites.

So how do we resolve this? God hates sin. He hates it when His people fail. And God can't just accept this sin because He is holy. But what about His covenant with them that He would never leave them nor forsake them? Are God's blessings conditional or unconditional?

The problem is that the Bible seems to give contradictory answers. The temptation is to want to come down on one side instead of hanging in the healthy balance. There's the liberal side that says, "Yes you need to obey, but in the end, God loves everybody and accepts everybody. It doesn't matter, so do what you want, and He will bless you anyway."

Or, you can be on the conservative side and say, “God is very loving, but in the end you have to be good, and work for it. You have to perform or He won’t bless you.” That’s like the Pharisees.

So how do you resolve it? Remember in our passage how Peter referred to Abraham in Acts 3:13. We resolve it by going back to Genesis chapter 15. It’s a strange story but it brings it all together about this new Acts Chapter 2 and 3 community that God is calling us to.

In Genesis 15, God makes a covenant with Abraham that involves Abraham getting some animals: a heifer and a goat and a ram and a turtle dove and a pigeon. He was to cut the animals in half, all in two pieces, except for the birds. He was to make an aisle for one to walk through in between the cut pieces. Here’s a heifer, there’s a heifer, everywhere a heifer heifer. A goat there, a ram here, and a bird there.

Abraham, the Lord of his tribe, was not surprised with this order from God because it was normal in his culture that when a covenant was going to be made between a Lord and a slave or peon or servant, a place was chosen, animals were slain and cut in half, a pathway is made in between the animal pieces, and the servant is supposed to walk in the aisle towards the lord. By doing so, the servant is saying that I am making a covenant of loyalty to my lord. If I fail in that covenant, then you may cut me up in pieces like these animals.

How that’s for a graphic correlation of what happens to you if you mess up? You will be sliced and diced by the boss.

And so Abraham cut the pieces and waited. Abraham was a lord of his tribe and so he knew he wasn’t expected to walk through the aisle as lords were not expected to. So where is

the servant who would walk through and who would pay the penalty of the covenant if it’s broken?

Abraham waited and waited, and then a deep sleep came upon him. The sun went down darkness came about, but it wasn’t a normal darkness but a terrifying darkness, says the Scripture. And suddenly God Himself appeared as fire in a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch (just as he would appear like a pillar of fire to Moses), and God Himself passed through the pieces of animals!

God was saying, I have made a covenant with you Abraham. And if you break the Covenant, then there has to be a price paid. And by my walking through the pieces of animals, I am saying to you, Abraham, that I will be torn apart like these animals if YOU break the covenant. Yes, I will be the one ripped apart if you break the covenant!

Incredible! God was making the promise for both of them and taking the curse for BOTH of them. Not only will I be torn to pieces if I don’t keep my promise, but I will be torn into pieces also if YOU DON’T keep your promises! I will bless you no matter what even if my immortality must become mortal and I have to be torn into pieces.

And so God was through Jesus Christ. Around 34 A.D. the sun went down early and darkness came on Jerusalem near Calvary where God was, in the person of Jesus Christ, in between two thieves. And on that dark day, Jesus who is God, was torn into pieces, with, nails, whips, and a spear. He was taking on the covenant curse because we broke the covenant.

And so when the early church broke the bread as we do for Communion, we should have a tear in our eyes for that torn bread reminds us that God was torn into pieces on our

behalf because we broke our covenant with Him when we sinned. And the cup in communion represents God’s blood that was shed for our sake.

And then we realize that if we can grasp covenant theology, all people are welcome to our church community: heterosexual, homosexual, slanderer, gossip, prostitute, and lawbreaker. If we can admit that we are all sinners, then we can understand the power of the covenant God made with humankind.

And then with every fiber of our being, when we understand the covenant and the importance of covenantal relationship with God, we want to have a covenantal relationship with others to be a member of God’s church, not as consumer or just a fan of God, but as a fully committed member just like how the 32 new members today have declared their part of the covenant. They declared they want to be part of this new community founded by the Holy Spirit Himself as seen in the Book of Acts.

We don’t want to be just fans but true followers of Jesus. We don’t want to be consumer Christians but be committed covenantal followers. This is the new community that God calls us to.

Amen? Amen.

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Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. It can also be sent to you by e-mail. Request the free audio version at fpchkoolau@gmail.com.