

(October 2nd, 2016)

ALL Are Welcome (Acts 2:42-47)

I remember my first trip to Kenya. I was staying in a village in a mud hut where there were no roads, no running water, no electricity, and heaven forbid - no Wi-Fi service! But there was a strong sense of community. On my first night there a call went out to the elders and to the respected leaders; children ran to the neighboring houses to pass the word that a Mzungu was in town – a white person. I'd been sent there by Nairobi University to work in the school – and they would make sure that I would be welcome in their community. One by one they all gathered in one of the larger better built houses – there was a circle of stools in the main room. In the back you could hear chickens squawking and smell of spicy aromas of food filled the hut. I was to be the guest of honor, and they would celebrate my arrival by sharing food with me. When everyone had arrived, a bowl of hot water was brought out and passed to me as the guest. Now, I'll be honest, I wasn't sure if I was supposed to drink it or what – but I took my lead from my host who motioned for me to wash my hands. I did, then the bowl was passed onto the next person, then the next, until it was ritually passed all around the circle. When we had all cleansed our hands, the leader began to chant some words in the local Luo language. It was clearly words of thanks that all there knew, and soon they were all chanting and singing what seemed to be words of grace – and it would most certainly shame our brief prayer that we might say before meals. When the prayers were dying down, the food began to be brought out. There was chicken – freshly caught from the yard – boiled potatoes dripping with butter – a type of Kale – corn - and of course Ugali – a Kenyan staple that's a cross between rice and maize (NOT my favorite!). Each was passed around the circle for everyone to have a handful, then passed again until everyone was full.

Now the other part of this story is that the next day there was no chicken or potatoes left, just kale, corn and Ugali ... then the third day, just corn and Ugali ... and by the 4th – you've guessed it – Ugali!

But of course, the important thing is not what we ate, but the sense of community. The willingness of those people to share a meal with me, sharing what little they had. The willingness to invite me in to be part of their community. The willingness to celebrate with 'glad and sincere hearts'. And that experience in Kenya reminds me of an Agape meal. Now if this is a term that you are not familiar with, it is a meal that was celebrated by early Christians. It literally means, Love Feast. It was, and still is today, a meal, a fellowship, a praise and a worship opportunity.

My experience in that Kenyan community was like the community of the early believers. Our scripture passage today summarizes the life of the early church community. It shows how they interacted and supported each other; how their actions and words reflected their love for God; and how their interaction and engagement with those outside the community sparked growth. Lots of growth! Simply put, others wanted what they had! And it tells us in verse 42 what their secret was:

They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Pretty simple really. Their lives centered around four key things: Jesus' teaching, fellowship with each other, the breaking of bread and sharing of meals together, and prayer. Let me say that again: (1) Jesus' teaching, (2) fellowship with each other, (3) the breaking of bread together and (4) prayer.

That's what their community is based on, and that is what attracted so many that the early church grew and grew in numbers. So let's break down those four things and see how they relate to us today.

The first activity is Jesus' teaching. Jesus' instruction was of key importance; in fact I think that is why it is listed first. They were most concerned that Jesus was central and that all they said and did reflected that. Are we like that? I believe that we are most certainly like that in our actions, but what about in our words? When we tell folks that we go to church on a Sunday, do we even mention that we go to celebrate Jesus? Do we even tell people that we go to church? And do we take time to explain why we are here? I think many non-believers think that church is just about being part of a community. They don't know that Jesus is the reason, because we don't tell them! But if we take Jesus out of being front and center, how different is church from the Rotary club or any other charitable organization?

Secondly, comes the mention of fellowship. Now if you take that word back to its Greek origin, it refers to 'sharing in common.' In fact, scholars believe the word fellowship refers to the type of mutuality that takes place in a marriage where you share everything. And for those of you who are married, you know that may not always be good thing! My mother used to have a saying of "What's mine is mine, and what's his is ours!" But the type of fellowship that Luke is referring to here is the real sense of connection to, between and for each other. Now I've only been at Knox for a month, but I can tell you, there is most certainly that kind of fellowship here. In the scripture today it talks about sharing "possessions *and goods*" and "*giving to anyone in need.*" I am sure that if anyone here needed a warm meal, a winter coat, or a ride – then fellowship would be shared. And one of the greatest possessions we have is time – when we share time in our busy days to listen to someone in need, then that too is fellowship. And believe me, people in our community of Ayr do notice the fellowship that we share.

Third comes the breaking of bread. In the scripture today, the breaking of bread is a reference to taking a meal together, just like the disciples took meals together with Jesus. It is not referring to the liturgy around the Eucharist. It is referring to the celebration of sharing food together in community. In verse 46 it tells us:

"They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

Now I have heard a rumor about Kate's Christmas dinners, and I suspect that they are most certainly full of people with glad and sincere hearts! But seriously, when this passage is referring to the 'breaking bread', it is a phrase that suggest an act that is an important part of community living. It is a way to share with each other. In ancient times, the act of sharing bread meant that you were entering into a friendship with that person. The people in Kenya knew that when they shared a meal with me; they were sharing community, and it was most certainly joyful. Jesus knew this when he broke bread and

shared it with 5000 hungry people. So when we break bread in church, whatever the symbol of the bread might mean to you, remember that it is also an important way to praise God and share joy with others. And it is this joy that reaches out into the community. In verse 47 it says, it reaches out to ***“all the people.”*** Other people appreciate a vibrant community. Ask yourself, do you share the love of Christ with others, with so much joy that people say – “I want what you’ve got!”

The final reference made to the life of the early community is that it was one that was devoted to prayer. A community at prayer is something that Luke emphasizes throughout Acts about community life. A prayerful community is one that doesn’t work by feelings or intuition; it isn’t one that always lets the loudest and the most powerful have their own way; it is one that always actively seeks God’s direction. Perhaps you feel that this community has sought God’s direction to find you a new minister ... time will tell! But is important as we move forward together as a community, that we always seek God’s direction through prayer.

So ... : (1) Jesus’ teaching, (2) fellowship with each other, (3)the breaking of bread together and(4) prayer. Four very simple ingredients for a vibrant community of faith. If we withdraw any one of those ingredients, then the community begins to fall apart. Like the children’s story today – the village only became vibrant when they came together in community and shared the bread. We too will only grow in community if we go out and share Christ through our words and actions, and invite others to participate in the Joy of knowing God. Amen.