

Called to Communitas
“Gathered and Sent”
August 5, 2018

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:42-47

That often read passage from Acts 2:42-47 gives us such a beautiful picture of what community life was like in the early church immediately after Pentecost and God sending his Holy Spirit upon the church.

“The devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship.”

“To the breaking of bread and prayer.”

“Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

“All (not just a few, or many, but “all”) the believers were together and had everything in common.”

“Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone (anyone) as he or she had need.”

“Every day (no, not just some days, or many days, ‘every day’) they continued to meet together in the temple courts.”

“They broke bread together in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all (again, not just a few, or some, but ‘all’) the people.”

What a beautiful picture of community in the early church! Do you think that the writer of the book of Acts might have been exaggerating just a little bit? But, even if he was exaggerating just a little bit, wouldn’t it be nice to have that same sense of community in our church today?

Not too long ago I would have hoped you would have answered that question in the affirmative, “yes.” Today I am not so sure. The truth is, that sense of community, even if it was exaggerated just a little bit, didn’t last for very long. Very soon after that the church would experience conflict, both from within and from the outside. There would be persecution, some would be martyred, and the early church would be scattered.

And the church has been trying to reestablish that sense of community described there in Acts 2 ever since, at great peril. You see, trying to establish or find “the perfect community” often gets in the way of being the community that God wants the church to be. As I said before, “if you find the perfect church, or the perfect community, don’t join it, you’ll just ruin it!”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was ordered killed by Hitler just before the end of World War II, in his little, but powerful book, *Life Together*, which I and many others think might just be the best

book ever written on what community in the life of the church is supposed to be, says that very thing.

In his book *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer, says, “Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community, even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial.”

Bonhoeffer says that “the Christian is not supposed to be in the midst of all those who are just like him, he is supposed to be in the thick of foes.”

He quotes from the founder of his denomination, Martin Luther, “The Kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ. If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared.”

Michael Frost, one of the people we have been reading, listening and watching as part of the Elder Team’s REVIVE training, who is from Australia, spent many years trying to create the perfect Christian community, just like the one described there is Acts 2:42-47. He says that while at times it did have its good moments, it was ultimately a failure. That is when he was enlightened by God’s word.

Michael Frost writes:

“So I went back to the study of the Acts of the Apostles, and I realized that the blissful early days of the Jerusalem church were short-lived. In fact, I realized that the inclusivity of sharing possessions, eating together, and gathering under the apostles’ teaching, as delicious as it seemed, was actually a contravention of Jesus’ command for them to take the gospel to the very ends of the earth.

“As I read on, I realized that the early Jerusalem church was in fact a community in transition. Once a traveling missionary community of disciples, centered on Jesus, it had become a static group, camped in Jerusalem. But this was not its intended future. After the persecution that resulted from Stephen’s bold and offensive ministry (described in Acts 6-7), the church was scattered, and through its dispersion it rediscovered its original mandate: to be a missionary people on the move...

“Christians don’t do well to build community as an end in itself. We build community incidentally, when our imaginations and energies are captured by a higher, even noble cause. Though it took me a while, I came to realize that Christian community results from the greater cause of Christian mission.”

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines “Community” as – a group of people who live in the same area; a group of people who have the same interests, religion, race, etc.; a unified body of individuals; **a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together with[in] a larger society.**

When it comes to the church or a church, the body of Christ here on earth, the common characteristic is faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Everything else is incidental.

When it comes to the church, “Community” is not the end product or the goal, it is the by-product of pursuing something else. That something else is pursuing together God’s mission into the world, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in words and deeds, that which we talked about last week.

Michael Frost says that “those who love community for community sake will end up destroying it. Those who love people build community.”

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, two of the biggest contributors to the REVIVE training that the Elder Team has been participating in over the past year, say that the church is called not to community but to *communitas*. *Communitas* is an anthropological term developed in the 1960’s. While there are some similarities between community and *communitas*, there are some stark differences.

Community	Communitas
Inward Focused	Focused outside of itself
Focused on encouraging each other	Focused on the task at hand/mission
Safe place	Pushes the group and society forward
Something to be built	Experienced through liminality

Liminal – being in an intermediate state, phase or condition. It is the state between what has been and what is to come. It is between the ideal and the not-yet. Exiles live in a minimal state. Exiles live in this world but are not of this world. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden, God’s people have always been called to live in exile.

The disciple Peter wrote to his brothers and sisters in Christ in his first letter, “friends, I urge to live as foreigners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11).

Communitas – Liminality – Exile - Christian

Living in *communitas*, liminality, exile, as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ all go hand-in-hand.

Jesus’ hard teaching had the effect of separating out the true disciples from those who were interested in the miracles he performed but were not ready to come into the threshold of liminality. Turning to the his twelve closest disciples, Jesus asked, “Do you want to leave me too?” And Peter’s response is that of a true exile living in liminality, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:67-68).

Only in the liminal state could Jesus’ disciples experience the awesome power of *communitas*. Men who otherwise would have nothing to do with each other are thrown together by their shared devotion to Jesus, and as they journey together, they develop a depth of relationship that literally turned the world upside down.

Often we don't even pause to think about just how different some of Jesus' original disciples were. There was Matthew who was a tax collector. Tax collectors worked for the Roman government and they usually swindled their Jewish clients out of a lot of money. The Jewish people did not like the tax collectors. Then there was Simon who was referred to as Simon the Zealot. Zealots were arch-patriots who opposed Roman rule and they often acted like urban gorillas performing acts of terrorism against the Romans and their Jewish agents. Matthew and Simon could not have been further apart on the spectrum of Jewish society. And they were called to live as disciples of Jesus in *communitas*. Today it would be like forcing the head of Fox News and the head of NBCSN to live together and work towards a common mission. I'll put my money on Matthew, the tax collector and Simon, the Zealot having a better chance to do it 😊!

After that story of the early church described in Acts 2:42-47, a community so sweet, nice and pristine, the church experiences Stephen's martyrdom, severe persecution, and the real story of the church begins. The apostle Paul joins the group, the same one who for years persecuted Christians, one who himself was probably referred to as a Jewish Zealot. He is joined by men like Barnabas, Timothy, Silas, and John Mark. Together they experience and survive beatings, shipwrecks, imprisonment, and long journeys through dangerous lands. There is nothing more satisfying than the love that fellow exiles share when their lives are in danger.

Why do you think those who have served in the military together, especially those who have risked their lives together, are forever bound together? Or policemen or firemen? Missionaries? Why is it when you take a mission trip to some far away country or serve in mission with different people in a different place that you have memories and bonds are created that last far longer than those created in our safe church communities? Because most missionaries operate in liminal settings and form *communitas* instead of community.

In Acts 13 we have the story of John Mark's desertion. It doesn't tell us specifically why but in the midst of their missionary journey he walks away and returns to Jerusalem. Why was Paul so upset? Well, as Michael Frost points out, something that I had not thought of before, John Mark broke the code of a liminal community. John Mark's desertion is unforgettable to Paul because in *communitas* the stakes are higher. In *communitas* the desertion is devastating. Just ask the policeman or the fireman who has experienced a partner, because of fear, backing out on them when their life was on the line. Often they will never work with that person again, or at the very least make sure they are never again put in that same position. Or ask the spouses whose husband/wife betrayed them and/or walked out on them. Whereas many of us might find the apostle Paul's attitude toward John Mark excessively harsh, that is probably not the case for those who have experienced abandonment or betrayal in *communitas*.

Michael Frost writes, "Communitas isn't a warm, relaxing space where you can come and go as you please. Communitas requires commitment, integrity, hard work, and courage. In short, communitas is about love." Not the warm, fuzzy kind of love but the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13, a love that never gives up. In many ways *communitas* is the same as covenant. God calls his people to enter into covenant with Him, and His people, to carry out His mission in the world. *Communitas* is formed only when we are doing that, not while we are trying to create or form community for the sake of community.

“The hunger for community is a legitimate one, but to pursue it for its own sake is the mistake. When we seek to build community without the experience of liminality, all we end up with is the kind of pseudo-community that pervades many churches. ..

“Community serves a useful purpose, but the ultimate purpose of the Jerusalem church was to go and make disciples of all nations. There’s no question that the apostle’s teaching was essential, but not an end in itself. Their teaching was meant to mobilize ordinary believers to go into the world, baptizing new disciples and teaching them all that Christ commanded them. ..

“Why do our churches often miss this experience of *communitas*? For no other reason than that they often avoid liminality, opting for a safer, more secure environment.”

Michael Frost, *Exiles – Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*

For much of its history the Mennonite church has been a liminal church – a church in the world but not of the world, a church that clearly recognized two kingdoms – the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God, a church that would not have gotten involved in kingdom of this world structures, politics or political debates. There would have been no republicans or democrats. That’s not the case for many, if not most of the Mennonite churches in America in the 21st century. We have lost much of our liminality. We don’t look that different than most of mainstream America.

Jesus talked about “liminality” in his *Sermon on the Mount*.

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.”

Matthew 5:13 (NIV)

The fact is Jesus’ whole *Sermon on the Mount* is about liminality.

I was struck by Michael Frost’s comment – “Attending a respectable middle-class church in a respectable middle-class neighborhood isn’t a liminal experience.” We could extend that to “attending a respectable respectable middle-class, rural church in a respectable middle-class rural neighborhood isn’t a liminal experience. Then he goes on, “but joining a peace church in a nation obsessed with military might is.”

Alan Hirsh says that “*Communitas* is a community infused with a grand sense of purpose; a mission that lies outside of its current internal reality and constitution. It’s the kind of community that ‘happens’ to people in actual pursuit of a common vision of what could be. It involves movement and it describes the experience of togetherness that only really happens among a group of people actually engaging in mission outside itself.”

“The grand purpose of the church is mission – sharing the good news of Christ, in words and deeds - feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, the sick, the homebound, working for peace and justice where we can. It is in the service of these goals that we will find *communitas* with our fellow Christians.”