

Belonging in Community
“A New Creation” – Unit II, Session 1
May 6, 2018

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.

They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.

Acts 2:41-47 (*The Message*)

This morning we are beginning Unit II of our series *A New Creation*. Part I was on believing and it is very important that we started with “Believing” because when it comes to the church it is our believing in Jesus Christ which is supposed to shape our identity. The church is not just a social club, or a fellowship, or just a community, the church is a community formed around the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord over the people's lives.

I don't think there is anyone who wrote a more accurate picture about what the community of the church is supposed to be like than Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in a brief but powerful book entitled *Life Together*, shortly before he was put to death by the Nazi's in Germany just a few weeks before Hitler was finally defeated.

Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *Life Together*, “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is anything more or less than this,” and “It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with fellow Christians.” Well, for Anabaptists and Mennonites, community has always been a very important part of our Christian faith. Apart from discipleship it is the strong sense of community that drew me to the Mennonite church. Growing up Catholic and being part of a very large Catholic church, I couldn't have even told you the names of probably 90% of the other people who attended. It's hard to have any sense of community in a church that size. Which brings up a good question, how big should a church really be to be the church God calls us to be? Studies tell us that human beings can only be in communal relationships with so many people, and FaceBook friends don't count!

Of course even for Mennonites it hasn't always worked out the way we have hoped, or the way it was drawn up on paper, or the way the early church is described in the Bible, but at least we can say it has been our desired goal. I know the early church which was established at Pentecost had probably the greatest indwelling of God's Holy Spirit in history, but human beings were still human beings. My guess is that the early church wasn't as pristine as that described in Acts 2:42-47.

Yet, that doesn't mean that is not God's desire for each and every church throughout the world. Unfortunately it seems that often we spend so much time trying to find, or trying to become "the perfect church," that for all practical purposes we are not even the church that God wants us to be. God doesn't want perfect churches, he wants churches which are faithful to His calling as a body of Christ.

It's hard confessing our faults and sin to one another, forgiving one another, when we don't have any sins to confess to one another or forgive. That was meant to be a hypothetical statement ☺! It's hard to bear with one another when we all think alike and are alike, or maybe the correct statement is, "we think we are alike," or "we make ourselves think we are alike." Why do we think we should all be alike and think we are alike when God created us all individually with so much diversity?

You see the church is more like the community that God desires it to be not when everyone looks alike, thinks alike, acts alike, agrees with everyone and everything. The church is more like the community that God desires it to be when there is lots of diversity, different age groups represented, different ethnicities, different races, different cultural backgrounds, different social strata represented – rich, poor and in between, different educational levels, all gathered around the centrality of Jesus Christ as the peoples Savior and Lord. The church that God desires the church to be in our fallen and broken world is not perfect, pretty and pristine, it is imperfect, ugly and messy. And in the midst of that ugliness and messiness and sinfulness, God calls us to live together in community.

Staying together in community has always been difficult, even in the early church. We find in the letter of Hebrews 10:25, "let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing," which was most likely written less than 50 years after the formation of the church at Pentecost and that description found in Acts 2.

But we also need to recognize that there might not be a greater pull to not engage in Christian community than in 21st century America. There are just so many cultural dynamics that fight against staying in Christian community:

- The rise of individuality.
- The loss of the established churches being one of the foundational pillars of most communities.
- More and more options, expectations, activities vying for our time, money, and attention.
- The lack of biblical knowledge and the understanding of what Christian community really is.

- Thinking that one can find “the perfect church,” fights against staying in Christian community.
- Thinking that we need to agree on everything fights against staying in Christian community.
- Lack of love, mercy, truth-telling and forgiveness fights against staying in Christian community.
- Not wanting to be accountable to anyone other than God fights against staying in Christian community.

But here’s the truth from the Bible - one cannot be accountable to God and not be accountable to other people. It’s an impossibility. It’s an oxymoron. When Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus relied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself . All the Law and the Prophets [basically meaning everything in the Scriptures] hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:34-40).

We cannot love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind without being in community with other people. I will even go out on a limb here and say, being in a Christian community and staying in a Christian community is almost as much of a training ground for being a Christian and a witness for Christ in the world as being married and staying married is.

Over the past couple of years we have buried and celebrated the lives of many of our older saints, like Roselle Kauffman yesterday. Most of them who were a part of this church their entire lives. I wonder, 25-50 years from now how many people we will be able to say the same thing about? And it’s not just our church, it’s any and every church. As a whole, the Mennonite church with its emphasis on the importance of community throughout its history has a better record in that area than many churches.

And in no way am I saying that people should never leave a church – things happen, people’s beliefs change, transitions take place in people’s lives, youth and young adults need to accept the Christian faith for themselves, and sometimes people just need a change. But we need to be aware of the cultural forces that are working against the building and maintaining of Christian community and how it affects our witness.

That passage this morning from Acts 2:42-47 has been foundational for the church being the church throughout its 2,000 year history. There are certain elements in that passage that have been essential to being the church, most churches emphasizing one or two over the others. Five specific elements:

1. Devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching –

A church that is not centered on the Word of God – both the person of Jesus and the written word found in Scripture is a church in name only. It is not the church God created it to be.

Many protestant churches that came about after the Reformation emphasize the written Scripture over everything else.

For Mennonites and Anabaptists the emphasis has been on the living Word found in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus first and then the word found in Scripture. Not just the Gospels or the New Testament but all of Scripture. Where they found discrepancies they gave precedent, first to the teachings of Jesus, and then the New Testament, believing that God chose to reveal Himself over time, culminating in His full revelation in Jesus Christ. The second essential element of the New Testament church is . . .

2. The Breaking of Bread, meaning the Lord's Supper or communion.

Done weekly by many, daily by some, monthly, quarterly, less often by others, as a celebration and as a reminder of the centrality of Jesus' death and resurrection as a community.

For Roman Catholics it is the participating in the Lord's Supper – the bread and the cup which is the primary focus of them being the church. Unfortunately, sometimes it has come at the expense of the word of God found in Scripture.

3. Prayer – Expressed in many different forms and styles.
4. Meeting together regularly – not only to worship but also in fellowship, meeting in peoples' homes and the sharing of meals together.
5. The Held Everything in common.

The early church even sold their property and possessions to give to those who were in need. But we need to remember that for the early Christians they believed that Jesus' return was imminent. Today, 2,000 years later, we are still awaiting Jesus' return. Sharing our possessions and property looks different. We don't sell them all and give all the proceeds to the church. We do so today in the form of tithes and offerings. Traditionally, many in the church have believed that the tithe is 10% of our income which we give to the church and the offering is that which is over and above the tithe, for special projects like our My Coins Count Project this morning, or specific agencies like Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service or specific missionaries. In the Old Testament the tithe was the expectation. In the New Testament the expectation for believers was even greater in every area of their lives. One just needs to read Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. Generosity in the eyes of God doesn't really begin until we go over that which is expected.

Five Essential Ingredients of a New Testament church:

1. The preaching and teaching of the Word of God.
2. The breaking of bread – participating in the Lord's Supper or communion on a regular basis
3. Prayer
4. Fellowship – apart from meeting as a church.
5. Generosity

For the past couple of years Ohio Conference of the Mennonite Church, and its congregations have been focusing on an initiative called “Gathered and Sent.” Throughout all of human history God’s people have been both a gathered and a sent people. God calls a people to Himself and then He sends His people out to do ministry and be a blessing to other people. The truth is that we need both. We need balance. Belonging in Community is more about the gathered part. The closer we are as a community of followers of Jesus Christ the better witness we give to a lost and dying world. Even as Christians in the church we often operate as individuals, or pockets of individuals, or family units. But that is not the way God intended the church to be. He calls us as individuals but He doesn’t want us to remain as individuals. He calls us to be a people, a community, one family, a body of Christ. Then He sends us out! Some of Jesus’ last words to his original disciples as recorded in the Gospel of John, after his resurrection and just before his ascension back into heaven, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

So what can we do to strengthen our community? This past week several of us went out to tour Kirkmont Center & Camp in anticipation of our annual retreat in August, August 10-12. I think all of us came away excited about the potential for having a great weekend. There are lots of activities we can get involved in – swimming, canoeing, fishing, a ropes course and climbing wall, lots of trails and nature areas, places to relax and sit if that is what you like to do, and accommodations which seem a lot better than what we experienced the last couple of years at Camp Cotubic, especially if you are one who would rather stay in a room instead of a tent. But you don’t have to stay out there at night either. It is close enough that you can commute and participate in all the activities. Most of all it is a way of strengthening our belonging together in community. So please mark the dates, save it on your calendar, and pray and think about how you might be able to participate.

There are many areas where I cannot articulate in words as good as others have already done. There are from our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Article 9, on what it means to be a church of Jesus Christ:

“We believe that the church is the assembly of those who have accepted God’s offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The church is the new community of disciples sent into the world to proclaim the reign of God and to provide a foretaste of the church’s glorious hope. The church is the new society established and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The church, the body of Christ, is called to become even more like Jesus Christ, its head, in its worship, ministry, witness, mutual love and care, and the ordering of its common life. . .

“The church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one and another and to God, while recognizing that the church is imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance.”