

PARISH LIFE

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INTRODUCTION:

Over the years, we have seen many believers move here to the Palouse, and we have been greatly blessed by this. The reasons have obviously varied, but in countless conversations I have been a part of, the word that comes up over and over and over again is the word community. There is a reason for that, and it is a biblical reason.

THE TEXTS:

“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from?? house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

As with many texts of Scripture, there is much more here than we can possibly address. But there is a key theme that we can take away from this passage, and if we do, our love for one another will only flourish and grow. In the aftermath of the great events of Pentecost, the church in Jerusalem was blessed in multiple ways. They continued steadfastly in four things—the apostolic teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers (v. 42). Fellowship is italicized here because that is what we want to focus on this morning. The revival provoked a response of godly fear, and the apostles performed many wonders (v. 43). The believers were knit together by the Spirit, and shared their goods freely, as any had need (vv. 44-45). They continued with one another on a daily basis in the Temple, and from house to house. They were in God’s house, but we also see that God was in their houses. They would eat together with gladness and singleness of heart (v. 46). They praised the Lord, and the outsiders praised them (v. 47). As a consequence, there were converts on a daily basis (v. 47). When the church catches fire, the world will come to watch it burn—and often the fire will spread to them.

SETTING ASIDE A DISTRACTION:

This passage has been grossly abused over the years, with utopians and idealists urging us to adopt some form of communism. But this was an outbreak of sharing, not an outbreak of confiscation. The Spirit enables a man to give. The devil enables a man to see that somebody else isn’t giving enough. When, a few chapters later, Ananias and Sapphira were struck down dead (Acts 5:4), it was for their lie, and not because they hadn’t met the commune’s draconian quotas. There are always liars in the church who, like Ananias and Sapphira, want to look more generous than they actually are. Today this lie in the church is perpetuated by those who confound generosity and the violence of confiscation.

And remember the circumstance. Jesus had taught His disciples that within one generation, real estate prices in Jerusalem were going to approach zero. A number of faithful Christians had thoughtfully begun to liquidate their assets (wouldn’t you?), and they were in a position to use those assets to benefit their brothers and sisters in the great revival.

THE KOINONIA BLESSING:

The word here rendered as fellowship is koinonia. It is a remarkable word, encompassing a great deal. It refers, for example, to our partaking of the Lord’s Supper together (I Cor. 10:16). It refers to coffee and donuts time (Acts 2:46). And it refers to our time together in the rough and tumble of daily covenant life (Philemon 17). Paul argues in a restitution/runaway slave case on the basis of koinonia. As the water flows from Ezekiel’s temple, out into the world, so koinonia fellowship flows out from our worship here, until it inundates your Fourth of July barbeque get togethers.

The worship of God proper occurs on the Lord's Day here. This is the church. What we do on Monday and Thursday afternoons represents the kingdom. The worship of God at His appointed time, in His appointed manner, is the cathedral. The rest of the week is the surrounding parish.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES:

A number of years ago, we divided our community up into different parishes, naming them after great men in the history of the Reformation. We did this, not because we think that lines on a map create koinonia, but because we wanted to facilitate the flow of that fellowship—we wanted to build channels for it to flow in. Overall, we have been pleased with what has happened as a result of this, but we still have a lot to learn.

Some strengths: We have seen many gifted meals, van-unloading parties, shower gifts, and kirkerbay helps. Some parishes have had a thriving social/governmental experience. Good levels of elder awareness of how folks in their parish are doing. We have seen a lot of pent-up energy for works of service (more than our current structures can accommodate).

Some weaknesses: Attendance at our parish HOH meetings is frequently thin. Some of the first zeal that attended our discovery of psalm-singing is diminished. As new folks come into the church, we have the problem of prerequisites and “shared assumptions.” We sometimes have seen parish envy (“why can't our parish...”). Church officers are sometimes stretched thin. We need to do something that will coordinate women's ministry. More Bible studies would be a blessing.

THREE COMPANIONS:

As we grow, we need to make adjustments. But we do not want to make adjustments just for the sake of making them. Rearranging the furniture is not the same thing as ongoing reformation and revival. The life of the Spirit always brings koinonia, but that life always has three companions—apostolic doctrine, breaking of bread, and prayers. Community, however it is created, is the sort of place where you can go and get propped up by others, making it look like you are more of a player than you are. All of these things are from the hands of the Lord. We rely on Him for them. We cannot generate them ourselves. We must look to Him, and to His means of grace. But this kind of proclamation is one of those means, and so our response should be to simply believe what He says about what He is doing among His people.



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