

“Called Together”

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Reading

Acts 2: 41-47

paraphrased From Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*

That day about three thousand ... 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 them 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.

This particular passage from the Bible has always intrigued me – both the message itself and the visual image which includes three thousand people. There was a crowd of people who somehow “signed up” on the spot [this probably means that they were baptized in the river] in order to become a community with one another with a clear mission to assist others with their pooled resources, especially addressing those with few or no resources. I know not to take the numbers literally, but the fact that this story appears in more than one place in the Bible suggests that this gathered crowd was an important beginning of the Christian community.

The quest to understand this passage is a personal one for me, and it began while Bill and I were at Eden Seminary in St. Louis Missouri where Bill was enrolled as a student. His class was somewhat unusual in regard to a decision they made together at the beginning of their first year. I don’t think this decision has been repeated since, but it was life-changing for many of us.

Part of ministerial training included students spending significant time over the three years learning specific ministerial skills. This was done in a variety of settings and projects connected to the Seminary which asked for student minister support. Churches from the surrounding rural areas as well as a few large churches in urban/suburban St. Louis requested this help, and there were also church-sponsored mission projects in the inner city. Students were asked to come to the office to indicate their interest and sign up to be considered for these assignments. What the students discovered one day were huge discrepancies in the monthly student stipend being offered: The big churches were providing substantial stipends, while the inner-city projects and rural churches could barely offer any money. As many of the students were unmarried, this discrepancy wasn’t at first perceived as a problem for students with families. The reality,

however, was that the amounts being offered to the students interested in the inner-city mission works and rural churches were not sustainable for families, even if both spouses were employed. A meeting with all the first-year students was called to discuss the problem, at the end of that meeting, *the unanimous decision was made by the class to pool their stipends and to give each student the same amount!* As it turned out, this was a remarkable undertaking. I was working full time, and Bill was interested in the inner-city projects. We would not have been able to stay in seminary housing and finish the three-year program if that decision had not been made. Even though working partners' income did not have to be considered in the stipend compensation, none of us earned enough income to cover the living costs, books, and other costs connected to family life on campus with our children.

Now fast forward three years after that decision. Married students with and without children lived in two separate three-story dorms. As we soon began to know our neighbors and their assignments, we also began conversations to mutually work out arrangements that collectively assisted each other with some of the difficulties that arose in our families, e.g., childcare, particularly for those of us like me who worked a night shift and needed some daytime space to sleep while our partners attended classes. Stay-at-home moms who lived across our halls watched their children and ours without pay. Some families couldn't quite stretch their paychecks to meet their weekly grocery needs, so every Friday night, in the wide halls of each floor, we had what we called a "floor family meal" by pulling out tables and chairs and everyone bringing leftovers to share. There was always enough for everyone to eat. A couple of us were nurses who were called upon to take care of minor injuries and illnesses, and to give health advice, as were the teachers who could help with mentoring or after-school homework. As couples we took turns providing regular playtime activities each week for the kids. There were regular group discussions and psychodrama classes that added to our growth as parents and helped us transition from being young people to becoming adults. There was Frau Fellowship, social action committees, and touch football nearly every day, weather permitting. There was daily prayer time and singing in the chapel. Many of our professors met regularly with us in those extraordinary weekly activities, and also often brought casseroles to the Friday night gatherings. Classmates got to know each other very well, listened to each other's experiences, and found unique ways to support one another. It was a special time, with what became a special community that still celebrates ongoing relationships today.

I was devastated when it was time to leave that situation. Those three years together was the first time in my life I had experienced such a loving community, and I feared we would never find one again. You probably won't be surprised, then, to hear that some of my undergraduate studies after moving out here included exploring utopian communities such as the Quakers, the Shakers, the Amish, and the Clarence Jordan Koinonia Farm community in Georgia, out of which Habitat for Humanity was formed. With the exception of Koinonia Farm, which still involves members living out their Christian principles, farming, working on low-income housing programs and being involved in shared mission projects as well as the ongoing Amish communities, the rest of the utopian experiments eventually went out of the business of living and sharing together.

Out of an understanding of some of what makes up community, I focused in my seminary classes on studying the expansion and inclusion of other races and cultures experimenting with Liberation Theology. The following passage from Acts somewhat summarizes the importance of that large crowd of new believers, their early Christian communities, and their mission.

From Acts 4: 32-35

The whole congregation of believers was united as one – one heart, one mind! They didn't even claim ownership of their own possessions. No one said, "That's mine, you can't have it." They shared everything. The apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of Jesus, and grace was on them all. And so it turned out that not a person among them was needy. Those who owned fields or houses sold them and brought the price of the sale to the apostles and made an offering of it. The apostles then distributed it according to each person's need.

The first few chapters of Acts describe how Jews from other lands and languages came and were baptized as Christians. This was a new starting point of a new religion.

Are there any connections today with this ancient history and what it represented? My friends, there still seems today to be an increasing global interest in what it means to be in community and where to find it. The very word "community" is of course part of the name of our little church. Being a community challenges us to seek ways to expand and to serve others and to enhance our definition of "community." Given that since the beginning of January we have had at least six visitors, all of whom described themselves as being in search of a community of faith, I believe it is imperative that we get clear as to what kind of a community of faith we *are* as well as how we express that faith. How does each of us "sign on", fit in, feel part of this faith community?

Looking at the definition of community as "a group of people living in the same place," it's clear that that definition doesn't quite describe us today, especially given the Zoomers in our midst, some of whom live out of state. Another definition seems more appropriate: those having interests or work in common; living together. Again that doesn't fit perfectly, but even though we haven't sold everything and pooled our resources, we *do* have things that hold us together. As a community we worship together, participate together in communion either weekly or monthly, and eat together at a "welcome table" each Sunday and as special occasions arise. We sing together, hike and play together, pray together, and assist one another in times of need. We share our love, compassion, and empathy, and support one another whenever we can. We also work together to keep this facility open and functional. Many of our members represent this community and what it stands for in wider world activities.

Stone Soup contributors last week remarked on the value of hearing others' stories, and I want to call on one of our long-time members to share her memories of an important response of this community a number of years ago. [Here Lois Karpenko shared the story of a community member who some years ago was very sick and had a newborn baby. Lois called on a number of women in the congregation to take turns holding and nurturing that baby while his mom recovered from her illness, and the child thrived under the love and care of these women.]

In this time of transition, as we continue each week to discern who we are, who we want to be, and how we go about creating a new future for ourselves with a new leader, it's important to refresh our minds and spirits by reading about the early Christian community as well as identifying current challenges and opportunities we can explore together. This morning we are offering the congregation the opportunity to give your questions and suggestions directly to the Search Committee which is moving forward in selecting our new minister, but before we begin that conversation, let the beautiful music of Scott and Sophia bring this part of our service to a close and open us to the discussion to follow.