

The Very First Church

We're in the fourth week of our community journey through the epic story of the early church as recorded in the New Testament book of Acts. For a bit of recap, here's your: "Previously on *The Making of a Movement...*" Where in episode one, we heard that everything that was about to unfold was actually a continuation of the work of Jesus, who's earliest followers had witnessed and hung out with Jesus as risen from death. But then, after Jesus ascended to the heavenly realm, we saw that his followers weren't quite sure what was going to happen next, so they waited patiently on God for the things Jesus said were to come. And last week, we encountered the power of the coming of the Holy Spirit – God's personal presence within us. Like a Holy Breath, a Holy Wind, and a Holy Power that was poured out on those who were believing in Jesus, lighting up their community and their communication like fire from heaven. All culminating in the final verse from last Sunday that said:

Those who accepted [the] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Acts 2:41

This is a story that has moved from a few dozen who had followed. To a few hundred who had witnessed. To a few thousand who believed. What we've seen so far was that a movement that would eventually change the trajectory of the world was on the verge of being born. And that's where we pick up the story today, with the question: *What happened next?*

If you have a Bible, you can follow along in the next verse in Acts 2:42, where it says:

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

Acts 2:42

What we see next, is that in response to everything that had happened so far, this rapidly expanding movement of people now devoted themselves together to four significant things: *the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.*

First, it says that they committed themselves to the **apostles' teaching**. We learned a couple weeks ago that the “apostles” were a unique set of the followers of Jesus who had been with Jesus throughout his entire earthly ministry and who all had first-hand encounters with Jesus in resurrected bodily form. And now they had one message that they kept sharing over and over and over again: that though Jesus of Nazareth was killed by the rulers of the day, God raised him to life proving that Jesus is Lord and Saviour over all things. In fact, the Apostle Peter declares this message – that, “*you killed but God raised*” – no less than five times in the first five chapters of Acts. *This* was their teaching. *This* was their good news. And *this* was the message that the entire movement was built on and now fully devoted to.

Next it says they devoted themselves to **fellowship**. Now, unless you're a *Lord of the Rings* fan, you've probably only used – or maybe even heard of – the word “fellowship” at a church picnic. And, unfortunately it probably isn't the best word these days to understand what it meant here, because “fellowship” sounds like a group of people wearing khakis, sipping coffee, and saying “blessed” a lot. But what's interesting is that the Greek word here – the word *koinonia* – actually has no exact English translation (and so “fellowship” has become the best we've got in most English Bibles). But *koinonia* literally means “*to share*” or “*to have in common*.” That *koinonia*'s about a bond. An interconnectedness. More like a band of brothers or soulful sisterhood, living in unity and oneness, not just being at a cheesy church meeting. It was this depth of relationship that was the second thing they devoted their lives to.

Third, it says they devoted themselves to **the breaking of bread**. This one probably needs a bit of explaining as well, cause it could sound like these people had a real issue with baguettes. And interestingly, scholars have some debate about what exactly the writer, Luke, was getting at here because this phrase wasn't a common way to describe a meal or any existing ritual at the time. It was new. And it was unique to this movement.

But when the dots of Luke's description are connected to themes in his earlier gospel (and then re-iterated in later writings), it's best understood as a unique blend of a full-course dinner party, but one that was always initiated with a toast to Jesus. A celebration of what Jesus had done, following a pattern that Jesus had shown them. By breaking bread and sharing wine, thanking God by remembering Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, through what we now describe as *The Lord's Supper* or *Communion*. This regular dinner party celebration was the third feature of life they devoted themselves to in response to all they'd seen so far.

Fourth, it says they devoted themselves to **prayer**. We heard about this a couple weeks ago, that from the earliest days after Jesus ascended, this community prayed continually. Prayed to maintain their connection to Jesus. Prayed to seek God's will for their movement. Prayed to be more of who God wanted them to be. But what's interesting about this commitment to prayer, is that some translators say this is better interpreted as *the prayers*. That this movement was built on *the* prayers they had been given. Prayers from their Psalms for sure, but most significantly on *the* prayer they'd been given by their Lord – the prayer Jesus taught them to pray in Luke 11. What we call *The Lord's Prayer*. Not just make-it-up-as-you-go asking-God-to-meet-your-wishes prayers. But prayers that kept them longing for and living into the kingdom they believed Jesus had inaugurated. (One way we can practice this commitment is through our **Prayer Night** on October 7th.)

This is what this movement did next. Not only did they receive God's Spirit and thousands responded in repentance and baptism, but now they were re-orienting their entire lives around all Jesus had done and continued to do. By devoting themselves to the message that Jesus is Lord. By embracing a oneness in Jesus that meant no longer living life on their own. By keeping the fire hot through remembering and celebrating regularly the new kingdom Jesus came to establish. And, by asking God for more and more and more of it to come on earth as in heaven. And this became a hinge in the story that began to change everything...

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 favour of all the people.

Acts 2:43-47a

This is the first picture we get of the actual life the people of this movement – what began to be known as the church – started to live and experience together. And isn't it compelling!? Can't you just feel the life-changing, if not, world-changing potential!?

It says that everyone was filled with awe. That it was an awesome experience. Like an aura in the air of all God was doing among them. And though it says they were in awe of “the many wonders and signs performed *by the apostles*”, remember from week one of this series that the book of Acts might be better named “The Acts of *Jesus Through* the Apostles”. That what they were in awe of was all that *Jesus* was doing. That because they kept trusting in the apostles' teaching that Jesus was Lord and that Jesus' risen Spirit was now in them, the miracles of Jesus continued to flow in and through their lives.

It says that all the believers were together and had everything in common. Here's where you start getting a clearer picture of *koinonia*. Though we learned last week that this movement was growing across ethnic and social boundaries (with only more yet to come), because of Jesus, the people of this movement found a way to embrace their common humanity, as though everyone had everything in common. They became each other's keepers. So much so that your need became my need. And if I had a little more – even that vacant lot I'd been holding for retirement – I sold it to look after a newfound sibling with less.

It said they met together daily with glad and sincere hearts, whether gathering in the temple courts or getting together in each other's homes, it was an unending party throughout Jerusalem, all in honour of a king named Jesus. You might have likened it to this weekend's *Grape & Wine Festival* but with the primary source of cheer being the Holy Spirit among them.

And not only was everyone invited, but everyone began to want to get in on it. It says they enjoyed the favour of all the people. That as people looked on, seeing everyone being included, seeing everyone being looked after, seeing everyone celebrating what God had done in Jesus and how God had unleashed a Spirit of love into their lives, the world around them couldn't help but, not only like what has happening, but want in on it as well. All as the early answers to the prayers of the believers, that God's kingdom would come and expand on earth, right there and right then, as it is in heaven.

And as a result, in the final verse of this passage, we read this:

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:47b

That from a few dozen, to a few hundred, to a few thousand, the movement began to expand on the daily. The saving work of God on display in people's lives, not described here as some future destination or disembodied salvation, but a saving to enjoy the awe of all God had done and was doing through Jesus. A saving to know that you were invited and belonged to the family – *koinonia*. A saving to experience the joy of *giving and receiving*, ensuring all needs were met for everyone everywhere. A saving to *pray for and participate in* the coming of God's kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was available here and now.

This was the making of a movement that began to change the trajectory of the world forever. And it's a movement that we believe is not over. A movement that we believe we are invited into, and that together we are aspiring to propagate and participate in right here and right now in our lives today in Niagara. But you know what I find most compelling, yet also most convicting, about this picture of the very first church? It's that, while it ends with more and more of Jesus' saving, the whole vision for the church opens with and flows from the devotion of the believers. Where the whole passage could be summed up as saying:

They devoted... Jesus saved.

While, make no mistake that everything we read throughout the book of Acts is the work of Jesus continued throughout human history, because of God's radical and free invitation to humanity, to be Jesus' image bearers and conduits of his Spirit, the power of the movement is actually amplified and multiplied by human lives devoted to him. That what we see at the end of Acts chapter two, is that ***lives devoted to Jesus have the power to save the world***. That the church, when filled with people who are fully devoted to the words and way of Jesus, stewards the power to participate in and extend the saving work and activity of Jesus to others in real and tangible and awe-inspiring ways right here and right now.

And so, I think, the question for us from this story of the very first church in Acts – especially if we long for and desire to get in on or share more of the saving work of Jesus that we see so compellingly here – is: ***What are our lives devoted to?***

The truth is, I think there's plenty of options to devote your life to. For Jesus' original followers, for some, their lives were originally devoted to the family business. To carrying on the fishing trade. To making it in the marketplace. To follow the steady, though sometimes unpredictable, pathway of building a safe, secure, and successful life. For others, it was political ambition. That they had vision and ideology about what was wrong with the powers-that-be and so they gave their lives to try to take the power back. For others, it was pure material gain and the pursuit of pleasure, colluding with the rich and powerful at the expense of their moral compass to have and enjoy as much they could. And for others, it was religious zeal. Believing that if they could nail down the right answers and put on a show of piety, that God would ultimately bless them, if not in this life, at least in the life to come. And for all of them, it wasn't until their lives were turned absolutely upside-down and utterly re-oriented in full devotion to the person and work and words of Jesus that their devotion began to change – if not, by the power of Jesus, actually *save* – their lives and the lives of those around them.

So, what is your life most devoted to? And what are the results of your devotion?

For you: Is it the classic pursuit of happiness – the latest vehicle, the home reno or upgrade, a stable retirement? Is it the picture-perfect household – kids to brag about, Instagram-worthy pets, the superhero schedule? Is it health and fitness – the workout streak, the beach-ready bod? Is it popularity and people pleasing – being liked, whatever it takes?

And if and when any of these are our utmost devotion, where does that leave Jesus and his kingdom? As a take it or leave it, feel-good addition? As a program or formula to assuage our conscience? As a way to look after our kids and teach a few values along the way? As a product to shop when the latest no longer does it for us? And what saving might we be missing out on – or missing out on sharing with others – that the very first church fully devoted themselves to and saw rapidly expand right in their midst?

So what if, like the very first church, we devoted ourselves to the apostles' teaching – to the faith that Jesus is actually our risen Lord and Saviour, whose kingdom will one day inevitably and ultimately come on earth? To the *koinonia* – to a shared community and humanity, where your need is my need and we look out for one another? To the celebrating of what God has done in Jesus, gathering together regularly, thanking and acknowledging Jesus at the centre of it all? And to praying continually – asking God daily that His will would be done and His kingdom would come in our lives and our world as it is in heaven?

Devotion to four things that can actually be summed up as one thing: Jesus.

Friends, the sober truth is, while I've essentially followed Jesus all my life, and I've been passionate about the church and giving the best of my day to it for the majority of my adult years, I'm not sure I've yet gone as all-in bet-your-life-on sold-out-on-every-level fully-devoted as these first followers who started this world-changing movement. But as I look at Acts 2, I want to take another step toward devotion. Another step toward Jesus. Another step toward the saving work and way that he has in store and is inviting us to share with others.

So what about you? What's your step of devotion to Jesus today?

To help inspire us – and as our own celebration of the many wonders and signs that Jesus does in fact continue to do among us – today we have the opportunity to celebrate the lives, stories, and commitments of several people who are taking the step of devotion to Jesus through baptism. And as you hear their stories, and in our locations where we'll celebrate their baptisms, may we all inspired and know that we're invited to more fully devote our lives to Jesus, as he continues building his world-changing movement called the church.

Check out these stories!