

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, On the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

Simple Church

(Acts 2:42-47)

Study #4

Introduction: The beauty of simplicity...

Some years ago, a man who was visiting our church came up to me at the conclusion of a worship service to compliment me on my sermon. I thanked him, humbly, of course.

He went on to say that he saw real brilliance in my message, even genius. (I think I began to blush.)

He continued, telling me that after hearing that sermon, he thought I just might be the smartest man in the world.

I asked him, *"Please, continue."*

He explained, *"Well, it was said that only three people in the world could understand Albert Einstein. I don't think anybody could have understood that sermon you just gave."*

So, while there are some who have the beautiful gift of making complex things simple. I am evidently, one of those with the other gift.

The 15th century Italian artist and inventor (also scientist, musician, sculptor, engineer, cartographer, botanist, and geologist) Leonardo da Vinci wrote, *"Simplicity is the ultimate elegance."* (That statement is even elegant.)

Leonardo and architects, computer programmers and mathematicians value simplicity. But in many places in our world, we find dizzying complexity.

For instance, governments at most levels, are often inelegant in their un-simplicity. Some businesses are, too. And, lest I throw stones too easily from my glass house, there is church...

Churches can be highly complex organizations. Staff and non-staff juggle responsibilities and authority. There is often duplication of services. The church's mission may be unfocused and fuzzy.

Churches are often anything but simple. Well, this morning we get to see the church as it was formed on the Day of Pentecost. And, at its inception, it was a model of elegant simplicity.

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, describes the church's opening activities in six verses and we're going to look at these six verses together today. We'll see that it was beautifully simple because it was simply all about Jesus.

We join the church's journey on the day *after* the Day of Pentecost. There are three thousand plus believers in Jesus. What do they do?

Well, right off the bat Luke tells us that these disciples of Jesus were doing.

God Works Through the Apostles

The Pattern of Christian Growth (v. 42a)

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching...

The three thousand want to know more, more about Jesus

Now, these three thousand people who had placed their trust in Jesus would have had already a pretty decent base of Bible knowledge.

They were serious enough about their Jewish faith to have taken a pilgrimage to Israel to worship at Passover and Pentecost. So, they would have known what we call the Old Testament really well. But, they likely knew precious little about Jesus.

They all knew that He had been welcomed as Messiah and King on Palm Sunday, that He had been opposed late on Passover week, and that He had been crucified, buried, and resurrected.

But I doubt if most of them knew much else about Jesus - the birth stories, His teachings and miracles and commands, or what kind of a Person He was.

Believing that He was Lord and Savior/Messiah, they would have been hungry for any information they could get about Him. And the apostles were only too happy to tell the stories of Jesus.

The apostles were eager to tell the stories for the first time

When the apostles taught, they would have spoken with the assurance and certainty of eyewitnesses.

Imagine listening to Andrew, as he speaks to a group of new Jesus followers, *"I heard Jesus tell the parable of the sower. Here's how it goes..."* Then James chimes in, *"I watched Jesus calm a storm on the Sea of Galilee. This is how He did it..."*

Thomas told new disciples about meeting Jesus for the first time. John described what it was like to watch Lazarus walk out of his tomb at Jesus' command. Peter reported not finding Jesus' body in Joseph's tomb on Easter Sunday morning.¹

The apostles didn't just know the stories. They knew Jesus!

And by this teaching, the apostles were fulfilling the Great Commission. They were teaching these new disciples AND teaching them to obey everything Jesus had commanded.

There was nothing the apostles wanted to do more than to tell those first believers about Jesus. They are still eager to tell stories about Jesus. They want to tell you.

The apostles are STILL eager to tell the stories

Every healthy church is built on the foundation of the teaching of the apostles. More broadly, the Bible. Christians grow healthy by obeying His commands, and we can't obey what we don't know. We need to learn about Jesus.

So, if you want to get to know Jesus, follow the example of those in the first church ever: OWN your Bible.

The Bible will guide you into faith and obedience. It will protect you from wrong ways of thinking about life and God.

Wherever there is long-term, sustainable spiritual growth, there is devotion to the apostles' teaching. That's the way it was in Jerusalem, and that's the way it is to be here and in each of our lives.

Luke continues to describe the distinctives of life in the early church.

The Pattern of Gospel Movement (v. 43b)

[43]...and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.²

The pattern on the Day of Pentecost

¹ I would imagine they explained Old Testament passages that had been obscure, but were now as clear as a bell in light of the crucifixion and the empty tomb. Isaiah, chapter 53, Psalm 22, Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2 and many other passages were explained to the church in light of who Jesus proved to be.

² Take some time sometime soon to trace through the book of Acts and you'll see that these miraculous works primarily (although not exclusively) took place through the apostles (as Luke says here).

We have seen the miracles that occurred on the Day of Pentecost. Everybody in the church and everybody in Jerusalem knew about the sound of the violent, rushing wind, about the tongues like fire dancing on the disciples' heads, and of the disciples' ability to speak in unlearned foreign languages.

Luke says that the wonders and the signs continued *after* the Day of Pentecost.

The pattern in the days that followed

We are going to see in our study of Acts that miracles continued. Now, they don't turn up on every page, and they tended to occur at strategic places in the historical expansion of the church.

We'll see that miracles were more prevalent in two settings. First, when Jesus' followers were taking significant risks in serving Him. Second, when they were taking the Gospel to people and to places that had never heard about Him.

The credibility for the Gospel increased as people saw accompanying signs. The signs "greased the skids" for disciples to bring Jesus into conversations.

But a pattern was set in the events of Pentecost, and here's the pattern:
First, God worked;
Second, His people spoke.

The miracles of Pentecost were followed by Peter's sermon. And that pattern - believers speaking in response to God's work - repeats itself over and over again in the book of Acts.

That pattern hasn't changed. We speak, today, in response to God's movement.

The pattern continues (God moves; we speak)

Of course, we speak about what God has done in the events of Jesus' life and ministry, and through His death and resurrection. We speak in response to what He has done, historically.

But we also are to speak about what God is doing today.³

On a 1999 trip to Tatarstan, Russia, Todd Havekost and I were staying with a couple who opened their flat to us for the time we were in Nizhnekamsk. One evening, after sharing the gospel with this couple, the wife, Guzel, asked, "*But what has Jesus done for you lately?*"

What a great question!

It highlights the reasonable assumption on the part of an outsider that IF God did all of that back then, THEN He surely must be doing something now. So, in addition to sharing the historical heart of our faith, we are also to speak about what God is currently doing.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, [**1 Corinthians 4:20**] ***For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power.***

In other words, the biggest thing going on at any time is not our "*talk, talk, talk.*" It's about God doing what only He can do.

Part of our assignment, as witnesses (remember Acts 1:8) is to cultivate a sensitivity to what God is doing around us. We are to learn to open our eyes so that we see His work of restoring families, meeting financial needs, breaking addictions, providing employment, healing sickness, reconciling broken relationships, saving souls.

And then, keeping with the pattern we see in Acts, we speak in response to what He is doing.

³ I highly recommend picking up a book or two by Tom Doyle, who writes about God's work, today, in the Muslim world. Specifically, [Killing Christians](#) (Living the Faith Where It's Not Safe to Believe) and [Dreams and Visions](#) (Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?). Doyle's books - and many others - reliably document God's miraculous works in bringing Muslims to faith in Jesus, especially in a region (Middle East) where it is very dangerous to profess faith in Jesus.

We tell our friends, “Here’s what God has been doing in my life. Here’s what He’s done recently. Let me tell you what this tells us about the God who is revealed in Jesus.”

The apostles were greatly used by God in the earliest days of the church to teach and to perform great works of power. Luke mentions another element of those first days in Jerusalem.

The Body of Christ Learns to Love

Shared Life (v. 42b)

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to...fellowship⁴...

The meaning of fellowship/koinonia

The word we translate “**fellowship**” here is the Greek word, *koinonia*. At its most basic, *koinonia* means “*shared life*.”

When relationships are at their best, husbands and wives, parents and children, and close friends enjoy *koinonia*.⁵ *Koinonia* was flowing among the three thousand believers in Jesus there in Jerusalem - and that is remarkable.

The basis of church fellowship/koinonia

It is remarkable because prior to the Day of Pentecost most of these people didn’t even know each other. They observed different customs and came from very different cultures.

And yet, now, after Pentecost, they are relating at the deepest levels. And that’s because their fellowship wasn’t based on custom or culture. Jesus was the hub around which their lives revolved.

⁴ Somewhat surprisingly, this is the only occurrence of the word *koinonia* in the book of Acts.

⁵ The word can also refer to a legal partnership, highlighting the root meaning of “sharing” in something. (Luke 5:10)

The same is true today. One of the most compelling things about becoming a Christian - at least it was for me as a teenager - is that when you trust Christ for eternal life, there is an instant bond between you and others who have also believed in Jesus.

You may have all kinds of things in common with someone. You may follow the Spurs, play the same games, go to the same range, have the same political leanings, and enjoy Thai food - or you may not. If you are both following Jesus, you can enjoy deep, meaningful fellowship/*koinonia*.

It happens here all the time, especially as you get to know people during brunches and in Adult Bible Fellowships and Care Groups and visits in the hallway.

Well, as the church was just starting up in Jerusalem, this “shared life” played itself out in very practical ways.

Shared Possessions (vv. 44-45)

[44] And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common, [45] and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.⁶

The first century setting

Remember that many of those who are now part of the church had come to Jerusalem only for Passover/Pentecost. But lots of these had decided to stay there to grow in their new-found faith in Jesus.

Of course, the longer they stayed, the less cash they had, and the more they needed to be supported by those with means.

⁶ When Jesus and His disciples traveled throughout Galilee and Judea, they shared a common store of money. They had all things in common.

So, those who were able would free up whatever of their wealth was necessary to meet the needs of those who had just come to visit.⁷

This is sacrificial generosity. It wasn't coerced giving. It was simply a voluntary response to need.⁸

The people didn't all sell their property at the same time and put it into a big pot.⁹ No. As people had needs, donations were made.

There was tangible fellowship because of a truly shared life in Jesus. It was love and care in action and it was spontaneous and loving. (And it was short-lived. While generous living and giving did continue, it appears that the practice of having all things in common did not.)

And wherever the church has ever been healthy, generosity has always been the rule.

And in 2017

I love the generosity that I see being demonstrated here at our church in these days.

There are weekly contributions to the Benevolence Fund. That's a fund that provides assistance to people in our church and in the community who are facing desperate situations.

You are providing gifts of food and money to the Food Pantry to help people who otherwise wouldn't know where their next meal is coming from.

There is consistent generosity toward the General Fund - and I love that because it speaks of your ownership of the ministry and of your heart for what the Lord is doing here.

⁷ Some (not me) believe that this sharing indicates their understanding that Jesus was coming back soon. I think it just shows genuine compassion. The rationale is not so much eschatological as it is social.

⁸ At Qumran (a desert community of super-zealous Jews), the pooling of material resources was required for entrance into the group called the Essenes.

⁹ Strictly speaking, this is neither incipient socialism nor communism. It's generous living and giving.

And then you give to support missions trips to Chile, to serve persecuted Christians, to aid in Bible translation and distribution, to support people who are serving Jesus cross-culturally.

You give to meet needs in Jesus' Name by providing clean water and medical aid, support for widows and orphans, and by fighting sex trafficking and slavery.¹⁰

So, the picture that is developing of life in the church in Jerusalem is of a community of disciples who are learning from the apostles, watching God at work, and enjoying deep fellowship in a setting of generosity.

And there is more. The next ingredient tossed into the mix in the first church was - are you ready for this? - FOOD.

Food - It's What's for Community!

The Lord's Supper (v. 42c)¹¹

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to...the breaking of bread...¹²

¹⁰ The Apostle John, who was there in Jerusalem to witness this incredible outpouring of generosity when the church was launched, wrote near the end of his life, *[17] But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? [18] Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.* I've often wondered if, as he penned those lines, he was thinking of the first days of the church in Acts 2.

¹¹ While consensus among commentaries is no guarantee of truth, the Bible scholars I consulted agree that this (v. 42) is a reference to a celebration of communion - and that agreement does carry *some* weight.

¹² See "*breaking bread*" - as a reference to the feeding of the 5,000/4,000 - Matthew 14:19; 15:36; Mark 6:41; 8:6, 19-20; Luke 9:16; in reference to the meal after the walk to Emmaus - Luke 24:30; 35; in reference to the Last Supper/Lord's Supper - Matthew 26:26; Acts 2:42; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24; other - Acts 2:46.

Most Bible students believe that the reference here is to the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper.¹³

Remember. On Jesus' last night with His disciples, they all ate a Passover meal together. In Jerusalem, the first disciples ate meals together where the point was to remember Jesus.

We'll do that next Sunday. We'll take the Lord's Supper and will remember Jesus as we drink a cup of juice and eat a piece of matzah.

But that's not what they did in the early church! Then, the Lord's Supper was celebrated with a full meal and was referred to as the Agape (the Love Feast).

Luke does not tell us how frequently they observed Communion, only that they were "continually" breaking bread. Their remembrance of Jesus by the Lord's Supper deepened their faith, enriched their *koinonia*, and grounded them as disciples.

But then sometimes, they just got together and ate.

Taking Meals Together (v. 46b)

[46] Day by day continuing with one mind...they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart

This is, simply, friends sharing meals together. We all know that good things, God-honoring things, intensely personal things happen when we share meals with each other.

It happened in the first century. It happens today. Sharing a meal is friendly.

So...if you are looking for one exceedingly practical, intensely spiritual application from Acts 2, here it is:

¹³ Among those I'm using as resources for this series are commentaries by F.F. Bruce, Everett Harrison, and Darrell Bock. Bock is the exception, who takes these words as a broad statement that the early Christians ate meals together rather than as a reference to a sacramental meal.

EAT MEALS TOGETHER

Invite someone over for dinner. Meet at a favorite restaurant. Host a dessert fellowship. Throw a pot-luck (pot-faith?) supper.

Do it because food feeds fellowship.

And, to round out the distinctives of what was happening during the church's infancy, Luke writes about prayer. Not surprisingly, the first Christians prayed together.

First Things First - the Matter of Prayer

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to prayer...¹⁴ [46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple¹⁵...they were...[47] praising God...!

We don't know anything about the form their church-wide prayer life took.

Did they divide into twos, threes and fours to pray? Did they all pray out loud at the same time? Did they form Facebook and Instagram prayer groups?

Who knows? Clearly, they were filled with gratitude to God for what Jesus had done for them and they were consumed by a burden to fulfill the Great Commission. What better way to respond than to pray?

Luke tells us that as they prayed, they were of "***one mind.***" Now, what image does that phrase "***one mind***" bring to your mind?

Does it mean that the early Christians were cookie cutter look-alikes who had the same opinions about everything? Frankly, that's not a very attractive image, and it's sure not likely.

¹⁴ God's people have always recognized that prayer is essential for spiritual growth and spiritual health. Old Testament Jews knew this, and Christians have always known this, too.

¹⁵ Their presence at the temple highlights the Jewishness of early Christian faith.

(Not even the original apostles were on the same page, politically, what with James the Zealot on the same team as Matthew the tax-collector.)

The “**one thing**” about which the early church was of “**one mind**” was Jesus.

- They may have had different opinions about politics, the economy, and child-rearing.
- They may have been rivals in the business world.
- Those from different lands probably had very different tastes in music, dress, and food.

BUT, they were caught up in Jesus. He was at their core, and they related to each other from that core.

So, when Christian A was ready to go to the temple to worship, he didn’t let the differences he had with Christian B about politics or music get in the way of inviting Christian B to come along.

He just grabbed Christian B by the arm, and said, “*Let’s go worship Jesus.*”

And so they did, day by day. They learned and loved, shared and worshiped. Simple.

And as they did the faithful things that they could do, God did the wonderful things that only He can do.

The God-Fueled Impact of the First Church Ever

From the Congregation: AWE! (v. 43a)

[43] Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe¹⁶

This is the experience of the insiders who were a part of this movement. They were awestruck with wonder at what God was doing.

¹⁶ The Greek word here is “phobos” - a word usually translated “fear.” “Awe is a great rendering in this context, as Luke is point us to the disciples’ amazement and worshipful reverence for God because of what He was doing.

It was all “awe-worthy.” The unity and love, the sacrificial sharing and the miracles were only explainable as coming from God.

But all that was happening was also having a profound impact on those who were on the outside looking in.

From the Watching Community: FAVOR! (v. 47b)

[47]...having favor with all the people.

The residents of Jerusalem were impressed by what they saw of Jesus’ followers. At this early stage, the church had a sterling reputation with those who were outside the movement.

Yes, that will soon change. But at the beginning, there was a broad appeal and a winsome attractiveness about the church.

And finally, more and more outsiders were being welcomed in.

From the Lord - PEOPLE SAVED! (v. 47c)

[47]...And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

So, have you ever wondered, “*By what means did the Lord bring about these ‘day by day’ conversions?*”

While it’s possible that Peter and the other apostles gave daily messages in the temple, I have a hunch, based on a little “sanctified imagining”, that something else was going on.

These brand-new believers had families and they had friends. They had social networks.

As they simply lived their lives, they interacted with these who had not yet come to know Jesus. And they told their friends and family about Jesus, who believed in Jesus and were saved.¹⁷

¹⁷ “There is nothing to suggest that the increase in the numbers of Christians was due to more public preaching. While the possibility of such preaching must be

Conclusion:

Effects are always the work of God. And the effects we see in Acts 2 - reverential worship, great favor, powerful conversions - were the result of God's amazing grace.

But notice the dynamics that were in place during this season of such effects. The disciples (and the way we say it around here) were...

- ...LIVING AND LOVING THE BIBLE
([Acts 2:42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching.)
- ...DEPENDING ON GOD TO DO WHAT ONLY HE CAN DO WHEN WE ASK HIM
([Acts 2:42] They were continually devoting themselves to...prayer.)
- ...RELATING WITH MASKS-OFF
([Acts 2:42] They were continually devoting themselves to...fellowship/koinonia.)
- ...LIVING AND GIVING GENEROUSLY
([Acts 2:44] And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; [45] and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.)
- ...BUILDING FAITH AT HOME
([Acts 2:46] Day by day...breaking bread from house to house.)
- ...BRINGING OUR FRIENDS TO JESUS
([Acts 2:47]...having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.)

Simple church. It's elegant in its lack of complexity.

If we here are going to go "back to basics" in our faith and follow our Manufacturer's instructions about how to live in Jesus, it'll mean giving attention to simplicities. Doing what everybody can do.

So, what if this coming week, your life was marked by what marked the first disciples? What if you gave priority to those values they held dear.

I wonder what God would do in your life if you gave priority to these simplicities? I wonder what God would do in us if we each followed the pattern we find in the first church ever?

This is the life to which Jesus invites each of us. It is the life to which He invites us, together.

granted, the more likely explanation for the growth of the church at this stage was the transformation observable in the three thousand. The impact of the few at Pentecost had broadened and become the impact of the many." Everett F. Harrison, Acts: The Expanding Church, Moody Press, 1975, p. 67.