

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

September 6, 2026

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Jesus' Faithful Witnesses...** **...bearing witness to Jesus' life-changing message.**

(Studies in the book of Acts)

#### **Simple Church**

(Acts 2:42-47)

Study #4

**Introduction:** The elegant power of simplicity...

The 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist and inventor (and scientist, musician, sculptor, engineer, cartographer, botanist, and geologist!) Leonardo da Vinci wrote, "*Simplicity is the ultimate elegance.*" (There is even an elegance to that statement.)

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

For instance, many governments at many levels, are inelegant in their un-simplicity. Some businesses are, too.

And, lest I throw stones too easily from my glass house, there is church - and not just big churches.

Even small churches can be highly complex organizations. There may be duplication of services. The church's mission may be unfocused. Lines of authority and responsibility blur.

Regrettably, churches of all sizes and shapes are often anything but simple.

But today we'll see the first church ever on the day it was formed. And, at its inception, it was a model of elegant, all-about-Jesus, simplicity.

We get a description of the church in Jerusalem shortly after the Day of Pentecost. There are three thousand plus believers in Jesus. What do they do?

### **God Worked Through the Apostles**

#### **The Pattern of Christian Growth (2:42a)**

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

*The three thousand want to know more, MORE about Jesus*

These three thousand people who have believed 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 Jerusalem 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 knew that He had been welcomed as Messiah 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. They probably didn't know the birth stories, or much about His teachings or His miracles or His commands.

But, believing that He was Lord and Savior, they would have been hungry for any information they could get about Him.

The apostles were only too happy to tell the stories of Jesus. And when they told these stories, they would have spoken with the credibility of eyewitnesses.

After all, the apostles didn't just know the stories. They knew Jesus.

*The apostles were eager to tell Jesus stories*

We can imagine Andrew speaking to a group of new believers. *"I heard Jesus tell the parable of the sower. Here's how it goes..."* - as Andrew launched into that parable.

Then James chimed in, *"I watched Jesus calm a storm on the Sea of Galilee. This is how He did it..."* - and he recounted that miracle.

Or...

...Nathaniel might have told the new disciples what it was like when he met Jesus for the first time.

...John described what it was like to watch Lazarus walk out of his tomb at Jesus' command.

...Peter reported how amazed he was at NOT finding Jesus' body in Joseph's tomb on the day of resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

There was nothing the apostles wanted to do more than tell those first believers about Jesus.

They are STILL eager to tell stories about Jesus. They want to tell you and me.

*The apostles are STILL eager to tell the stories*

Every healthy church is built on the foundation of the teaching of the apostles. 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. Learn from the apostles.

Linger long in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Take the writings of Paul and Peter and John, the letter to the Hebrews and the little letter of Jude YOURS.

By opening to these books and letters, you're allowing apostles who knew Jesus to guide you into faith and obedience. They'll protect you from wrong ways of thinking about Jesus. They'll lead you into the ways of Jesus.

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 has to be here and in each of our lives.

Luke continued to describe distinctives in the life of the early church, drawing attention to the pattern of the gospel's movement.

### **The Pattern of Gospel Movement (2:43b)**

***[43]...and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.<sup>2</sup>***

*The pattern on the Day of Pentecost*

Everybody in the church and everybody in Jerusalem knew about the miracles on the Day of Pentecost.

They knew about the sound of the violent, rushing wind, about the tongues like fire dancing on the disciples' heads, and about the disciples' ability to speak in unlearned foreign languages.

Luke says here that the wonders and the signs continued *after* the Day of Pentecost. We will see in our study of Acts that the miracles continued.

<sup>1</sup> I suspect that they explained Old Testament passages that may have been obscure but were now perfectly clear in light of the crucifixion and the empty tomb. They now understood passages like Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2 and others in light of who they now knew Jesus to be.

<sup>2</sup> If you take some time to trace through the book of Acts, you'll see that these miraculous works primarily took place through the apostles (as Luke says here).

*The pattern in the days that followed*

These miracles don't turn up on every page, and they tended to occur at strategic points of the church's expansion.

They most often occurred when Jesus' followers were taking big risks in serving Him OR when disciples were taking the gospel to people and to places for the first time.

Credibility for the gospel increased as people saw these signs. The signs opened hearts to really listen to the message of Jesus.

And a clearly discernible pattern emerged in the early church: 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.

On a 1999 trip to Russia, Todd Havekost and I were staying with a couple who let us stay in their apartment while we were teaching at a Bible conference in their city (Nizhnekamsk, Tatarstan).

One evening, we had the chance to share the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection with this unbelieving couple - thanks to their Christian daughter's translating work. After we had shared, the wife, Guzel, asked us, *"But what has Jesus done for you lately?"*

What a great question! Guzel, assumed that if God did all of that back then, He must still be doing something now.

That's a reasonable assumption. So, in addition to sharing the historical heart of our faith, you and I 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 is not 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 Acts 1:8 **"witnesses"** is to cultivate a sensitivity to where God is at work.

We are to live with eyes wide open to God's works of grace.

If we pay attention, we'll see where He is restoring families, creating breakthroughs of repentance and forgiveness, meeting financial needs, breaking addictions, healing sickness, providing employment, reconciling broken relationships, building communities of love.

Keeping with the pattern we see in Acts, we speak in response to what He is doing. We share our *"God sightings."*

We tell our friends, *"Here's what God is doing in my life. Here's what He's done recently. Here is what He is doing for my friend. Let me tell you what this says about the Jesus who died and rose again for you."*

Luke mentioned another early church distinctive.

**The Body of Christ Learns to Love**

**Shared Life (2:42b)**

***[42] They were continually devoting themselves to...fellowship...***

### *Fellowship = Shared life*

The word we translate “**fellowship**”<sup>3</sup> 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*. *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 came from different countries with different cultures and observed different customs.

But 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 relationships revolved.<sup>4</sup>

I became a Christian as a teenager. Among the most compelling things I learned early on about life in Christ was that, as I focused on Jesus and as others who believed in Jesus focused on Him, we found a *koinonia*, a bond, that united us.

THAT was a life-changing reality for me. May that experience be a reality for every teen and every child in our church.

And for every adult. For instance, you and another Christian may have all kinds of things in common.

You may be excited about this football season or play the same games or have the same political leanings, or both enjoy Thai food - or you may have none of these things in common.

If you are both following and focusing on Jesus, you can enjoy deep, meaningful fellowship.

It can happen here. *Koinonia* can happen during visits in the hallway, or when we have our quarterly brunches. Fostering *koinonia* is one major reason why we have ABFs on Sundays and Care Groups that meet during the week.

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

### **Shared Possessions (2:44-45)**

***[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.***<sup>5</sup>

### *The first century setting*

Remember that many of those who were part of the church had come to Jerusalem only for the Passover / Pentecost season. Then, lots of them 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.

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

This is sacrificial generosity. It wasn’t coerced giving. It was simply a voluntary response to need.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, this is the only occurrence of the word *koinonia* in the book of Acts.

<sup>4</sup> Not even the original apostles were on the same page, politically, what with James the Zealot and Matthew the tax-collector both on the apostolic team.

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus and His disciples traveled throughout Galilee and Judea, they shared a common store of money. They had all things in common.

<sup>6</sup> At Qumran (a first-century desert community of zealous Jews called “Essenes”), anyone wanting to join the community was required to give all their material riches to be shared by all in the community.

There was tangible shared life in Jesus. It was love and care in action and it was spontaneous and loving.<sup>7</sup>

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

*And in 2026*

I want to take a moment and commend you for the beautiful generosity to meet needs in Jesus' name that is happening around here in these days.

Lots of you regularly contribute to the Benevolence Fund. That is the fund of money we use to help people in our church and in the community who are facing tough times. You have been exceptionally generous in giving to this Benevolence Fund in recent years.

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

There is consistent generosity toward the General Fund. That generosity speaks of your ownership of this ministry and of your heart for what the Lord is doing here and around the world through our supported missionaries.<sup>8</sup>

And then, beginning in November, you will again have the chance to support our missionaries through our annual Missions "Matching Initiative" where what you give is matched from our Land Sale Proceeds fund.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It seems that the practice of having all things in common did not continue for long. However, generous living and giving certainly continue.

<sup>8</sup> Through your giving to the General Fund at Northwest, you are supporting missionaries who, among other things, provide clean drinking water and medical aid, support widows and orphans, do Bible translation work, equip and train Christian workers and young adults, and serve Jesus in some very hard and dangerous places.

<sup>9</sup> The Apostle John was in Jerusalem to witness this outpouring of generosity. He wrote near the end of his life, *[1 John 3:17] But whoever has worldly goods, and see his brother or sister in need and closes his heart against him, how does the*

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, bearing testimony to Jesus, enjoying rich fellowship in the spirit 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 (2:42c)**

***[42] They were continually devoting themselves to...the breaking of bread...***<sup>10</sup>

Most Bible students believe that the reference here is to the regular observance of the Lord's Supper, something that we'll do at the close of our time together this morning.

We'll remember Jesus as we drink a thimble-sized cup of juice and eat a small, but delicious, piece of matzah.

But, at least as I understand it, that was 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).<sup>11</sup>

Luke does not tell us how often they observed Communion, only that they were "continually" breaking bread.

***love of God remain in him? [18] Little children, let's not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.*** I wonder if John was thinking of the early days of the church when he penned these lines.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Corinthians 11 for Paul's description of the early church's communion service.

Their remembrance of Jesus by the Lord's Supper deepened their faith, enriched their *koinonia*, and grounded them as disciples.

And then sometimes, they just got together and ate.

### **Taking Meals Together (2:46b)**

***[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, breaking bread, together. And as you know, 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 exceptional practical, intensely spiritual application from Acts 2, here it is: EAT TOGETHER.

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

Take full advantage of the opportunity for connection over food between services on Sundays - and especially during Sunday morning brunches like last Sunday.  
(And yes, I did miss being here for that!)

What you often see in the weekly program is true: Food Feeds Fellowship."

And, to round out the distinctives of what was happening during the church's infancy, Luke wrote about prayer.

Not surprisingly, the first Christians prayed together.

### **First Things First - the Matter of Prayer (Acts 2:42, 46, 47)**

***[42] They were continually devoting themselves to prayer...  
[46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple<sup>12</sup>...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 mainly pray the Psalms? Did they form Facebook 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 - so they prayed.

The image that comes to my mind is that it was the norm for one to say to another, "Let's pray" - and they prayed.

If they were talking about some great need, they prayed. At the drop of a hat. Just like that. If someone shared a personal hardship, the friend placed their hand on the brother's shoulder and prayed.

It was as natural as breathing air for two or more of them to break out in prayer to God. Prayer was their common language.

Prayer knit believers together who might have had enormous differences about politics, the Roman economy, music, dress, and food. They might have been rivals in the business world.

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 a house where others were gathering for prayer, he didn't let the differences he had with Christian B stop him from inviting Christian B to come along.

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<sup>12</sup> Their presence at the temple highlights the Jewishness of early Christian faith.

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

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

### **The Impact of the “Simple” First Church**

#### **From the Congregation: AWE! (2:43a)**

***[43] Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe.<sup>13</sup>***

That was the experience of those who were insiders in the Jesus movement. They were awestruck with wonder at what God was doing. It was all “awe-worthy.”

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! (2:47b)**

***[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.

Sure, 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 - MORE PEOPLE SAVED! (2:47c)**

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

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

It’s possible that Peter and the other apostles gave daily sermons in the temple. And if so, there was probably fruit from these.

But my hunch, based on a little “sanctified imagining,” is 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. They told their friends and family about Jesus.

And these, hearing the message, and seeing changed lives, believed in Jesus and were saved.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

What a refreshing look Luke has given us of life in the first church ever. There was zero complexity. At this earliest moment, they gave little, if any, thought to structure or to hierarchical organization.

All the time and energy and resources of the first church was given to nurturing the life in Jesus they enjoyed and to sharing that life with those had not yet believed.

And, to review, they gave themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to prayer and worship, to sharing life at deep, personal levels, to meeting needs in Jesus’ Name, and to breaking bread together.

In that setting, ***[47] the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.***

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word here is “*phobos*” - a word often 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.

<sup>14</sup> Everett Harrison makes this point in his commentary on Acts, page 67. (Acts: The Expanding Church, Moody Press, 1975).

Simple church.

As we move through the New Testament, and as time passed, there were developments in the church from what we've seen today.

We find the addition of structure and organization and leadership - and more. That doesn't surprise us. We would have expected there to be change in form over time.

The benefit for us today in taking a look at life in the first church is in seeing the essential function of Jesus' church. Function is set. That hasn't changed.

Forms change all the time. Forms are still developing and changing to better meet changing needs.<sup>15</sup>

The forms churches add and adopt aren't bad (at least, they aren't necessarily bad), but they aren't the thing. Function is the thing.

Think of it this way.

The external bark of a tree is dead. But the bark is crucial because the dead bark protects the living stuff. The bark keeps the tree's cambium and the xylem healthy and growing.

In the same way, the church organization - the building, the programs, parking lot - is the bark. It all exists solely to protect our shared life in Jesus.

The form is dead, but it protects the living function.

All the forms we have here (the physical building, the programs, the organization) exist to make possible the times we have for ***"devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching."***

The forms provide a setting for us to worship and praise God, together.

The forms exist to give space for a Sunday School teacher and a child to have a moment of loving connection centered on Jesus.

The forms provide a setting for you to stop and pray, in the moment, with someone in the hall, here in the Worship Center, in the Welcome Center, on the phone, or in a home.

The forms allow you to learn of a need and respond with loving generosity.

Let's not lose the point of what we're all about. It's not that complicated.

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<sup>15</sup> Beyond some basic guidelines, the biblical instruction on form for any local church is quite vague. Congregations are free to experiment with different forms so as to best carry out the biblical functions in their own cultural context.