

Best Practices
Acts 2:41-47
Sermon by Richard Kauffman
May 29, 2022

41So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

42They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Why do we go to church? Why did you come here this morning? You could have stayed at home to read a Sunday paper and have an extra cup of coffee, or ride bike on the Pumpkinvine. Instead, you came here. Why?

I recently met with an old friend. Since we hadn't been together in a while, we had a lot of catching up to do. After it seemed like we had exhausted every topic possible, I asked him: "How's your church doing?" Without a break he said, "I don't go to church anymore. I don't feel the need for it." I was stunned! He had worked for church organizations almost all of his adult life. In fact, he worked in congregational ministries for a while. I asked him if he'd consider himself spiritual but not religious. He agreed that that label would fit him. A church dropout in his 70s! Though stunned, I just listened.

The Acts reading this morning is about much more than going to church. Rather, it's about being the church. It notes four marks of the church which form the church: teaching, fellowship, eating together, and prayer or worship.

Several things you should know about Acts and its author Luke, who also wrote the gospel of Luke. In Luke's first volume, the gospel, Jesus was the bearer of the Spirit once the Spirit came upon him at his baptism; in Luke's second volume, Acts, the church becomes the bearer of the Spirit at Pentecost.

In the book of Acts Peter isn't the chief protagonist; neither is Paul. The Holy Spirit is the chief protagonist. Reading Acts with that in mind makes a difference.

And now for the marks of the church according to Acts:

Mark one: teaching of the apostles: We Mennonites have a bias for action over contemplation, ethics over theology. But here the first mark of the church is teaching, not doing. The form of this teaching, however, is not doctrinal or dogmatic; rather, it is a narrative, as story, often in the form of stylized sermons in the book of Acts.

These sermons have a narrative form, a story in 3 parts: (1) about God's calling of the nation Israel; (2) about the life, death and resurrection of Christ; and (3) about the

formation and ongoing mission of the church. These sermons typically call people to repentance and baptism.

This story is our story. It helps shape our identity as people of God; we live into this story; we live out of this story. And our own story is a continuation of this story. Acts is a book that is never finished, but gets new chapters added as the church lives on in history. Can you imagine our story here at Berkey Avenue being added to that story?

Mark two: fellowship of the church, its common life together: I have long wondered why Berkey Avenue has “fellowship” in its name rather than church. I’m inclined to think that any congregation using fellowship rather than church in its name is evangelical with a low view of the church.

After I started here over a year ago I dug around in the archives to learn about the history of this congregation and to see what I could find out about the name. I also consulted with some charter members. What I learned was the congregation was first called West Goshen Fellowship. After the West Goshen Church of the Brethren expressed some concern about the confusion of names, this church became Berkey Avenue. And later, when it decided it really wanted to be Mennonite and joined Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, Mennonite was added. But “fellowship” persisted.

In an email exchange with John Roth, he reminded me that German congregations don’t go by Kirche (church) but rather Gemeinde (community). He said he lives happily with the name fellowship here because of its likeness to the German Mennonites. That too helped me to accept this rubric for Berkey.

Fellowship is a key mark of the church. It’s an embodied reality. We need to be with each other. That’s why being church was so difficult during COVID when we couldn’t meet together.

Fellowship isn’t just something we do together; a fellowship is what we are.

Interlude: the apostles had all things in common: When I preached a sermon on this text at College Mennonite Church, a stalwart member said to me, you didn’t say anything about the apostles having all things in common. My response was that it was too complex an issue to deal with in a sermon. That was a poor excuse. I’m not going to make the same mistake today.

There were precedents for the apostles to practice some form of economic communism. Jesus and his disciples seemed to have had a common purse. The Qumran community, an early Jewish ascetic community seemed to have all things in common. But was the practice compulsory? Was it universal?

Here's my take: the apostles were bound to each other by the Holy Spirit. Out of this bondedness they sold some (or all?) of their possessions as there was need in their fellowship. There is a radical message in this for us: the Holy Spirit lays claim on our possessions, our treasures, talents and time. These possessions are to be freely shared with others in need and for the mission of the church in the world.

Mark three: breaking of bread: Simply put, this meant eating meals together as a fellowship, although eventually it also included specifically Communion. In the Jewish tradition once food is blessed, both the food and the eating together were considered holy. This understanding most certainly carried over into the early church.

Eating together had both a retrospective and a prospective perspective for the early church: it reminded them of Jesus eating together with his disciples and of being accused sometimes of eating with people considered unworthy. But it also helped the

early Christians anticipate that great banquet table in the future when all God's people will feast together in God's kingdom.

There is a rebuke in this practice for us. Too often we're inclined to break bread with people like ourselves. Jesus' practiced another way, of eating with people who were outcasts and on the margins of society.

Mark four: prayers (worship): Prayers here aren't just about individual worship; it's really short-hand for corporate worship.

Worship is directed away from ourselves to God. It helps remind us that faith isn't, in the first place, about what we do, but about what God has done in Christ and continues to do through the Spirit.

Incidentally, there is this little, three-lettered word in this text: **awe**. "*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*" This is a same word that is used a few times in the gospels to describe peoples' responses to the work Jesus was doing in their midst.

In our secular world we are lacking a sense of awe. Science, modern bureaucracy and secularism has rid the world of mystery. The great German sociologist Max Weber said that modern people live in a disenchanting world. If we don't have an explanation for everything, we believe that in due time we will. No sense of awe. Worship, remembering the acts of God, should awaken our sense of awe about God and God's work and world.

Twice before I've quoted my friend of blessed memory, Alan Kreider: "*We don't go to church to change our minds. We go to church to change our reflexes.*" In other words, we go to church to have our impulses changed—changed to likeness of Jesus. It is for our spiritual formation and transformation.

A good example of being rewired to respond in a Christ-like fashion was the Amish response to the Nickel Mines school shooting in Lancaster County in 2006. A milk tank driver barged into an Amish school, shooting and killing five Amish kids and injuring another five. The surrounding Amish community immediately said they forgave the killer and they offered mercy and hospitality to the killer's mother and wife. And the whole world took notice of the Amish expression of grace.

I must admit my response was to say: "It's way too early to say they forgive the killer. That will take some time." I know enough about social science research on the process of forgiveness to make me dangerous. It's a process involving stages somewhat like the stages of death.

But the Amish take Jesus' words about forgiveness literally and seriously. And maybe the Amish know something about forgiveness that social science doesn't understand. The Amish announced their intention to forgive the killer and give grace to his family, and then they lived into that intention.

This reminds me of another Alan Kreider saying: "*You can't think your way into a new way of living. You live your way into a new way of thinking*" (repeat).

Why did we come to church today? Why are you here? Why do we go to church any day? You tell me.

