“Back to the Basics”

Acts 2:43-47

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These past ten weeks have been a time for me to see the world through new eyes. Babies have this magical way of helping us with that. As I’ve cared for my newborn daughter, I’ve been forced to slow down. Reexamine life. Think things through step by step. As she develops and grows, I watch her learn new things. I’m astounded by how much effort each step of that learning takes. She has gone from sleeping most of the time to periods of alertness when she is discovering the world around her. At first she would move her arms and legs in a reflexive motion. Nothing was intentional. Now that is starting to fade and she’s making more grasping motions. She’ll reach for a toy and bat at it with her hand. Not yet grasping it on her own, she’s making those strides toward a skill that most of us adults take for granted. We reach for items and pick them up without having to think about it too much. Our brains command our bodies to do simple tasks without having to exert ourselves. But as infants, we had to learn each step of the process. Taking our time to develop new skills and allow our brains to absorb each step. Every little thing requires much effort and patience.

Like I said, maternity leave has forced me to slow down and go back to the basics. The basics of human development as I watch my daughter grow. But it also got me thinking about the basics of our faith. Bringing a child into the world has proven to be a very spiritual experience. One that has led me to examine my own faith journey. \*

There’s a certain danger in going to seminary because your head gets filled with weighty theological terms and concepts. Language that strays from the very basics of what it means to live in faith and follow Christ. Shortly after graduating from seminary, if someone had asked me why I stay in the church, I would have given the academic answer. I would have spouted out those big fancy words that would make my professors proud. I would have given a doctrinal statement and I would have quoted John Calvin and Karl Barth, the heavy hitters of theology in our tradition. This would have been a fine answer. But I realize it lacks heart. It lacks emotion. It lacks testimony about my experience in the church and why it feels like home.

And so I realize the need to go back to the basics. Make those baby steps in thinking about why the church, why faith, why following Christ is still important.

I’ve been attempting to articulate this thought, every time someone asks me about returning to work after having a baby. Those first few weeks were brutal, with the sleep deprivation turning my brain to mush. I was lucky if I could remember my name when introducing myself to someone! This didn’t make those conversations about returning to work any easier. With an exhausted mind, I was struggling to respond to folks who inquired about my role in the church and why I stick with it. “Isn’t the church dying?” they’d ask. “Do you really think the church is relevant and necessary in these times?” they’d ask. “Wouldn’t you rather stay at home with your baby?” They’d ask. My sleep deprived brain would attempt a response, but I fear I wasn’t able to give a convincing response.

Because like the non-religious sector of society, I too wonder about the church sometimes. I wonder whether all of this is worth it, or if our Sunday mornings would be better spent doing something else. I wonder this when I see the statistics released by the Presbyterian Church (USA) headquarters. In 2014 alone, 92,000 people left this denomination. 92,000! That’s a 5% decline in membership. That means our denomination has less than 40% of the number of people who called the Presbyterian Church their home in 1965. Granted, many of those folks are leaving for other churches, but many people are just leaving the church altogether.

I have to wonder if these people are on to something. Maybe they’re right and the church isn’t worth it anymore.

And then I look at congregations who have suffered unspeakable horrors. Like Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This church was founded by a man who saw slavery for the sin that it is and rallied his community to fight against it. During the two centuries that this church has been around, it has faced oppression and violence. The attack on this church this week, when 9 people were killed, was yet another in a long line of violent attacks, motivated by racism. It is pretty clear that this church was targeted because of its long history of activism. Its pulpit has held Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King Jr. Voices that have made their marks in history. As President Obama stated in a press conference: “Mother Emanuel is, in fact, more than a church. This is a place of worship that was founded by African Americans seeking liberty. This is a church that was burned to the ground because its worshipers worked to end slavery. When there were laws banning all-black church gatherings, they conducted services in secret.  When there was a nonviolent movement to bring our country closer in line with our highest ideals, some of our brightest leaders spoke and led marches from this church’s steps.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This church has been instrumental in speaking out against sin and evil in the world. And because of the sin that is racism, Mother Emmanuel, like so many other Black churches in our nation, has been victimized.

I look at these churches who have suffered so much, and wonder why the stick with it? Why continue being a church, why continue being oppressed and beaten down when the world outside is so full of hatred toward them? \*

And then I watch the video of family members addressing the shooter at his hearing this week. Their words are steeped in mercy and forgiveness. They speak of the pain he has caused, the agony that they are feeling. But they tell him that they forgive him because they understand a mercy beyond our world’s comprehension. These faithful people are well versed in God’s extraordinary grace. They’ve felt that forgiveness for themselves and they want this man, who walked into a church a killed their loved ones, to experience that forgiveness as well.

To the outside world, this act of forgiveness may seem outrageous. They may not understand. But for someone who lives and breathes the liturgy of the church, it makes perfect sense. Because all that we do in the church is rooted in love and mercy, grace and forgiveness. Those phrases about turning the other cheek, forgiving seventy times seven times, praying for our enemies. They aren’t just words on a page. They are practices we Christians are called to live by.

We see this if we go back to the basics. Go back to the core elements that frame our faith. If we look at the sacraments that were commissioned by Christ, continued in the early church and remain central to our faith today. Baptism and communion. Both are sacred movements that are rooted in love and community. Both of these practices remind us why we do this church thing.

Because the gospel of love that Jesus proclaims to the world speaks louder than any sinful voice.

When we participate in a baptism and when we fellowship at the Lord’s Table, we’re reminded that there is hope beyond shrinking church membership and empty pews. We’re reminded that even though violent and horrendous things happen to churches like Mother Emmanuel, God’s love is stronger. And that we as the body of Christ, united in community are stronger than any wickedness in the world. These sacraments remind us that staying together, even when it is difficult, is what we are called to do as followers of Christ.

When we need a reminder of this, we ought to look at the very early church. The one spoken of in the book of Acts, right after the day of Pentecost. This group of people saw perhaps the highest rate of church growth than any other time in history. Day by day their numbers grew exponentially. People flocked to this community, not yet called a church, but simply known as “The Way”. What was it about this community that appealed to so many?

Our text for today tells us that they spent a lot of time together and had all things in common. This doesn’t mean they were a homogenous group, with identical demographic profiles. It means they shared everything. A diverse group of people who had nothing other than Jesus in common, shared everything they had with each other. They got along with each other. Slaves and women made up the majority of these people. They were the ones who were forbidden from certain religious practices before. But this community in Christ, welcomed them in as equals. Reconciliation between races and genders and nations was possible in this community. Day by day they gathered. To pray in the Temple. To break bread at home. To lift each other up and encourage one another in faith. It sounds like the ideal church.

How might we get back to that image? The ideal church where all are welcome? Where people flock to it in droves? How might we get back to that?

Why don’t we go back to the basics? The practices that create a firm ground for how we live our faith. Those movements which model for us love and grace. Reminding us that all that we do should be centered in love and grace.

In the coming weeks, we’ll be exploring 7 sacred actions of the church. Baptism, communion, confirmation, confession, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and marriage. My hope is that they will remind us of who we are as the church. Help us to focus in on the elements that unite us. Not just as a congregation, but as a Church worldwide.

Now, these 7 actions are deemed sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. But we Protestants only recognize two of them as sacraments – baptism and communion. We recognize these two because they were instituted by Christ. But the other five are still important in our tradition. Each of these actions remind us of what our faith is about and what the church needs to be about. Perhaps through rediscovery of these practices, we might discover anew, why it is that we stick with the church.

As one of my favorite authors, Rachel Held Evans, puts it: “As long as Christians are breaking the bread and pouring the wine, as long as we are healing the sick and baptizing sinners, as long as we are preaching the Word and paying attention, the church lives, and Jesus said even the gates of hell cannot prevail.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Amen.

1. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/18/the-incredible-history-of-charleston-s-emanuel-a-m-e-the-bravest-church-in-america.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Evans, Rachel Held. *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)