

All

Acts 2:42-47

May 3, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

Sometimes sermon titles don't end up matching the sermon, well, maybe more than sometimes. Maybe frequently. And this week is one of those times. If I were titling the sermon I actually wrote as opposed to the one I thought I was going to write, the title would be "Common." So pretend like that's what the bulletin says. Common.

A million years ago when I did youth ministry on a regular basis, one of my favorite get-to-know-you activities was something I called "three things you have in common." It applies to people of any age, really, and they don't have to be strangers. If we were all sitting together in the same room, I might make you play it this morning. It goes like this. You need to be in groups of at least three people but not more than 5, or it will be too hard. The instructions are for the groups to come up with three things that every member of the group has in common. And it can't be something that every person in the world has in common, like I would not count "we all have noses."

So three high schoolers could say things like "we all have one sibling, we all play school sports, and we all like pepperoni pizza." Of course, the more specific you can get, the more impressive it is, but most any group of three people can come up with three things they have in common within just a few minutes. The point of the game is to remind people that we're all connected, and that we have things in common with other people, even if they're strangers at the beginning of the conversation.

Acts proclaims boldly that the earliest Christians—this is still in the same chapter we've been in for three weeks now, right at the beginning—the earliest Christians "had all things in common." Those who had possessions and property to sell, did so, and distributed the proceeds to those who had need. Over the centuries since Acts was written, there has been particular resistance to these couple of verses, for understandable reasons. There seems to be a consensus that well, maybe the writer of Luke and Acts really really wanted this to be the case, that the church would hold all things in common and distribute them equally among its members. And so by writing that the early church did so, he hoped to inspire his direct audience of Christians to do the same. There's not much evidence in the rest of the New Testament, and only one other episode in Acts, that suggests this was really happening.

So if they might have resisted holding all their possessions and property in common, then what did they actually, really and truly, have in common? Well, the whole passage is about that. Starting in verse 42, here's a list: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. They did those things together, some in the temple, some at home. They held those things in common, practiced and learned and celebrated in common.

You may not remember my sermon on Maundy Thursday, but it keeps coming back to me, and this passage is another echo. What I said that night was something along the lines that the ordinary things of water and bread and cup become extraordinary and holy. The ordinary things of life, the common things, become extraordinary and holy.

The dual meaning of common in English, meaning both ordinary and something held together with other people, also works in Greek. So these things that they held in common, the teaching and fellowship and breaking of bread and prayers, were common things, nothing exotic or unheard of or even weird, much as Austin would like to hold weird up as a virtue. The things the early church did together, the things they did in common, were common things. Yet they were so attractive to their neighbors that day by day the Lord added to their number. They held these common things in common, but perhaps not in common ways.

We also hold those very same, common and ordinary things, in common. In common with each other and in common with the early church. Which is kind of amazing, really. That the early church might recognize something about our common life, and that we can see ourselves in the description of them.

Teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayers. Check, check, check, and check. The apostles were teaching about Jesus and how he fulfilled the Scripture—Peter has just spent a whole chapter doing so—and those are the same things we learn about. Fellowship, though we have to go about it a little differently in recent weeks, I think we've managed to continue our connections to each other. Breaking bread: again, we've had to do it differently, but I'll say that communion has seemed even more powerful to me. It's highly likely that Acts is also referring to entire meals that the early church shared together, not the sacrament in particular, as it may have still been developing as a separate observance. We've been known to eat together a time or two, and I look forward to the time when we can do so again. And prayers. We've done a lot of praying together, and separately, and praying for each other and with each other. That's nothing new for us, and it's something that we do well.

We hold in common with each other, and with the early church, common, ordinary activities. Yet they are extraordinary things and activities, because they bind us together with each other and with the risen Lord, just as they did for those first Christians. Let's hold fast to those things, day by day.