

Anchor Passages: Time Together

Acts 2: 43-47

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These next few weeks, Pastor Lauren and I will be preaching through some Anchor Passages for our faith. These are scriptures that inform our understanding of the church and our mission, and shape how we live our faith from day to day. I hope that these passages are helpful now and as the church moves into a time of transition. I know these passages will be holding me in place personally as I am transitioning into a new chapter in living out my faith.

This is a reflective time for me. I find myself contemplating my faith and my work as a pastor. I'm thinking about the ways I've changed, and the ways you have helped my faith change and grow.

I've always liked this passage from Acts because of how unusual it sounds in our country. After Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, the Spirit descends upon the disciples at Pentecost, giving the disciples the ability to speak in every language. Peter preaches a remarkably effective sermon and about 3000 people decide to join this new movement. The new members step in line and they devote themselves, we are told, to the apostles "teaching and fellowship, and the breaking of bread and the prayers."

Then we have a deeper look into the beginnings of the church. The line that always jumps at me is, "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell

their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need.” During one of the Bible studies I led in the churches I served in Wisconsin, I included these verses, and I got a grumbling response from some of my elders, “sounds like socialism.” “Hmm,” I said. “So what do we do with that? Let’s talk.” He said, “let’s keep reading, maybe we’ll find something better in here.”

It’s actually the next verses that are the anchor for me. “Day 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.” What is necessary for building relationships and being a community is described. Time together, eating meals together, generous hearts (this warmth and desire to move towards someone, to give something of someone’s life to someone), and there’s joy, gladness. These are the ingredients of a healthy and vibrant community: time together, generosity, joy.

The passage says “God was adding to their number those who were being saved. The word “saved” trips us up, because Evangelical Christianity has taken ownership of that word and given it a particular meaning that we often don’t find helpful. But we can think of “saved” as the good that God does: God’s rescuing. God delivering us from something we can’t get through alone.

The Way of Jesus and this new community and way of life are rescuing people. God is rescuing people. Well, from what? The time together is rescuing people from loneliness. The time together is rescuing people from facing the struggles of life alone. This proclamation of love that even Caesar can’t defeat with his power and weapons that include the cross; this proclamation of love that even death can’t defeat; it’s rescuing people. People are experiencing

hope in a despairing and chaotic time. People are giving themselves to this way of love and compassion, and they are giving themselves to one another. Through this, God is rescuing them.

This community is attracting people. They are discovering a powerful belonging. The community has a permeable boundary. It is making room for new people, including and inviting new people. Belonging is transformational. When we find it, we go to it.

My feelings about the importance of community have changed over time, in part because of you. By changed, I mean, I have moved from being oblivious to the importance of community and relationship to understanding some of its power. I'm recognizing that what I will miss most about pastoral ministry is being in community with you, spending time together. I will need to be finding church community in other places and in other ways.

I've told this story before, but it tells you something of my starting point with community. I grew up in a town of 700 people in Northwest, IA, and our small UCC church was the one of two alternatives to the large Catholic church in town. When I was in high school, a new pastor, named Christopher Grundy, arrived, straight out of Union Theological Seminary in New York. Before seminary, he had graduated from Carleton, and was very involved in this church when he was in college. Christopher is now a preaching professor at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He had a significant influence on me.

I remember when Christopher first arrived, he said, "we are going to build community." I thought, "dude, I can't get away from community in this town. We already know everything

about one another. Some stuff we've just made up because we're bored. Why do we need more?"

In seminary, we would have "community days" as we started the year. We would do relationship building workshops. I remember wondering why we couldn't just get on with it and go to class. In one session we were asked to share times when we had experienced community. Others were talking about church experiences that were powerful experiences of belonging, but I couldn't think of church experiences. I talked about being in the Hawkeye Marching Band and the trombone section had this tradition of making sure that everyone was included, and we did everything together. It kind of drove me crazy, but there were moments when I was a first year student and people kindly invited me in, and made sure I was there, and that meant so much to me. My understanding of the rescuing power of community and time together was beginning.

In one conversation we had here, I can't remember what it was, a visioning conversation, or a listening session. We are fond of those. We were brainstorming responses to the question, "Who Are We?" One person said, "we are wired for relationship." At first that child who had grown up in that town of 700 people, thought, "Whoa, are we?" But I kept thinking about it. By this time I was learning more about myself as an introvert, and realizing how I do relationship and community and how it is different than people who are extroverts and its all ok. Since I heard that statement, I've been seeing again and again how it is true.

In the book *Leadership and the New Science*, by Margaret Wheatley, the author talks about what we learn from quantum physics. She writes "in the quantum world, relationships are

not just interesting; to many physicists, they are *all* there is to reality. Instead of a lonely void, with isolated particles moving through it, space appears filled with connections. Wheatley writes, "I have learned that in this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of "critical mass." It's always about critical connections (and love is the most potent source of power.)"

I've been thinking about the places where the churches I've served have spent time together. There's worship, there's coffee hour, and our passage for today is telling us that the coffee hour like activities are just as sacred as worship. The churches I served in Wisconsin made pasties, a traditional Cornish meat pie on the first Saturday of the month. They would start at 4:30 in the morning. The second shift would come in a 7:00, and clean up would be done by 11:00. Each church would make and sell 900 pasties at each month's sale. It was ridiculous. I would work the early shift just so I could have a shocking story to tell people, something they wouldn't believe. But we spent time together. And connections were made and relationships were built. The core group of volunteers that got a free health clinic off the ground all worked at pasties and pasties helped cement their relationships with one another. Would that same group have gone to the free health clinic together as a group, without that relational time making meat pies, I don't know.

Our Wednesday evening meal serves the same community building purpose here. Multiple generations gather, eat together, talk. I've spent a lot of conversations trying to get others to watch what I'm watching on Netflix at any given time. I watch adults getting to know one another, lingering in conversation after the meal is long over, sometimes children and adults play games, the kitchen crew, the worker bees, are always having a good time. There are Connect groups (small groups for faith discussion) that have multiplied, choir rehearsals,

women's groups, men's group, those who prepare coffee, and meals for funerals, ISAIAH meetings. These are all places where we spend time together.

It is hard to quantify the value of this relational time, but in the scriptures we see this as foundational to the beginning of the church as a movement. The church can't be, and this movement can't start and catch fire without time together. We experience the life-giving grace of God in that.

Providing belonging and rescuing people from having to face alone whatever life is throwing at us, is something this church can offer. There are young people moving to Northfield, and retired people moving to Northfield. These are people who will be looking for belonging. The church is a place that practices providing a space for belonging, in all our humanness, and spending time together, making new connections, and discovering God's grace and the joy and hope that come with it. This church can be one that intentionally seeks to make space for others to find a place to belong too.

Relationship takes time. Community takes time. Being the church takes time. As we give this time, we find the grace of God is with us, even rescuing us. May it be so. Amen.