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“The Continuing Church”

A sermon by Allen Verhey

Acts 2:37-47
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This morning let that last verse get a firm grip on your imagination.
Let that verse take a firm grip on our life together as a continuing church.
Hear it again from another translation (NEB):

“They met constantly to hear the disciples teach,
to share a common life,
to break bread,
and to pray.”

That is a singularly concise account of the church –
as it was, and still is, at its best.

If we can imagine that church when it was first continuing,
we may renew our own vocation
to be the church.

One cautionary word needs to be said at the beginning.

We must avoid the mistaken impression
that these were extraordinary people,
equipped with extraordinary gifts of patience and courage.

They were real people, ordinary people,
not a halo to be seen.

Soon and sadly the power that had been like fire would flicker and dim.
Soon and sadly the energy that had been like wind would slacken.
Soon and sadly they had their problems, too.
But there was a joy that ran along their days.

There was a flame that warmed the drudgery.
There was a breeze that blew the routine to gladness.
They met constantly to hear the apostle's teach, to share a common life,
to break bread and to pray.

In those practices the church has discovered again and again and still again
that the risen Lord is still present.
It has always discovered in those simple practices that
– six weeks after Easter or two millenia after Easter –
the risen Lord still abides with us
and still calls us to life in his name.

First, then, they met to hear the apostle's teach.

Could that really be a path along which the Spirit moves? Teaching?

Could this really be a mark of the continuing church?

It might help, I think, to try as best we can

to put ourselves back there with those ordinary women and men
eager to be taught.

What was it that the apostles taught?

Can you imagine

that classes were assembled
to hear quite long, dull, academic lectures
on the relation, say,

of Peter's morality to Stoic moral philosophy?

Not even I can really believe

that these people would find much joy or strength or direction
from that sort of teaching.

And I make a living from that sort of teaching.

I imagine the apostle's simply talked, day in and day out, of Jesus.

They had known him,

this one who had been crucified but whom God raised up.

They had walked with him when he did signs and wonders.

They had chatted with him about the good future God promised
and about life and death and anxiety and wealth and work.

And they could not get over the fact that he continues to live
and continues to abide with his continuing church.

So, with women and men gathered in their work clothes,

listening hungrily,
Peter would reminisce about an occasion
when the Lord had said this or that about life
and God's intentions for it.

And on another day
John would be talking with four or five people
about the cheap, flashy woman
who had been coming to their gatherings lately.
No one wanted to sit near her or to greet her.
So John mentioned that long, hot, wearying walk
they had taken one day
just so Jesus could talk with just such a woman
at some village well in Samaria.
John told them that Jesus offered her the living water.
And those four or five people were changed that day,
and that woman was welcomed that day.

And Andrew, somewhere else, would be recounting
– in his halting, fumbling way –
words that Jesus had said to him about a person's daily job –
words sadly never written down.

And suddenly I envy them.
It must have been wonderful to hear the apostle's teach.
It's too bad we don't have more of their words.
So much of what the apostles taught
must have disappeared with them.
But so much has stayed with us, as well! [Bible held]
There's more than enough to fill our lives with study.
Not simply that we might be better informed, mind you.
But that we might live our lives with greater strength,
and courage, and discipline, and joy,
with more faith and hope and love.

When we are attentive to the apostle's teaching,
the risen Lord still mysteriously abides with us,
still calls us, still empowers us.
It is a mark of the continuing church.

Second, they met to share a common life.

There used to be a game, I am told,
that was popular in certain encounter groups of long ago.
The game called for everyone to lock arms in a tight circle,
save one person who was "it."
He or she had to try to break through the circle,
to get inside.
The outsider would batter himself against the ring –
his desperation to get inside met by the stubbornness of the ring.
The whole point was to get inside,
to escape that terrible sense of being left out, shut out, alone.
Finally, "it" would make it,
sometimes bruised,
but in, finally in.
You may form your own opinion of the game.
Personally, I think it's a little stupid.
But it points toward the continuing human battle
against the anguish of loneliness.
The continuing church met that human need.
They met constantly to share a common life.

Again we must caution ourselves.
These are ordinary men and women.
Peter, James, and John did not automatically or magically
lose the traits that had always grated on each others nerves.
The power of the resurrection was not and is not magic.
But in the grip of the mind of Christ,
and by the power of that new life,
they learned to care for each other.
Some found forgiveness and acceptance hard tasks.
Some found receiving forgiveness and acceptance harder still.
But each learned to trust the other for a welcoming.
That was a part of the common life.
And they prayed for each other.
They even shared their pitiful little wages.
People in this community tended to one another's needs
as naturally and energetically as they tended to their own.
No one came to this group and went away ignored.

Of course, there were problems and failures.
Soon some were posing as what they were not.

There was grumbling about the mismanagement of funds.
Here and there so-and-so stomped out never to return.
They had their cliques and divisions,
the old-timers and the new-comers,
the rich and the poor,
the Jews and the Gentiles,
the learned and the unlearned,
progressives and conservatives.

The forces that threaten fellowship
have always been at work in the continuing church.

But so has the power of the common life!

And a common life continues to mark any continuing church.

Consider the common life at First Presbyterian.

We do share a common life.

The communion of prayer that surrounded me when I was sick
and that surrounds all the sick, all the mourning, all in need,
is a part of that common life.

The delight we take in the children of this congregation
and the pride we took last Sunday in the youth service
is another part of that common life.

The offering and the sharing of resources with the poor –
another part.

I suppose I could ask some of you here this morning
to stand and give your testimony to the common life
at First Presbyterian.

And then we could make a list and say,
“See, these are ways in which we share a common life.”
It could be an instructive list.

But perhaps some of you would draw attention to our failure
to share a common life.

I suppose we could catalogue those too and say,
“See, these are ways in which we fail to share a common life.”
That, too, might be an instructive list.

But such list-making is not the point this morning.

This is the point:

There is some of the power of a common life among us now –
and to that extent, and not one millimeter more,
we continue to be the church.

Third, they met to break bread.

Return to that small group of ordinary women and men
where the church was first continuing.

Go back to the sights and sounds and smells of Jerusalem.

You live there.

You're a weaver; your shop is a dark little hole in a back alley.

It is dusk and your day has been a hard one.

Up before dawn to get that order done for your best customer.

You couldn't live without him –

but he's always in such a hurry.

And then your loom broke!

And that customer reneged on his order.

Probably your shifty little competitor up the alley
whispered him a cheaper price.

Probably –

but that was no reason to lose your temper with him.

So, you aren't too pleased with your day or your behavior

as you make your way through the streets of Jerusalem

to a house in another dark alley.

You can hardly wait to arrive.

Other days as spoiled as this one have been somehow baptized at the end

by the Lord who waits among the people there.

There will be talk about the new life –

and the broken loom and the quarrel will slip away into perspective.

Perhaps John will tell of one of his own fits of temper again,

and what Jesus said to him.

And there will be a meal, of course.

You have your own chunk of bread and a little clay jug of wine to share.

Peter will break a loaf of bread,

and it will seem his heart will break with it –

for pain or for joy,

you're never quite sure.

He will pass the bread,

and they'll all touch it and take it as though – well, as though it were

something else, something more than bread.

And there is wine, of course,

the cheap, sour stuff peasants drink,

but again you know something more than wine is being shared.

And oddly enough,
 you have come to depend on this bread and wine
 for things that you simply can't expect from bread and wine,
 coarse bread, cheap wine,
 the same stuff you cram into our mouth every day
 in the back of the shop during the noonday pause.

But here burdens are removed.
Here wounds are healed.
Here community is renewed.
Here hope is born.
Here it's as though Jesus himself has walked into the room.

But now let a few years slip by.
You're walking toward that house again.
 The same streets, the same smells,
 but things have changed.
Something of what you knew before has slipped into routine.
Some of the old warmth is gone,
 and the church tonight is just another drain on your time.
But then you know it's time
 for the breaking of bread to say
 what only the breaking of bread can say.
Its time to be told again just where you are in God's judgment and love.
So life tangle into knots,
 so even with the fellowship there are tensions.
At the heart of your life and at the heart of the fellowship
 stands the breaking of bread –
 and one again Christ says,
 “Take, eat, remember, and believe.”

That's a mark of the continuing church.
 That's a resource to the power of a risen life.
If it were anything less,
 it would have disappeared long ago, vanished into legend.
 Can you imagine it?
 King Jesus and the apostles of the long table?
No. The power and life of breaking bread together is still at work.
 And the Lord still stands among his people there.

Finally, they met constantly to pray.

Prayer is a mark of the continuing church.

I confess I feel a little uneasy here.

The word is woven into the entire New Testament.

Prayer seems as instinctive to these people

as consulting the clock is to some students.

Honestly, prayer is not like that for me.

A pious duty, that I know.

But the rest is something of a mystery.

Perhaps we can get some light again by going back to that fellowship
in that shabby little house in Jerusalem.

Look at the group again.

Ordinary people – still no haloes.

Their eyes today seem to hold more questions than answers.

Some of them look simply tired. And why not?

That stout little man in the corner, for example,

spent the whole day yesterday carrying sacks of grain
from his little market up the hill

to where the Roman soldiers have their garrison.

Now he just sits there half-stupid with weariness.

The part of his mind that cannot sleep

thinks of the sights and sounds of yesterday,
the fortress, the well-drilled soldiers,
the insults he endured along the way.

And he wonders whether

the apostle's teaching and the fellowship and the breaking bread
really make any difference.

The world doesn't seem to have changed very much.

The woman to the left, you see her scowling at the floor.

She spent her day collecting for the unemployed and needy.

And she didn't receive showers of praise, but complaints.

One sharp-tongued man accused her of playing favorites.

And another said that women should not even have such a role.

She's wondering whether

the apostle's teaching and fellowship and breaking bread
make any difference.

They don't even seem to change these people very much.

Then the room goes suddenly quiet as an old man enters.

He speaks. "James is dead! and Simon is now in Herod's prison."
There is grief, worry, a panicky feeling that God has lost ground.
"James is dead. Simon's in prison. What will happen to us?"
Then the old man begins to pray
one of the old prayers of the temple.
"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations."
And his voice gains strength as he prays
and the community gains courage as he prays.

Do you catch the spirit of this praying?
For people up against life and the pressures of tragedy and obligation,
prayer is not a pious duty.
It is an utter necessity.
And if that is not my experience,
the fault is not with prayer.
Perhaps I don't care enough.
Perhaps I don't take life seriously enough – or joyfully enough.
Perhaps I don't love enough.
Of course prayer takes some effort from time to time.
Why do we suppose prayer and trust and praise
gushed spontaneously and easily from these people?
Like us, they had their times of simply trying to pray.

What we need to see is that in prayer
they were not trying to get things out of God,
they were trying to get themselves
alongside the mind of God in Christ.
Whether praise or petition, thanksgiving or confession,
in prayer they stood – **and in prayer we stand** –
looking at the place our resources live.
And there at that place is God,
the very God who took Jesus from the dead.
That's why prayer is a mark of the continuing church.
That's why it's a resource to the power of a risen life.

They met constantly to hear the disciples teach,
to share the common life,
to break bread,
and to pray.
Those are marks of the continuing church.

If we leave out any one of them,
to that extent, whatever else we might be,
we will no longer continue to be the church.
People of God at First Presbyterian,
Be the church.
Continue to be the church.
For Christ's sake, continue to be the church. Amen.