

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino  
Acts 2:42-47  
May 30, 2021

### Life Together

During our new members class, we talked about what drew each person to Cascades online and what they found once they started attending in person. Someone said, “you are very authentic. What you see on line is who you are in person. The same welcoming people you are online is who you were when we first showed up. Honestly that is probably one of the best complements we could have received as a body of Christ.

I thought...and that is without most of our members present. Just wait! Then you’ll really experience the warmth that makes our community of faith so unique.

As much as I’d like to take credit for pastoring such a community. It is the real presence of Jesus among us that makes us so extraordinary. When you take an ordinary group of people, throw Jesus into the mix, extraordinary things begin to happen.

The scripture that we are going to hear from today demonstrates what happened to an ordinary group of Jewish followers of Jesus, intermixed with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and became extraordinary. Luke was captivated by this community. So sandwiched between the Peter’s bold evangelical address to the crowd and his first miraculous healing, is this little summary of what took place amidst explosive growth.

Please listen as I read from Acts 2:42-47 about this early gathering of Jesus followers which much later came to known as The Way or The Church. It’s titled “The Fellowship of the Believers.”

**42** They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. **43** Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. **44** All the believers were together and had everything in common. **45** They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. **46** Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, **47** praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

In Psalm 133 which we read for our call to worship today, David talks about the special fellowship that exists when brothers and sisters live together in unity. There is a special anointing that occurs. God's blessing. He describes it much like when one of God's servants is literally anointed with oil. Like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of this robe. It's not just a blessing, but the presence of the Lord among us when this occurs. It's clearly special.

Luke describes a similar sort of anointing that took place among the first followers of Jesus. But this blessing was by the Holy Spirit, which empowered them to do some pretty extraordinary things.

Luke recounted that they devoted themselves to four spiritual practices that made them such a unique community. The Apostles' teachings. Fellowship. Breaking of Bread. And to the Prayers. So this morning I'd like to break each of these down and see how it is these same four practices that makes Cascades the unique community of faith that we are.

First let's look at the Apostles' teachings.

These were the ancient teachings of Jesus Christ. Now remember in our story, the only scriptures that were written down were the Old Testament scriptures known as the Torah. So the teachings of Jesus that the apostles or first followers of Jesus devoted themselves had to have been shared orally. Word for word, and by memory.

Now to us that might seem like an impossible task.

But in ancient biblical days, oral stories were the key channels that teachings, sayings, or ways were passed down from generation to generation. When a Jewish child passed over into adulthood they had to have had the entire Torah memorized and be able to recite part of that back to their faith community in the synagogue. We know this as a bar or bat mitzvah.

Luke says they devoted themselves to these teachings. Devoted in Greek is *proskartaretes*. It means to persist, persevere in, remain steadfast in. In other words, they were not going to let them go.

Apostle. An ambassador of the Gospel. A delegate. An official commissioner of Jesus Christ. Earlier in Acts when Luke describes how Matthias was chosen to replace Judas as an apostle of Christ, they looked for someone who "had been with them the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among them, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up at the ascension." They would be a witness of Jesus' resurrection.

So an apostle would have been an eye witness account of everything that Jesus said and did while he was with them. They had heard with their own ears and could recount exactly word for word what was said.

Now in the oral story telling tradition of antiquity, retelling the story over and over again with the community was an important part of keeping the story teller honest. If they didn't get the words or details just right, they would be publicly corrected and their position as a trusted story teller could be jeopardized. This was serious business.

Have you ever been a family reunion where you hear the same stories told over and over again. It's a way of preserving the collective memory of the community. That's what the apostles devoted themselves to. That and also explaining just how the Old Testament scriptures pointed to Jesus' coming. Another way of authenticating his ministry.

The next thing they devoted themselves to was the fellowship. Koinonia in Greek has 19 occurrences in the New Testament. A partnership. A participation in something common. This was Paul's favorite word to describe the unity that existed among the believers with each other and with the Lord. Much like that anointing we heard from in Psalm 133. Living in unity. No one was better than anyone else. Everyone looked after one another. Shared everything in common. Everyone's needs were met. The Lord's blessing was there, even life forevermore.

This fellowship was especially a unique witness among the Gentiles because of the diversity that was present. A fellowship where slaves would be friends with freed people. Men could be friends with women. Old and young. Rich with poor. Jews and non Jews. Gone were the walls that often divided them into different people groups. They were one.

Then there was the breaking of bread. This was known as the agape feast or love feast. It was a meal that they shared with one another that often culminated with the Lord's Supper together. Just as Jesus had commanded them. Eventually this sacramental practice broke off from the meal aspect and found its way into the liturgy of the Christian worship service. Which we know as communion.

The agape feast began with the Jewish custom of saying grace. "Blessed be thou, O Lord our God, that thou does make bread to be on earth" followed by the breaking of the bread. These feasts took place in people's homes and seems to be complementary with the worship practice of attending temple together. Again, breaking from Greco Roman tradition, these meals were not to be segregated by position, status, race, or wealth. People ate the same food, at the same time, without particular attention to any place of honor.

They were very counter cultural meals.

And finally they devoted themselves to The Prayers. Now it's easy to take this out of context to think that they were simply a praying community. But these are certain prayers. THE Prayers. Implies a sense of prayers offered in the context of corporate worship...which at this point...since there were no separate places of Christian worship...would have meant the regular meetings of the Jewish

synagogue. In other words they were devoted to continuing their common worship practice as Jews which they had known. Eventually as these renegade Jesus followers were cast out of the synagogue, this would represent domestic family worship and private prayers at home.

Four simple spiritual practices. Remember what Jesus taught. Live life together with people who are different from yourselves. Share meals in each other's homes and regularly celebrate communion. And continue to come for corporate worship. These four practices changed the world.

Look what happened.

“And the Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved.”

So how do we experience these things at Cascades?

Each week we gather for worship and we heard the words of Jesus. We focus on his teachings. And not only that we trust that the Holy Spirit who lives in us will remind us of everything he said while Jesus was with us.

We take time for Bible study together. This year I loved that we found a way through ZOOM to continue meeting virtually when we were not able to be together in person. And what we found was that our Thursday Evening Bible studies were hugely popular. Last fall, winter, and spring we had more than 30% of our church adults engaged in the same studies on Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Christmas Carols, and then Race and the Gospel.

We will continue to have these ZOOM Bible Studies this Fall. Right now I am considering a study on Paul's Letter to the Corinthians especially since part of my sabbatical travel will be to the city of Corinth to whom Paul wrote. And then also next year, maybe next winter, we will look forward to Dian Poujade gathering the women of Cascades for another weekday in person bible study.

In the Fall we will resume our Sunday school for all ages just before worship. We'll have classes for early elementary, elementary, junior high and high school, and adult education. All a chance to live out this call to be disciples of Jesus. Remembering his words. Devoting ourselves to the Apostle's teachings.

This summer our youngest will be engaged with Vacation Bible School where they will be infused with God's Words and promises. Then there Sunday night's with the Orchards families for young adults and young families. Yet another place where people can be devoted to Jesus' teaching and figuring out how to put his words into practice in their lives.

We are devoted to fellowship. Sharing life with one another. We do that before and after church was welcome one another. Catch up on the week's events. Or learn more about each other stories.

During our new members class, one person described the fellowship moment as a pause between worship and rushing back into the craziness of our world... where we can know and be known by one another.

We fellowship out on the playground as our kids run around and have fun. As we serve beyond these walls in mission alongside one another. Or we serve here in the church together.

We fellowship with one another through ZOOM calls and phone calls to say hello. On retreat. Before and after meetings. At Youth Group or during worship team or choir practices.

We are devoted to the breaking of bread. I'm so looking forward to that first pancake breakfast we get back after summer. Our Mortgage burning celebration. Potlucks for the Fall Harvest Party, the Hanging of the Greens, Maundy Thursday, and the All Church Summer Picnics.

We break bread as we eat in each others homes for dinners for eight. Youth Group BBQs. The Men's Steak Dinner and Texas Hold'em Poker Tournaments. We break bread as we go out to lunch together or elegantly dine at the Women's Tea.

We also break bread when we celebrate the Lord's supper whether it is here corporately or with a deacon bringing it to our home.

And finally we are devoted the prayers. Prayers offered in the context of our communal worship life together. Prayers of the people. Prayers throughout worship. And Prayers requested through our prayer chain. We know that without Jesus' power, we can do nothing, but with him, we can move mountains.

But what truly was it that made the early believers community grow?

Jesus. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name. I am there in their midst."<sup>1</sup> Jesus is actually among us when we do these four practices. The real presence of Jesus is what attracts the crowds. Not us.

Cascades if we continue to do these things over the summer while I am away and over the course of our life, then we will shine like a light on a lamp post for all the world to see. We will be the salt of the earth. People will be drawn to us because they will encounter Jesus among us. And let's just see how he will add to our number daily those who are being saved.

We have gifts that our community is hungering for. Let's do life together and invite others into this great fellowship that we share.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:20

## **A Sabbatical Blessing**

**Session Elder:** We believe God works in the lives of those who love him, using all things for God's glory. We trust that in this sabbatical time, God will be at work in the lives of Chris, Karen, Maddy, Rhyan, Jordan, and Sofie, and the lives of the people of this church, using all things for our good and God's glory. We entrust you and your family to God's care, for God's good works, and rich blessings.

**Pastor:** During this sabbatical time, I eagerly look forward to seeing how God will be at work in the life of this congregation, in my own life, and the life of my family. And so, I entrust you, the congregation of Cascades Presbyterian Church, to God's care, for God's good works, and rich blessings.

**Congregation: With joy, we will remember you in our hearts for these three months, praying that God will refresh you in body, renew you in mind, and refill your hearts with the depths of God's love for you.**

**Pastor:** With joy, I will remember you in my heart for these three months, praying God will bless you with creativity and fill your hearts with His love for you. And knowing the depth of that love, may you continue to bring the truth of God's work, and a demonstration of Jesus' love to people in our community in Vancouver.

## **Time of prayer for Pastor Chris and his family**

**Pastor Geordie or Session Elder:** Whether together or during a time apart, this church body faithfully serves our God with compassion, energy, creatively and love. Let us now, in a unified voice, offer a prayer of commitment and faith to Jesus Christ, and to the work of God in our lives and in our world.

**Congregation: Almighty God, Draw our hearts to you. Guide our minds and fill our imaginations. Control our wills, so that we may be wholly yours. Use us as you will, always to your glory, and the welfare of your people, Through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.**