

Acts 2:42-47  
April 13, 2008

South Plains  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter

### As Close As We Can Get

Two questions have been at the forefront of medical ethics and controversy in the church. When does life begin? And, when does life end? Doctors and hospitals have developed important scientific criteria for answering these questions from a legal point of view, and these criteria are so important for everyone's peace of mind. Churches do not have the luxury of relying on empirical data to answer these questions so precisely. We need to ask another set of questions about the quality of life. Understanding what makes life worth living may not tell us exactly when life begins or ends, but that broader understanding will help us to know how to value life. This may be as close as we can get to Jesus' ideal of abundant life.

"Quality of life" is a modern phrase. On the lips of Jesus, it means abundant life. We have many sermons, exhortations and rules for the abundant life in scripture, some from Jesus himself and others from church leaders such as the Apostle Paul. What I like about this little passage in Acts 2 is that verses 42 – 47 give us a brief description of abundant life before the early Christians had much time to theorize and theologize about what it meant. This is what life, abundant life, was like in the weeks immediately after the followers of Jesus realized he was alive, raised from the dead, and the source of life

for them. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers."

Teaching, fellowship, bread and prayers. I'm sure that's not an exhaustive list of everything that went on in the early church, but it's a start in real living, and a pretty good guide for us in the church today. Teaching, fellowship, bread and prayers are all relational activities made holy by their center in Jesus Christ by the centrifugal force they generate pushing the church into the world to witness to God's grace in Christ.

Look at how they push the young church into the world, into an effective witness to the center of life in Christ. The teaching of the apostles points to the firsthand story of Jesus. In the first chapter of Acts, the twelve closest followers of Jesus counted noses and realized they were only eleven. Judas had betrayed Jesus and killed himself. They wanted a replacement in order to keep that sacred number of twelve. The standard they set in Acts 1:21 and 22 was someone who had been with them from the beginning, from the baptism of John through the ascension. That firsthand experience of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was essential for bearing witness to the power of the resurrection.

Because the starting place was Jesus that meant they would carry out his ministry to the world. The rest of the book of Acts is full of "signs and wonders" that drew

people to faith in the same way the earthly ministry of Jesus had drawn people to him. I do not expect to see today exactly the same kinds of signs and wonders described in the New Testament. We can expect to see miracles of love and kindness, miracles of lives redeemed, marriages that come back to life, and people healed who were beyond the help of modern medicine.

We are not surprised to see that fellowship was an important part of early church life just as it is for us today. We need to be careful that we are not guilty of “dumbing down” fellowship today. Some would say that the real miracle of Pentecost was not hearing and understanding so many languages. It was that so many people who did not even speak the same language could become one church.

We are so foolish to think that “our” church (which is really Christ’s church) could not possibly worship with people from a different racial or ethnic or national background: Maybe once in a while in a big conference at General Assembly, at Montreat or at Massanetta, or on a special occasion, but not every Sunday. These Christians not only learned and worshiped together, they shared their belongings.

I’ve heard serious students of scripture read this passage and say, “Well, that was a dead end for the church because they couldn’t keep up that kind of sharing. Therefore it doesn’t apply to us.” Time and time again, however, the gospel of Christ has compelled

Christians to give up their most precious possessions for the sake of other believers in need. Last week, a Navy Seal was honored for heroism in the Iraq war. When a grenade was thrown into the room where he and his troops were fighting, he covered the grenade with his own body, giving his life to save the lives of his buddies; his was the ultimate sacrifice of patriotism. I would suggest to you that Acts 2:45, holding all things in common, is the gold standard for Christian sharing, just as sacrificing one’s life is the gold standard for patriotism. All of us are not called to that kind of sharing, but it remains the ideal example of what Jesus taught, the ideal that draws others to his gospel.

“Breaking bread” is ambiguous because in the New Testament it can mean either eating a meal together, or celebrating the sacrament of communion together. I think the ambiguity is intentional. Jesus’ typical outreach was to eat with sinners and tax collectors. It was natural that his followers did the same. Jesus also instituted the Lord’s Supper, the most distinctive act of worship for Christians, the sign of Christ’s presence with his church, and the seal of our salvation.

We practice open communion at South Plains. That means that we open communion with a simple invitation: “This is the Lord’s Table. Our Savior invites all who trust in him to come the feast which he has prepared.” I have no quarrel with churches who expect communicants to have made confession or to have been

baptized or to demonstrate the sincerity of their desire to commune with Christ. I do believe we need to take people at their word. When they say they have prepared for this sacrament and when they demonstrate their desire for communion with Christ by showing up at Christ's table, they have said Yes to the invitation. It's only in the most exception circumstances that we would close the door, or in the ancient words of our tradition "fence the table" and deny certain persons this sacrament. That acceptance mirrors the acceptance we have received in Christ Jesus.

Finally, Acts 2:42 says they devoted themselves to "the prayers." I was curious about this last item because some translations omit the article and read simply "they devoted themselves to...prayers." But, "the prayers" sounds a little more formal. Indeed, we know that early Christian worship followed the model of worship in the Jewish synagogues. Furthermore, Jesus' relation with his heavenly Father was characterized by prayer. That was so much the case that his followers asked him to teach them to pray.

Prayer in the Bible is not left up the individual to work out any way he can. Prayer is taught and modeled. The prayers of Israel are at the center of scripture in the book of Psalms. They need to be at the center of our life together.

One of the good things we do at South Plains is to pray for each other. I hope you take home the bulletin

insert and use it to recall in prayer the needs of our congregation and community. Nothing strengthens our connection with God in Christ and with each other more than prayer.

One of the things we could probably do better at South Plains would be to broaden and deepen our prayer life. Prayer is not like the socks I buy, one size stretches to fit most feet. Over the centuries, the Christian church has developed many different ways of praying. Rosaries, breath prayers, Jesus prayers, centering prayer, prayers of intercession, adoration, supplication. The variety is endless because there are so many kinds of Christian experience that appropriate different kinds of prayer.

Prayer crosses over most of the barriers we erect between our different religious experiences. That's not always the case. Some people will refuse to participate in a prayer that does not meet their standards. But, most of us can respect even the prayers we do not understand, because the act of praying makes a powerful witness to the authenticity of another person's life. When we pray, we are reaching out to God and that means we are reaching out toward those around us as well.

These four acts, teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer, create a community of faith, a community of abundant life, a community where acceptance is not a matter of how much stuff we have or how much education we display. Acceptance is simply a matter of God's grace. That is life, life more abundant

than we can imagine, and as close as we can get to Christ and to each other.