

“Then Their Eyes Were Opened”

Acts 2:42-47; Luke 24:28-35 (1 Peter 2:20, 24-25)

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Over the course of the last 6 weeks or so, this modern-day plague known as “COVID-19” has forced human beings all over the world to do something we don’t necessarily like to do: THINK. THINK about who we are. THINK about what is truly important in our lives. THINK about what gives our lives meaning and purpose. THINK about life... and death. Many have likely given some thought to how this time of isolation affects their FAITH... and, vice versa. And, for those whose faith revolved around a certain 1st Century Jewish Carpenter named Jesus, they have also probably pondered the importance of that **communal** expression of our faith that Christ calls us to be a part of... that community of faith known as “CHURCH.”

Today’s passage from the 2nd chapter of Acts... which is basically a history of the early **church**... is generally recognized as a ‘template,’ the ‘definition’ of what it meant to be a member of this fledgling religious group, a ‘splinter’ from Judaism, that would come to be known as “Christianity.” For those of you watching today who are a member of a ‘community of faith’... no matter the ‘flavor’... you hopefully could relate to how the author of Acts describes those ‘character traits’ of the **church**... which both the 1st Century church... AND the TWENTY-first church... are to exhibit.

Some of those attributes we are NOT able to practice very well right now. **“All who believed were together.”** (Acts 2:44) Nooo... we WISH! **“They spent much time together in the temple.”** (Acts 2:46) i.e., the **sanctuary**. Nooo... I would SURE like to be looking out at your faces right now rather than this little one eyed creature with a red light. V. 47 says that these early ‘parishoners’ were **“praising God and having the goodwill of all the people”**... or “enjoying their favor.” Perhaps the most relevant translation is from the CEV: **“Everyone liked them.”** While most all of you watching this morning are pretty ‘likeable’... there are *some* exceptions 😊 (JUST KIDDING... even tho’ ‘God don’t like ugly,’ He still **LOVES** each one of you, warts and all)... the person(s) you’ve been ‘sequestered’ with this past month may not always be thinking you to be quite so ‘likeable.’ They see those ‘warts’ up-close-and-personal. Heck, there are days that WE

don't even like who we see in the mirror! It sure would be nice to be able to SEE some of those other people in your life who would attest to your 'like-ability,' wouldn't it?

But I want to remind us all of the ways in which we CAN continue to BE the church... despite *some* of the ways in which we temporarily cannot practice that identity. Four core principles of what it means to truly be the church are in that first verse of the passage we read from Acts. It begins by saying that ***"They devoted themselves to the apostles' TEACHING..."*** (Acts 2:42) Is this referring to THE 'Apostles'... like 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John' (who 'bless the bed that I sleep on?' 😊) Sure. But let us also consider the more 'generic' definition of an 'apostle': *"a person who initiates a great moral reform or advocates an important belief; an ardent supporter."* There are numerous 'apostles,' 'advocates of moral reform' and 'belief' that you can benefit from their teaching at the 'click of a mouse.' Like the 'click' that brought you HERE this morning!

Thursday afternoon I was about to work on this message when I get a Voicemail message... and then an IM... from a good friend whom I hadn't spoken to in years. He was telling me how much he had appreciated our messages on FB/YouTube. It was yet another reminder of how these all-too-often inane, trivial social media platforms can ALSO be a tool of GOD to use to reach others with the Good News of the Gospel! Kind of like how Martin Luther used some common 'bar tunes' to put his 'traditional' hymn lyrics to music. When asked about this unconventional use of 'contemporary music,' he supposedly replied *"Why should the devil get to keep all the good music for himself?"* The great Reformer's pithy statement was likely based on the wisdom of a verse from Genesis: ***"What man intended for evil, God can use for good... so that many people should be kept alive."*** (Gen. 50:20) Given how much a drain of time FaceBook can be, it can also be a 'necessary evil' for us to use to proclaim God's truths...

Of course, the 'teaching' that God most 'uses' in order that 'many people be kept alive' is THIS... **[hold up Bible]** That same friend I just mentioned said that he had been using his unexpected 'gift' of TIME in order to read through the 'four books' of the Holy Scriptures... those same aforementioned Gospels. We all have been afforded the extended 'opportunity' to 'catch up on our reading.' How are we doing with the 'reading' that will bring you the most 'bang for your buck?' Sure, reading newspapers, mags, novels are all well and good... but how about that

choice which will pay the most everlasting **'return on your investment'** of that most valuable asset you have of **TIME**... God's holy and inspired Word?

After the devotion of time to 'teaching,' the next one mentioned is **FELLOWSHIP**. Yes, a lot more challenging these days. But until we can once again 'be together,' may we be mindful of how we can have 'virtual fellowship.' 'Happy Hour,' or Bible study, or other meetings via **Zoom**. Time for devotionals and prayer via **Facebook Live**, or these worship services via **YouTube**. I mention these two under 'fellowship' because I will say that when some of you take a minute to type in 'I'm here,' or 'where are you,' or 'Amen!,' I feel a certain 'bond,' a 'fellowship' in knowing that you are indeed 'there.' As will others! Heck, even an email or a text message can help to build some degree of fellowship. For those of you with iPhones, FaceTime is a great way to fellowship with your brothers and sisters... literally or figuratively. I have a 'standing date' on Monday morning at 9 am to visit via FT with one of our members in her care facility. And there is STILL that old-fashioned, 'archaic' method, the 'phone call.' Not just 'voice-to-voice'... but 'heart-to-heart.' Now, more than ever, we need to be intentional in combating **isolation** by various means to strengthen the 'fellowship of the saints'...

And perhaps the most powerful way we build up our 'fellowship,' as well as 'exercise' our identity as the **church** of Jesus Christ is through **PRAYER**. I have mentioned on other occasions that church group that communicates quite extensively via text message. They are known, informally, as "The Prayer Chain." Lifting up one another in prayer is perhaps the MOST powerful, and significant, manner in which we build up the body of Christ that is His Church. But you know what? You can't pray for one another unless you **SHARE** those burdens of your heart. With one another... with your pastor, and church leaders... with **GOD**.

Leading up to the first devotional time of the week, I will most always solicit prayers from the two churches... and I get VERY few takers. Now, unless life is just SO good for you all that you have NO burdens to lift up before God and one another... I want to encourage you to open up your hearts, and LIPS, to help us to 'share the load' with each other. And I want you ALL to know that I am as close as THIS 'little black box' [**CELL PHONE**]... a 'flight recorder,' if you will, for you 'angels' out there...

Which brings me to final, most defining 'mark' of the church: the **BREAKING OF BREAD**. Now, I know that when we think of this term 'the breaking of bread,' that can be a kind of 'churchy' way to talk about sharing a meal... simply eating together. A very sensitive subject these days, what with all of the restrictions of gathering together in public places, particularly in restaurants, and in churches. Not being able to 'break bread together' as family and friends, both inside the church and outside of it, has been one of the aspects of our lives 'A.C.'... 'After Corona'... that we have most missed.

But PERHAPS one of the blessings that will come out of this time of 'staying at home' will be to GROW in our appreciation of just how important that 'breaking of bread' is in our **CHRISTIAN FAITH**. As we consider the experience of those new converts to Christianity in the Luke passage, it must not be lost on us as to what marked that powerful revelatory moment in which their eyes were truly opened to the presence of the Savior Jesus right in front of them. ***"He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. THEN their eyes were opened, and they recognized him."*** (Luke 24:30-31) Why was this simple act SO significant to those early believers, that it had such a powerful, eye-opening effect on them?

I would say two reasons. The first one will come as NO surprise to those of you who have been Jesus followers for some time. Because there is no more meaningful representation and reminder of the broken, battered body of Jesus, whose blood poured from the cross of His crucifixion, than a piece of bread that is broken, and the fruit of the vine that is poured out. Face it, we are all, to one extent or another, 'visual learners.' And it is that 'vision' of bread and cup being 'broken' and 'poured' that represents in a way like no other the death of Jesus on a cross... AND, much more importantly, his subsequent resurrection to LIFE.

But there is a second reason that this notion of 'breaking bread' is so important. Because, this practice of sharing in food and drink is a part of our **EVERYDAY LIVES**. Aside from the spiritual meaning of the Holy Communion we have at this 'Table of Remembrance'... which only takes place once every few weeks or so... EVERY TIME we partake of food and drink, we should think of that as a 'holy time.' That by God's grace and mercy not only do we have life eternal, but also life in the here and now. If all of these trials we have been going through recently have taught us anything, it is to take NOTHIING for granted. **Relationships...** with family and friends. And

with our God. **Resources** with which to buy food and pay our bills. With so many people affected by shortages in our stores, has not those ancient words of Christ in His model prayer taken on new meaning: *“Give us this day our daily BREAD...”*? (not to mention toilet paper and hand sanitizer. 😊)

As important as it is to do what we can to maintain the ‘fellowship’ we have in the **community** of faith known as ‘church,’ in this time of ‘separation’ from one another, remember those words in Acts: *“**Day by day... they broke bread at home, and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.**”* (Acts 2:46) As we all look forward to those days when we can once again *“**spend much time together in the ‘temple,’**”* let us be thankful for the blessings we yet have while apart. May >> you... TODAY... make *“**every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as you praise God.**”* (Acts 2:46-47, The Message)

HOW? How can every meal be a ‘joyful celebration’ in which you ‘praise God?’ Because you know that you are not alone. That as you ‘break’ and ‘bless’ your ‘daily bread,’ like those earliest disciples, your eyes too will be opened to the presence of Christ in your midst. With every meal your break... with every breath you take... may Jesus be made known to you. Like those guys on the road to Emmaus, say to Jesus, *“**Stay with us (ME)... for the day is nearly over.**”* And what happened? *“**So he went in to stay with them”... And when Jesus comes in to stay... He will definitely give you a LOT to ‘THINK’ about...***

CHARGE: We have considered today what it means to be ‘the CHURCH.’

I hope that you all have perhaps grown in your appreciation of this meme:

“The church isn’t empty... the church has been DEPLOYED.” ‘Deployed’ for what purpose?

To STUDY... to FELLOWSHIP... to PRAY... to BREAK BREAD.

And what happened to that early church as they did so?

*“**Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**”* (Acts 2:47)

I CHARGE each one of us to give prayerful thought to those in your life...

from long-time friends to (im)perfect strangers... who need their ‘**eyes opened**’

to the saving presence of that great Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Christ.