

With Glad and Sincere Hearts

Acts 2:42-47

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What takes place in your heart when you hear this passage from Acts 2:42-47? The closing verses from the second chapter of Acts portray a church that is truly devoted. The closing verses from the second chapter of Acts portray a church that is putting into practice the two great commands: Love God and Love your neighbor. The closing verses from the second chapter of Acts seem to capture the words of Moses to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength. Although you do not find in the second chapter of Acts that the church tied the word of God as symbols on their hands or bound them on their foreheads, what they did do is every bit as impressive. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. **Everyone...**was filled with awe. **All...**the believers were together...and had **everything...**in common. They sold property and possessions to give to **anyone...**who had need. **Every day...**they met in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of **all...**the people. And the Lord added to their number daily...those who were being saved.

The four pillars of the early church were teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. Solid. Biblical. Faithful. Spiritual and Spirit-filled. The words that describe the church in the second chapter of Acts are expansive and inclusive. All the believers, everything, anyone, every day, and all the people. The daily addition of new believers seems to be God's stamp of approval on the faith of these devoted disciples.

What takes place in your heart when you hear this passage from Acts 2:42-47? Such an ideal community of faith might send us into a tailspin. How can we ever compete with that? How can we ever compare with that? How can we ever come close to that? A man in his sixties went back to visit the Baptist church where he grew up. He wandered around and was reflecting on his days at the church some fifty years before. Somehow or other he found the church records. He looked through them until he found a few from the years when he was growing up. One year in the record it said, "Not much happened this year. Only three kids were baptized." Well, if you are comparing what God is doing to the second chapter of Acts, I guess you could convince yourself not much happened...only three kids were baptized.

I don't think that is what we are supposed to do with the second chapter of Acts. I don't think it is meant to be a standard that is held up and if we don't match it, or exceed it, we say, "Not much happened." When we hear the numbers that are mentioned in the Book of Acts we might get discouraged. Acts 2 tells us that 3,000 people joined the church in one day. By chapter 4 the number has grown to 5,000. And yet if our only measurement is thousands of people, I wonder why Jesus told a parable about one tiny mustard seed, or about one lost sheep, one lost coin, or one lost child. Jesus emphasized small things. Jesus emphasized one single life being changed. I know Acts tells us of thousands, and there is nothing wrong with praying for thousands. But Jesus says one matters. Don't let the beautiful blessing of Acts chapter 2 make you miss out on the beautiful blessing of what God is doing in your life, or in your church. "Not much happened this year. Only three kids were baptized."

That story about the guy who went back to his church and read the records of one particular year that said, "Not much happened. Only three kids were baptized." The guy realized that year was the year he was baptized. And believe me, in his mind a lot happened. A lot happened. A lot happens when we are baptized. That guy's name is Tony Campolo. It just so happens Tony Campolo is a well-known and highly respected Christian leader. Tony Campolo has inspired countless men and women to live as Christians and serve as Christians with the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. Tony Campolo also happened to preach one of the all-time favorite sermons where his bald little Italian head is sweating and his puckered Italian mouth is literally spitting words out rapid-fire as he proclaims, "It's Friday...but Sunday's a coming!" Tony Campolo came to Sacramento, California when we were living there and led a crusade that lasted several nights, and every night 8,000 people showed up to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Don't let Acts 2 convince you that just because three kids were baptized not much happened. That is not what we gain from the beautiful blessing of what God was doing in the second chapter of Acts.

Some say Acts 2 is an effort on the behalf of Luke, the write of Acts, to see the world through rose colored glasses. A preacher named Will Willimon uses the phrase about rose colored glasses as he tells about the church that he grew up in. Like Tony Campolo, Will Willimon found a book about the church he grew up in. "The book is by a man whom I know. I remember him from when I was a child. He was one of the patriarchs at my home church. His name is A.M. Mosley. And he was the author of a single book, *The Buncombe Street Story*. His is a 300-page history about the church where I grew up, a church with the rather improbable, and not too inspiring name, Buncombe Street United Methodist Church. I started reading. And though my home church may not have the most inspiring of names, what an inspiring story A.M. Mosley had to tell! When Mr. Mosley told the story of Buncombe Street, here was a church on the move, climbing quickly out of its

humble origins to glory upon glory. Francis Asbury preached at the church and there was a grand explosion, a huge movement arose in Christendom, a great crusade began to spread across the whole city...all because of Buncombe Street United Methodist Church.”

Mosley transformed ordinary potluck suppers in the church basement into heavenly feasts at the messianic banquet table. When the church came together after paying off their mortgage in the 1950’s, Mosley described a worship service that made Pentecost look tame. And when he wrote about the pastor, oh when he wrote about Pastor Smith: “The Reverend Smith was beloved by everyone. His first sermon was a marvel and caused conversation all over town. That began a dynamic ministry that changed the face, not only of Buncombe Street, but of indeed the whole community. The entire church rallied around him and his lovely wife. When, after seven years of marvelous work, the Smiths left us, departed from us, there was not a dry eye in the congregation. Everyone loved the Smiths.”¹

Right about when I was going to google Mr. A.M. Mosley and see if he could come and write some nice history about me, about our church, Will Willimon breaks the spell of this master church historian and says, “Really?” Really. Willimon grew up in that church. Willimon says that is not how he remembers things. Reverend Smith had to remove two adults from the youth program for spreading fundamentalism. There was an explosion. Everyone loved the Smiths. Really? What about when Reverend Smith pushed the church to buy an expensive organ that got installed and then never worked right. Oh, yeah, sure, everyone loved the Smiths. Mr. Mosley, take off your rose-colored glasses. Admit it. Everyone did not love the Smiths and everyone did not get along at your Buncombe Street United Methodist Church.

If we dug deep into the history of Acts, and the gospel of Luke that came before it, would we uncover a conspiracy on the part of Luke to portray the church in Acts 2 through rose colored glasses? If we dug beneath the surface of that early church, do you think old Doctor Luke would lower his rose-colored glasses and say, “Well, ok, here is how it really was.” Something tells me he might lower his rose-colored glasses, but only so he could look us straight in the eye. Without blinking I think that old Doctor of the church would say, “Let me tell you exactly how it was.”

Here was a church that had been through hell. Their first church meeting was held in an upper room with a bunch of people bewildered about what was happening. Jesus had died, rose from the dead, and before they could grab hold of him, he left again, ascending right up to heaven. Huddled in that upper room they waited for some sign that God was with them. Just when they thought they were abandoned and left alone, the Day of Pentecost came and with it a rush of a mighty

¹ Will Willimon, “Church As It’s Meant to Be,” Pulpit Resource (April, May, June 2007), 29-32.

wind. The Holy Spirit came and filled the heart of each believer. Luke would look us right in the eye and say, “Let me tell you exactly how it was. We received the power of the Holy Spirit.”

In those early days it was glorious. Lives were changed. A crippled beggar was healed, and he bounced into the temple courts dancing and leaping and praising God. But in those early days there were also arrests. There were threats. There were beatings. And there were persecutions.

Something kept us going. Someone kept us going. Every time we gathered, there was a common theme. There was a common message. There was a common testimony. There was a common witness. That theme, that message, that testimony, and that witness, was that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead. The whole world had been changed on that Easter morning. The old rules no longer applied. There was a new Lord who ruled heaven and earth, and his name was Jesus. He was alive. Through the Holy Spirit, he was with us.

Why would we think Luke has rose-colored glasses? Because he says that people shared everything? What is rose-colored about that? If someone shares something, it is only because another person needs it. There were people with needs in the early community. There were struggles, there were crises, there were challenges, and there were even conflicts. Read all of Acts. There were most definitely conflicts. And yet what stands out is that because Jesus had risen from the dead, the people lived under a new Ruler. They bowed down to a different Lord. They served a new Master. In Acts 4, another scene which a cynic would say is rose colored, Luke tells us, “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.” Much grace was upon them all.

Will Willimon read the book by A.M. Mosley describing the church he grew up in and he said, “Really?” Willimon remembered things differently. But then Willimon writes, “Professional historians would say to A.M. Mosley, ‘Take off your rose-colored glasses and just give us the facts as they really were.’ But I would say to any historian critics, A.M. Mosley had something that none of you have. He loved the church. When A.M. Mosley looked at Buncombe Street, he saw not a struggling, sometimes squabbling band of people just trying to survive in the world. He saw the bride of Christ.”

You do not need rose colored glasses to see the church as the bride of Christ. You just need faith. It does not mean the church is perfect. No, the church is just the bride. We are just the bride. We are not perfect. But Christ is. And because we are the church of Jesus Christ, we belong to him, and he will not let go of us until he is finished perfecting his people and making this broken world whole.

Somebody handed me a copy of this little book not long after we moved to Westerly. This little book just has a simple title. Any guesses? History of Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. "From the beginning the church has broadened the horizons of the members of the community by bringing people from other lands to live in its midst. In 1952 the Lisle Fellowship sent students from four different countries to spend a week in the area; for two summers church families hosted high-school age students from England; and an International Youth Exchange student spent a year with another church family. More recently the church sponsored a Vietnamese family's move to Westerly. People from five continents have led worship at the church." This edition of our church history was written in 1986.

There are parts of this history that could well be considered rose colored. "On February 10, 1952, fifty people were received into membership by the church and holy communion was served for the first time. Twelve people were baptized during the service. Twenty-eight of the new church members had previously been members of no church. This, the formation of a new church to carry on Christ's church in a growing community, was a tremendously moving experience for those who participated." You can sense the deep joy in the one writing as they tell about the founding a junior high girls choir, or the youth taking the initiative to build the Chapel in the Pines. There was a coffee house in the 60's. There were also conflicts, times of deep struggle, transitions that stretched the church, and disappointments. Still, if you read our church history, I think you will agree it is not written with rose colored glasses. No, it is written by one who understood the church is the bride of Christ. Because of that the history is sacred and holy, and very, very special.

Once again, I want to ask you, "What takes place in your heart when you hear this passage from the second chapter of Acts?" Do you get discouraged when you compare our history with that history? Do you wonder where our thousands are? Or can you see the description of the church in Acts 2 as a witness and a testimony to what God was doing in that time and that place. Can that passage help you look with wonder, amazement, and gratitude at what God is doing in this time and this place?

- We might not witness a person who has not walked since birth leap in the air and start praising the Lord. But because of an impromptu moment for mission a while back we have a member named Bob who is sending prosthetic hands around the world and I guarantee the kids who get those hands are leaping high in the air, with joy in their smiles and hope in their hearts.

- We might not have a woman named Dorcas sewing robes and clothing for people, but we have a whole crew of people making quilts and dresses and sending them to little girls who wear those dresses proudly and people in need who wrap up in the warmth of those quilts and in the peace of Christ's love.
- We might not be the church that sent out Paul and Silas to do missionary work, but when our teams go to Texas and North Carolina and Camp Mechuwana, lives are changed. We did not need rose colored glasses when a family moved back into their home in North Carolina. The depth of gratitude they displayed was evident to the naked eye.
- We might not have someone writing chapter and verse that says we were devoted to the Apostles' teaching, but year after year we have folks who show up to study the bible, and when it is all said and done and we have our little celebration and reflection, that time is filled with endearing testimonies to how God's word has brought a bountiful blessing to each one of our lives.
- We might not be adding 3,000 members at a time, but when we do add new members, the stories they tell warm the heart. One of our members was born in another country. Now she not only has a home in our country, she has a home in this church. We are family. The day a mom and dad and their two children joined the church provided us with the unforgettable blessing of the dad being baptized with the two children. See what love the Father has given us that we should be called the children of God. Someone who was with this church way back when the church was started rejoined the church this past year. A rejoining like that is truly a heartwarming homecoming.
- We have told the story about the Deniger family and how they came to our Christmas Bazaar last year and little Hazel bought just one ticket for the raffle, put it in the jar for the new bicycle and told her folks she only needed that one ticket. Sure enough, Hazel was the lucky winner. Or maybe we were. Maybe we all were. This week I found out another part of the Deniger's story. Bridgette told me in October of 2017 she and Hazel were next door at the seafood restaurant playing outside and having lunch. This was before they ever worshiped with us, before even the winning raffle ticket. On that day we were having the memorial service for Maddie Potts. So many people came that day to remember Maddie's life that we hooked up speakers in Fellowship Hall and the upper parking lot and to the Chapel in the Pines. Many of you who live near church said you sat in your back yards that day and listened to the service. While Hazel played happily outdoors at the restaurant Bridgette said she listened through tears to the amazing memorial service for Maddie. The paper estimated more than a thousand people heard the word of God that day. I don't know exactly how many actually heard the service, but it touches a special place in my heart to know God put at least one person outside at the seafood restaurant just so she could hear the good news of God's love. And speaking of Hazel, correct me

if I'm wrong but it sure seems like the little glasses she wears are rose colored.

The woman who wrote our church history was named Eloise Saunders. Eloise has a sister named Florence Madison. Those two certainly left their mark on this church. Just a week ago one of our dear members, Annabelle Sherwood came to visit in my office. Annabelle has such a kind and caring heart. She wanted to share some stories that have impacted her life. One of the things she said had to do with Eloise Saunders. I don't really know the context of the story, the background, or really the details. But somewhere along the line, as Annabelle got to know Eloise, Eloise told her a story. Eloise was with a member of the Narragansett Tribe. Eloise was with a Native American. Again, I don't know the context or the details. But as these two were together, Eloise and a member of the Narragansett Tribe, Eloise got down on her knees and washed the feet of the man, the member of the Narragansett Tribe. The man asked why she did such a strange thing. Eloise said, "I think Jesus would want me to do that." At least I think that is what Annabelle said. Her voice broke on her. Her eyes filled with tears. She could barely speak. No, I don't know all that took place that day when one of our founding members knelt and washed the feet of a Native American member of the Narragansett Tribe. But it helps me to be sure Eloise Saunders did not write the history of our church through rose colored glasses. She wrote the history of our church as one who knows we are the bride of Christ. With that image in our mind, what better way to finish our worship than to sing, "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."