

Intro

I grew up in St. Paul AME Zion church located in Detroit MI. (side) I started going to church at around 16 after I had a very vivid dream. And I told my mother the very next morning, WE HAVE TO START GOING TO CHURCH AND WEVE BEEN GOING EVERY SINCE. What's really interesting is that most of the people around my age at the time that also grew up in the church met on a zoom call this week. I have not seen some of these people in almost 15 years so it was great catching up. So we did an ice breaker where you got points based on your past church involvement. Needless to say, I think I had one of the lowest scores. Because (don't judge me) I really didn't like doing a lot of churchy things. They asked me to be an usher, tried it didn't like it. They asked me to join the choir, tried it couldn't sing. They want me to join the youth council. Sitting around a table talking about church, sounds riveting. I sat in the same pew with my mother but didn't really find community until an older gentleman asked me to go play basketball with some of the younger guys. My first memories of feeling like I was a part of a faith community was in an old church gymnasium. I didn't feel like the one that couldn't sing or the one that didn't when people could enter the sanctuary. I was just one of the guys. And let's just say the rest his history.

So think about this for a moment, type it into the chat. How did you end up at St. Lukes? Who invited you? Where was the first place you found community?

No better place than to start than in acts 2. Our text today takes us to our first Christian community. Here in these 5 verses we get a glimpse of a very unique community. On the surface it seems quite normal, but it was anything but... Listen again to the words that describe their activity together. They fellowship with each, they share meals together. They pray with each other. They meet each other's needs. They are gathering in homes. Their sell their possessions. These are people that are intimately involved in each other's lives.

For this first Christian community, church wasn't a destination. It wasn't someplace they went on Sunday morning. **Church was a verb.** It was an action. It was less about where they were going as opposed to what they were doing. Being the church meant the sharing of lives. And this is what made being church distinctive. This is what set it apart from all the other communities. This is what made being church counter cultural and radical. The community itself becomes the witness. *The life that's being described in on Acts 2 is a life defined by intimacy and mutual sharing.* This is not a community that comes, worships and leaves like ships in the night! This is a radical community, because in their culture it was uncommon for people to share meals and engage in intimate fellowship with people from different social and ethnic classes. These were very public acts. So you don't invite someone to sit at your table that was from a different class.

Think about it. That's why people were so challenged when Jesus ate with people outside of his expected circles. It was one of the main criticisms of the life of Jesus. People had a hard time reconciling how this would be Messiah, religious leader could possibly eat with known tax collectors and sinners. He was eating at Matthew's

house as his dinner guests and scriptures says that many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with his disciples.

Which makes sense because his church now has his heart. In these 5 verses these are people from all walks of life, people who are rich, people that are poor, Jews and Gentiles praying, breaking bread, sharing meals, praying together, learning, growing and ultimately sharing their lives. It defied the expectations of the larger society. Being church was a radical community of inclusion centered on the practice of hospitality and invitation and the sharing of their faith. **This radical practice of invitation becomes a distinctive mark for the people who are doing church together. What made them different was their willingness and eagerness to include and invite those that were not already apart of their community.** It was searching for the person that was not connected. **It was actively seeking out the strangers in their midst. It was asking the 16 year old kid to an old an old gym to play basketball. It was a place for the stranger. Someone without a home.**

Strangers

Now this isn't referring to a physical home, but People who for whatever reason are disconnected from life giving relationships. You can be around people you've know for years and feel like a stranger. You can be around family and feel like a stranger.

Here's the challenge. We are intimidated by the act of witness and sharing our faith because we have forgotten what it was like to be stranger. The longer we've been in church, being a stranger becomes a distant memory. We forget what it was like to be new! That's why God would often remind them, Don't forget that you were once slaves in Egypt. Don't forget that you strangers in foreign land. In these 5 verses they are simply Dealing with people the way God and others have dealt with them. They received being welcomed so they are welcoming. They know what it's like to receive Grace, now they are just giving it back in return. They are simply reciprocating what was done to them.

I think Remember when you were the foreigner. Remember when you were new on the job. Remember when you were new the church. New to the Team? New to the class? New to the company? Let's be honest, we weren't always as churchd as we sometimes appear. We forget that at one time we had a failed marriage or a broken family and needed community. We forget there was a time when needed a second chance. There was a time when we had to live with the consequences of our decisions. Their was a time when we struggled. We were searching. We were scared. We were strung out. And then somebody invited us. **Because none of us got here on our own. We are the product of someone or somebodies that graciously gave an invitation to something. Even if it was to a gym!**

Power of the invitation

Here's the power of invitation. Most people think invitation is carrying your Bible to work and reading scriptures and names we can't pronounce. But the sharing of information is void unless we are willing to share our lives. Strangers don't need information without communal intimacy. They are not just learning. They are praying. Their sharing. They are having meals together. People see our faith long before they hear it. We naturally crave community and acceptable not onslaughts of information. The church has to give the stranger what they can't get from google. That's the power of the radical invitation for the person not already connected.

When we were getting married we got into so many arguments with our parents. You see her father side of the family is huge! I mean family all over the world. Uncles, Aunties, nephews, nieces, cousins. So for the wedding, we got into some healthy disagreements about the list of invites. My mom had her friends. My dad had his family. We had our friends. We had our church family. Her moms family. And then her Dads family with all of these people, some of them she's not met, haven't seen in a long or don't really or know that well. So he was insisted upon sending out all these invitations even to people that we knew were not going to come. But he was insistent. I didn't understand why, but I get it. **Wedding planning has spiritual implications.**

One writer puts it like this, "unless the invitation is given, it is a setting in which the stranger would not be free to enter. It is somehow a bound space, a set of relations which convention says does not have to be open to strangers." And Yet its the invitation is less about the need offer a prescribed set of rules question and more about a simple recognition of their worth and dignity. The invitation says I see you. I recognize you. The invitation says to the stranger without a home, the stranger search for a place to belong, the stranger searching to be included. It says you matter. The mere invitation is making Gods radical love visible. In the invitation Gods Grace becomes tangible. **The invitation becomes the opposing voice that speaks against shame, doubt, and exclusion.** For everyone one that made their way this radical community, it was Gods love becoming real.

Maybe it answers the question why the Lord was daily adding to their number.

"Bring your Self, not just your stuff"

Our first reaction to this is to marvel at Gods ability to expand this Christian community. Let me clear this up. It's not because they we're passing out tracks asking are you saved? If you died tonight do you know if you'd go to Hell? Have you been washed by the blood of Jesus. That sounds absolutely frightening. But the increase had to reveal tension.

There existed the tension of maintaining their communal identity and living with the effects of being invitational and sharing their faith. If it works, if we are successful, every person comes bring their own experiences, their own preferences, their one gifts,

their own trauma. Gentile would come with their stuff. Stranger would come with their baggage. You get the point. That's why later they would argue over whether or not these Gentiles had to get circumcised or not, because for every person added it radically changed the dynamic of their lives together. The Lord adding daily to their numbers means their communal life was constantly in flux. It was always changing. And the successful invitation meant their own communal transformation.

NPR did an episode a long time ago and they talked about the **edge effect**. It highlighted the natural tendency for people to find comfort in the familiar. It's one of the reasons why we naturally flock to people that share the same interests, laugh at the same joke, vote the same way, etc. But they realized that familiar ground wasn't the best place to cultivate creativity. In one study that tracked business students during a 10 month MBA program. They found that students who dated someone or held close relationships from another country became more creative during the term. They concluded that difference was transformative.

It's not just a conversation on NPR, but it's the same one being had in Acts. This is a new community unfolding before their eyes that was very different than what any of them had ever experienced. The invitation would radically change the dynamic of their community. It means we must be willing to forgo a static communal identity and allow the differences and the lives of others to transform even our own. It means allowing the 16 year old kid at the gym room to answer a call to ministry.but the community allowing itself to be transformed.

But some people will get caught in the THINGS that they were doing and miss the tangible implications. We get caught with the fact that they sold their things and gave away their possessions. This wasn't about a community defined by people that brought and sold their stuff, but people who were willing to bring "themselves".

Implied in the invitation was this unique call for authenticity. It is highly likely that people from all walks of life are being invited into these faith communities. Jews, Gentiles, rich, and poor. And they are bringing all of their things, selling their possessions, and yet it's a call to be something other than who you are. There is only a call to become more like Jesus Christ. There is not a call to become more Jewish. It becomes a place where people are not bringing their stuff but they are bringing themselves to their faith community.

That's a radical assertion. Because for many people, there aren't too many places where we can bring our "selves". We can bring our ideas. We can bring our gifts. We can bring our experiences. We can bring other people's expectations. But community and the sharing of lives is void and empty unless we are inviting people to bring their true authentic selves. **This becomes absolutely vital to this distinctive community, because it becomes the one place where people could bring their true selves unapologetically.** It's where access to fellowship, and the breaking of bread, and the sacred act of sharing their lives did not come with a mask upon entry. It did not require the loss of self. Because the community was dependent upon people bring their lives to share.

The witness was that the Jew, the gentile, the rich, the poor, the apostle, the tax collector, the sinner, could be a part of a community and bring their whole selves. That's why Jesus says to the church, you are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are a city set on a hill. Let your communal life together be a witness and a reminder. Show people what it looks like to share their lives.

Closing

It's only when we share our lives together that we "do church." Remember it's a verb, it's something we do not just a place we go. Because when we do this, this is when we embody the life and ministry, and witness of Jesus Christ in the world. Think about it, as Jesus shared that last meal with his disciples, he took a common meal and reminded them of his body that was to be broken and his blood that was to be shared. Jesus was laying his "life" down on the altar. Jesus didn't say, I'm laying down my gifts at the altar. Or I'm laying down my power. I'm laying down my collection of sermons. No he says I'm willing to offer my life to this. So as often as you do this. As often as you share your lives together, do it in remembrance of this day. This day when I was willing to share my life and live sacrificially for each one of you. And that was the witness of this community. That is the witness of our community. It becomes the radical move of inclusion through invitation. Jesus shares his life so that others may be invited to share and experience the power of this community. One writer said it somewhat like this. It is in our witness and invitation that becomes for the Christian community the sign of God's love for the world. While we might imagine sacrifice in terms of one moment of martyrdom, faithful inclusion, faithful invitation, the sharing of our faith, the sharing of our lives involves the laying down our lives in little pieces, in small acts of sacrificial love and service.

Communion then is not just the thing we eat or do on first Sundays.....But its how we live our lives.