

November 8, 2020

“Altar-ed Living: Altar-ed Church”

[Acts 2:42-47](#)

Scripture Reading

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.

When I do premarital counseling, I use a great resource called “Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts” (also known as SYMBIS). Session One is intended to help couples move from Idealization to Realization. The content, and each of the 5 exercises they work through aim to communicate a few primary messages: 1) Your spouse will never complete you. 2) You have unfinished business that only you can deal with. And 3) You may very quickly go from the HONEYMOON to “Honey, you didn’t used to be like this when we were dating?!”

What we can’t possibly know when we’re dating and engaged – but soon discover when we get married – is that none of us are who our spouses thought they married. A few months or a few years into marriage we find ourselves saying or thinking: “I had no idea you were so: self-centered, insecure, addicted to shopping/alcohol/pornography, sloppy, bossy, lazy, obsessive-compulsive, so attached to your mother, etc.” What makes this even more complicated is that, in our younger years, WE don’t even know who we are! Moving from idealization to realization can be heartbreaking. Sadly, many of us come to this moment, when we see people (including ourselves) as they are, and bail. This can happen with our jobs, friendships, families, spouses, kids . . . and even our churches. Unfortunately, this tendency to bail out keeps us from experiencing the deepest kinds of change that only happen over time, as we show up with our real selves and invest in who others really are.

So two words from God’s Word (specifically found in Acts 2:46): Togetherness and Sincerity. These two words are so important when it comes to our transformation. Other words that might resonate with us are Community and Honesty or Relationship and Transparency. We are changed (as individuals and as communities) when we hang in there together faithfully without pretense; without pretending to be someone we’re NOT.

From Luke’s description of the Early Church in Acts 2, we get a glimpse of what is possible when the Holy Spirit fills God’s people and they surrender to God and each other. This

description of the Bride of Christ in Acts 2 is the picture everyone keeps coming back to of what it means to be The Church. Several years ago, some church leaders in America came up with the expression of becoming an “Acts 2 Church.” And this is the passage they lifted up. The Church is called to be a biblically-based community filled with faithful teaching, safe and consistent connection in groups, generous givers, inspiring worship, and heart-felt prayers.

Many of us fell in love with this vision of the Church; or something like it. We had an idealized picture of what the Church was or could be. And we got more involved; we joined; we committed ourselves to its mission. And then, the honeymoon ended; and we realized we had “married” an imperfect and insincere group of people. Idealization to Realization!

I don’t want to come at this passage in this way because I’m cynical (although on any given day I can be pretty cynical). I’d like to think I’m a realist more than a cynic. I’d also like to think I’m biblical. And it turns out the Book of Acts (thank God) is very realistic, honest, and sincere – without being cynical. After painting this amazing picture of a START UP church that goes mega and multi-site, Luke refuses to hide how imperfect, pretentious and fickle the Church can be. I share this, not because I want to talk you out of TOGETHERNESS and SINCERITY, but to help each of us make a solid and faithful commitment to true community, which comes over time as we create atmospheres of honesty and sincerity.

Transformation DOES happen! But it doesn’t happen all at once. It happens more, as we’ve been saying, “From one degree of glory to another.” (2 Corinthians 3:18) If you read through the rest of the Book of Acts you see this kind of up-and-down, on-and-off-again growth in the two primary leaders of the Early Church: Peter and Paul (formerly Saul). Yes, they have some life-altering moments. But they are also very flawed and unfinished. And both of them are very honest about their ongoing need for transformation in the letters they wrote (we have more from Paul than Peter). They are very clear about how their transformation came in fits and starts; how unfinished and unaltered they were; how desperately they relied on the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. Much like the Old Testament, which is also very honest about humanity’s brokenness and blindness, the New Testament reminds us that transformation comes in the midst of our imperfect communities as we commit to the scriptures, prayer, fellowship, mission, and generous support of one another . . . with SINCERITY and TOGETHERNESS. **[By the way you can do all of these things in a sort of dishonest and individualistic way.]**

Sincerity and togetherness are hard to find these days. Pick your topic: politics, race relations, all things COVID, the Church. These are hard times to be together and sincere, for sure. So much is pulling us apart.

But even in good times, sincere togetherness can be a double-edged sword. We aren’t really tested through superficial and sporadic relationships. And if we’re not tested, stretched, and

made uncomfortable, it's hard to be transformed. But the more we're together and the more we let our real selves be known, the more likely people will bail on us. So what do we do? Pretend and keep it superficial or commit and bring our real selves? We need people to help us grow. We need community. We need to be together; authentically. But being together and transparent can be messy. What do we do? **When it comes to being a part of the Church, it is essential that we make the painful move from Idealization to Realization . . . and that we choose to keep hanging in together!**

A theologian and Bible scholar from Sri Lanka named Ajith Fernando reminds us that sincere togetherness is worth it. “The joy, enrichment, and security that come from a caring community outweigh by far the pain and inconvenience that come with getting close to people.” (Ajith Fernando in *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*)

Whether we agree with Fernando or not, we also must agree that being a part of an Acts 2 ‘caring community’ is no longer built into the fabric of our culture or our lives – including our church lives. Will Willimon made this observation over 30 years ago in his commentary on Acts. “Contemporary religious life is plagued by momentary enthusiasm, periodic outbursts, and superficiality.” He goes on to say that the word “enthusiastic is a virtual synonym for a short-term high that does not take root in long-term commitment.” (Will Willimon in *Acts*)

I don't know how else to say this, but SINCERE TOGETHERNESS is impossible if you and I don't stick around through some messy times – which includes the messes we make.

So, not only because I'm your pastor, but also because I'm a part of this family of faith, I want to make it clear that I am committed to being with you for the long haul – as honestly and sincerely as I can be. And I don't just want to “hang out and let it all out” (as they say); I want to be with you long-term and honestly while we center our lives around: Scripture, Worship, “Breaking Bread” (doing life), Caring Fellowship, Generous Living & Giving, and all that God's Word calls us to. And as we do this – honestly and together – we get to witness GOD'S TRANSFORMATIVE, ALTERING WORK in each other's lives. So let's stay put and be sincere with each other.

Now I know we all can't always stay put. I know jobs can take us different places. I believe going away to college is a great thing; and that students will go away end up settling somewhere else. Many will need to relocate to be closer to family and aging parents. Our health needs change, and that impacts where we live. People finally can't stand traffic (so they move here); or winter (so they move to Arizona). This isn't first century Palestine. For better or for worse, we're a more mobile society. And yet, I encourage you, as much as is possible, to commit to long-term, sincere togetherness.

This doesn't mean that every church is a good fit for everybody. There are different ways to teach the scriptures and pray prayers; different focuses for mission and ministry; different kinds of worship experiences and ways to 'break bread.' My plea is not for everyone to make FPC their forever church – although I'm not opposed to that. But I do think that every follower of Jesus needs to make a commitment to SINCERE TOGETHERNESS that centers around the scriptures, prayer, worship, fellowship, mission and outreach, and open-handed generosity in a local church. It's not the only place we get altar-ed, but it IS where and how our lives can regularly be Altar-ed; "from one degree of glory to another."

I love hearing about the Early Church. I know some of them bailed, but I'm so glad the men and women of the Early Church were willing to stick around and be sincere together. Talk about being Altar-ed: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he/she had need." (Acts 2:44-45) Who does that?

This is just one of the places where the rubber meets the road in Christian community; where we find out if we've really been changed. Are we willing to give of ourselves (our time, attention, abilities and strengths) AND our resources to meet the needs of others?

[We're going to look at the generosity of the Early Church in the next two sermons before we begin Advent together.]

The Early Church wasn't perfect, that's for sure. Don't idealize them. But so many of these folks were Altar-ed, day-in-and-day-out, in such a way that they turned the world upside down. They altered the world. May you and I be changed "from one degree of glory to another." May you and I find ways to be TOGETHER with SINCERE HEARTS. And may that togetherness and that sincerity be blessed by God as He keeps Altering our lives at the Altars in which we keep encountering Him.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. Think of 3-5 of your most wonderful memories of the Church? What was it that you loved so much? Can you name some of the emotions you felt in those moments?
2. Now do the same for some of the more painful, disillusioning moments you have had in the Church?
3. How has sincerity and togetherness been modeled and experienced by you and others in the context of the local church? In your opinion, how and why has it been lacking at times? How has it helped your own transformation (and the transformation of others) to occur more deeply?
4. How willing – on a scale of 1-10 (10 being extremely high) – have you been to practice TOGETHERNESS and SINCERITY with others? What helps you commit to both? What keeps you from these two elements of being the Church?
5. Are we willing to give of ourselves (our time, attention, abilities and strengths) AND our resources to meet the needs of others?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?