

Acts 2:14a, 22-24, 32-33, 36-47/NBBC/May 7, 2017/Who are we listening to?

We are backing up a bit to finish a chunk of Acts since we didn't do it last week. After reading verse 14a, I am going to skip to verse 36 and read it through verse 47. Here we have Peter finishing his sermon.

Read the scripture: Acts 2:14a, 22-24, 32-33, 36-47.

Here we have a bit of a picture of the early church—the apostolic community—and how those early believers lived together.

These early believers lived together . . .

- as those who had all things in common: beliefs in common, sharing their material items in common, priorities in common; activities in common;
- they shared meals and ate together;
 - Eating together is a big deal. Eating with someone or sharing a meal around the table with someone conveys an acceptance of that other person; this is in part why so many people get so distressed at Jesus when he continues to eat meals with those who are considered to be outside the acceptable social boundaries of the community—Jesus ate with taxpayers, for example, and it made some of the leaders crazy because taxpayers were generally thieves and liars and cheats, taking money for the Roman government and pocketing some for themselves;
- they were comfortable being in one another's homes;
- they worshipped, studied, learned, and prayed together;
- they went bowling and visited Wheatley's together—just checking to see if you were listening—okay, probably not bowling or Wheatley's, but they were willing to fellowship together—they became more than strangers or acquaintances—they became friends, and my guess is that some became close friends.

Notice what characteristics this community had:

- they believed in something bigger than themselves—their belief that God has made this Jesus both Lord and Messiah—and that is what united them;
- they were generous with one another and
- they saw one another as equals . . . none better, none worse
- they acted out of abundance, not scarcity;
- they were having a blast or at least it appeared that they were—they had to be or others would not be attracted to them and willing to join them, and they wouldn't have been able to spend so much time together;
- they knew how to include strangers and help new people feel welcome—note that on one day 3,000 people were added—what would we do if 3,000 people were added in one day?;
- the devotion they had to their activities more literally translates to the idea that they held “fast to” or “persevered” in the disciplines that are named. It also suggests that these were practices that were repeated, practices that endured; and it seems it wasn't always easy to do them or else why would they need to hold fast or persevere?
- They must have been honest with one another or else they were really good liars—more likely they could be honest or they would not have been able to spend so much time together and they surely would not have been able to pray together;

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- They either never argued—not likely—or they figured out how to resolve their conflicts without breaking relationship;
- They must have had respect for one another or they simply could not have spent any amount of time together or settled any disputes;
- They trusted one another with their very lives—telling another person what was on their hearts and minds—what bothered them—what questions they had—what they were struggling with and what they needed;
 - what would it mean for you to trust someone else in this community of faith with your physical well-being, with whether you had enough food or had shelter or clothing?
 - What would it mean for you to trust someone else in this community of faith with your spiritual well-being?
- They must have been able to be ignorant and vulnerable with one another—both of which require trust—you cannot study with anyone except yourself or pray with anyone except yourself if you are unwilling to be vulnerable: ask what may seem to you to be a goofy question—offer ideas even if you aren't sure they are good—identify the things that are bothering you—not worry if your prayer includes the “right” kind of language;

This is a portrait of the early Christian community. They have as one scholar puts it: common worship, common practice, common good, and common witness.

These scriptures are a challenge to congregations everywhere. At the same time, because of verses such as these, we tend to romanticize the early church and the time in which Jesus lived. We tend to believe that it must have been a less complicated—easier—than it is now, that people weren't really human beings with problems and concerns and illnesses.

We have similarities and differences with the early church. We worship and study and pray together on Wednesdays and Sundays. We don't meet together constantly—or live with each other unless we are living in family groups. We don't share everything in common, though I find you to be a generous people.

And for those of you who are feeling the hair on the back of your neck stand up because of the economic redistribution described in these verses, you will be pleased to hear Bruce Epperly words:

While Acts 2 is not a recipe for populist income redistribution or changing our tax policies to favor the middle class and working poor, it is clear that the passage challenges us to see the welfare of others, economically and spiritually, as important as our own. Care for the vulnerable is at the heart of biblical ethics and should be a factor in government policy as well as individual generosity.

In twenty-first century individualistic America, these words are countercultural even in the church, but we need to address them, and then struggle with how we can live them out in the free market and in the life of the church.

But the thing that gets me the most lately about this scripture is how this all seemed to happen

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because Peter put the gospel in words, folks were convicted; they changed their behavior; they believed, and loads of people responded to what they saw and heard.

It is true that there were also “signs and wonders” being done by the apostles that clearly affected people, but nevertheless, people heard the message and took it in—really took it in seriously and earnestly—and acted out of what they heard and they believed. Folks really heard Peter and acted accordingly.

Is it because Peter sounds a little threatening? If so, what is he threatening them with? There is no threat of hell or losing God’s love or being cursed or being met with violence.

Verse 40 says Peter used other arguments and “exhorted” them, which means he was pulling out all the stops and trying hard to persuade those present.

There is the call to repentance, literally “turn,” which does involve a change in heart, so Peter is encouraging them to change their way of living and way of being in relationship with God and one another.

There is the promise of forgiveness and receiving the Holy Spirit, but these promises sound pretty good to me.

Then I thought of tons of other things that we have to choose to believe or disbelieve and act or not act upon:

- Do you want to be a card carrying member of the Southern Poverty Law Center: fighting hate, teaching tolerance, seeking justice.
- How about Sojourners: God is not a Republican or a Democrat.
- How about the advocacy organization that calls TrumpCare a “moral obscenity,” and the Republicans who say that “There are no losers” in the recently passed bill.

Who are we listening to: FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube; corporate slogans “We bring good things to life” (GE); The Johnson Amendment as it stands or the Executive order that begins a legislative process to repeal, rework, or erase the Johnson Amendment?

Who are we listening to? What conversations do we need to have? What questions do we need to ask? What do we need to know or learn to decide if we should listen to someone? What makes something or someone believable or more or less believable?

These scriptures are a challenge to all of us, and they give us a lot to ponder. Where do you want to start?

May you thrive and be that community of faith that lives and breathes and believes and walks and follows Jesus.