

Learning Community

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Evergreen Churches Sermon Series

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Acts 2:42-47

This is one of my favorite stories in Scripture. It takes place starting on the day of Pentecost. As you may recall, after Jesus rose from the dead, he was with the disciples for forty days, and then he ascended into heaven. The disciples gathered in Jerusalem for the spring harvest festival along with Jews from around the Roman world—this was a Jewish festival celebrating the first fruits of the fields. Jews came from all over the Mediterranean, from Libya and Egypt and Ethiopia to Crete and Corinth and all places in between. And while they might know some Hebrew for worship, most of them knew the languages that were spoken by the people around them. The more educated among them would have known Greek, but most did not.

So on that day of Pentecost, when the disciples were gathered together in one place, the Holy Spirit came upon them like a rushing wind, and divided tongues appeared on their heads. And suddenly they could speak the languages of the people around them—of the Jews from all over the known world. And Peter recognizes this as the work of the Holy Spirit as foretold by the prophet Joel. Now, when the prophet Joel spoke that their young would see visions and their old would dream

dreams, he was speaking a vision about the day of the Lord, about the end times, and Peter and the other disciples take this as a sign. And there's always a danger when we start thinking that it's the last days, because, well, here we are, two thousand years later, and we are still waiting.

But when people think they don't have much time left, they start acting nicer to others. When people think that Jesus is coming back at any minute, they start acting like they ought to. Paul always says in his letters "Keep away, for you do not know the day or the hour." In this time period right after Pentecost, the disciples and those who were gathered that day—Acts chapter 2 says they numbered about three thousand—began doing what they ought to. They started to live together as God's beloved community. They devoted themselves to the disciple's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Breaking bread together was not a simple communion meal like we do it, with a little bread and a little juice, but they shared an entire meal together. Those who had a lot brought a lot, and those who had a little still ate enough. Sort of like our Baptist potlucks, am I right?

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. Peter and the others began to speak boldly, without fear, of the love of Jesus and his laying down his life for us. They began to see people transformed and changed.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. These house churches truly were house churches—they saw each other as part of the family.

We must remember these early Christians, at this point, were still Jews—so they still went to the temple together on the Sabbath, but they also broke bread at home and ate with glad and generous hearts.

There had been other groups of Jews who had tried to follow God's ways—in fact, most scholars believe John the Baptist came from one of those groups. Have you ever heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls? They were collected by a group of people we now call the Essenes, a group that lived near the Dead Sea, who had separated themselves from other Jews and were waiting for the end times to come. They lived on an almost vegetarian diet, and wore simple clothes. John the Baptist wore a coat of camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. Most likely, he came from this group that also practiced the Jewish ritual of the mikvah, the purification bath, the forerunner to the ritual of baptism.

The difference between a group like the Essenes, or countless other groups that exist today, is that these early Christians did not go live separately from everyone else, but they lived in community and still participated in the greater community they were from. They still went to temple. They still went to work. They still participated in society around them, but they also created a new society within. And because of this,

they praise God and had the goodwill of all the people, and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I love this passage because it is who we are at our core as Christians and a challenge to who we ought to be. We are God's beloved community here on earth, and we are called not to separate ourselves, but to participate and invite others in. We are part of the world that we are in, a world that has changed so much. Our neighborhoods and communities that we live in are changing. My son goes to school with classmates who are Muslim and Jewish, classmates who are from Somalia and Mexico and India. One family across the street from us speaks Spanish—their next door neighbors speak Russian.

In some ways we have become more disconnected with one another. People don't necessarily know who their neighbors are anymore. And at the same time, with the internet and social media, we are both disconnected and more connected than we have ever been. We are a global community where one person can Tweet 140 characters—if you don't know what that sentence even means, don't worry about it, but someone can say one sentence and millions of people can see it.

This doesn't mean all of this change is necessarily good. Change is inevitable, and whether it is good or bad, it is happening all around us. In the time of the early church, everything had changed, and they found a way to embrace that change by being part of the community they were in, and at the same time, creating something new. The early church was

born out of diversity, born out of people whose only connection was their religious background and coming to celebrate the spring harvest festival together. And the Holy Spirit brought them together—despite their differences in language and you can bet there were cultural differences as well, from Libya to Arabia to Jerusalem to Crete and Rome—and they became the early church, a new community learning what it meant to be God’s community.

As part of the Evergreen Association, “Learning Community” is one of our core values. What that means is that we are still growing and learning as an organization. We are about to turn fourteen years old, and have more than doubled the amount of churches that are part of our organization. Just last month, the Asian Caucus welcomed in our fifth Burmese congregation. We had four Chin congregations, and this one is Kachin, a different ethnic group, so we had to even change the name of our Facebook group from Evergreen Association Chin Congregations to Evergreen Association Burmese Congregations. Our umbrella is growing larger. We have a new Hispanic Caucus church plant called Casa de Oracion—House of Prayer.

The Evergreen Association is a microcosm of the world around us, and is in many ways like that early church—we are in the world, and yet we have formed something new and different. We reflect the diversity of the world within us. And yet the world still seeps in. Sometimes we don’t feel as connected as we should. So we are growing and changing

to help us connect more deeply. One idea that surfaced was this very Pulpit Exchange to help us connect with other Evergreen churches that we may not connect with on a regular basis. Another idea that will be coming soon is an opportunity for one church to meet with another church—just a few people and the pastor—to answer some questions and talk about our churches and Evergreen, to help the search committee when it is formed to select a new Executive Minister. Still, we have other places we connect—the Take Your Pastor to the Ballgame is coming up on August 1st, and there is the Barbecue hosted by the Black Caucus in July, a place where we can literally break bread together and eat with glad and generous hearts in fellowship with one another!

It is important that we learn from one another and remember that we are connected through not only our faith as Christians, but as neighbors and friends of one another. As part of this Evergreen Association, we have purposefully said “Yes, I want to be connected to people who are different from me. Yes. I want to know the love of Christ through my neighbors that are different from me. Yes, I want to learn, and change, and be transformed by God’s love through the love of my neighbor who is different from me.”

As part of the Evergreen Association, we believe we have been called to transform the world through the love and grace of God, but also that we are willing to be transformed by that same love and grace shared through others. How might you be transformed in relationship with

someone who is different than you? Which of your neighbors do you not know that well? How might you learn more about God's grace by learning from someone new?

Go and share the good news about God's transforming love, and allow God to transform you by getting to know someone new. Help build up God's beloved community together, and remember that you are part of this particular branch of God's beloved community called the Evergreen Association. Reach out to your neighbors in your association and be transformed! Amen.