

Family Re-invented, Acts 2:42-47

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I want you to imagine something with me for a moment. Imagine that you are one of the crowd, there in Jerusalem, on Pentecost day. There are lots of people! This is a Jewish feast day, so there are Jews from all over the known world. (map) They are coming from the Middle East, North Africa, Arabia, Asia Minor and Europe. It's fun and exciting, and you are glad to be there – kind of like being at a World's Fair. (fade out slide)

So -- you are one of the people who have come to Jerusalem, expecting the usual celebration. But all of the sudden about 120 rather ordinary, mostly uneducated men and women, from the very unimportant region of Galilee, infiltrate the crowd, speaking to each in their own language, about this man named Jesus. They are, like, on fire. Their enthusiasm makes you step back a little. Who are these people? And then one of them, named Peter, gets up on his soapbox and tells you all about Jesus, quoting Scripture, proving that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Crucified and resurrected! You've never heard of such a thing, and the cumulative effect of all that is now happening moves you like you have never been moved. And you repent, you are baptized; you become a follower of Jesus. You, and about 3000 other people.

So the question is now: what next? Because this is not a passing thing. Your life is changed forever. You will never be the same. So you start to gather with the others who have just been baptized. You ask questions, you begin search Scripture together, and if you don't know the answers, you find someone who does.

You see, that sense of joy and wonder doesn't go away. It's not just about what you've experienced with your eyes and ears. It's not like some fantastic concert that leaves you with a buzz that goes away after a few days. In fact, the Holy Spirit has gotten hold of you. Like the original 120, you too, have been filled by the Holy Spirit. You look for any of those folks and you ask, "What should I do now?"

Well, what *would* you do? Maybe you have to get back home again – your caravan to Cappadocia is leaving and you can't to miss it. Or maybe you delay your departure for a few more days. Or maybe you just stay. And that's where our lesson begins today.

So you *gather*. You gather to celebrate, to pray, to worship God, and to figure out what you are going to do next. You *fellowship* – that means relationships and involvement with one another. You get to know these other people. You especially want to know those who have been with Jesus. Who is this guy? What made him special? What did he teach? You want to study Scripture with others, now reading it with new eyes. And you want to do something about it.

You and I are also believers in Jesus. We too, are filled with God's Spirit because that is the promise Peter spoke of, saying:

"You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:39)

That's us. This promise is also for you and me. As followers of Jesus, filled by his Spirit, what do we do?

Well, the first step is to *gather*. That's what we are doing today, and what we do regularly on Sundays. Do you know why we do that on Sundays, by the way? Because Jesus was raised from the dead on a Sunday, the day after the Jewish Sabbath. Little by little, the old routines of Jewish life were re-defined to fit the new, wonderful reality of a post-resurrection world. Your Sabbath now falls on Sunday.

What used to be law – to observe the Sabbath – now became a joyous desire. We read that they "*devoted* themselves to teaching and to fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer." Gathering became a priority in their lives. They continued to meet in the Temple as was their habit; and then in addition, they gathered in their homes. They did so daily. They shared everything together (just imagine the job of feeding a crowd every day!). They also cared for all who were in need. Their first impulse was to gather, to share and to care.

That included worshiping together. They combined elements of synagogue worship and Temple worship. In Jesus' time, these were very different things. Temple worship focused on sacrifice. The sacrificial system was complex, requiring the presence of priests, and could be offered on any day and at any time – plus special sacrifices for feast days. But synagogue worship was different. Synagogue worship focused on Scripture, and required only a rabbi (a teacher). It began during the time of exile, when there was no Temple. Eventually the Jews began to meet at a set time on the Sabbath. There were 5 central parts to their worship: The creed ("**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one,**" Deuteronomy 6:4); teaching; prayers; singing the Psalms; and the benediction. In addition to this basic structure, the Christians added the "breaking of bread:" Communion, which eventually took the place of Temple sacrifices. Only now, the sacrifice was flipped. The old way, people made the sacrifices to God. But in Christ, God made the sacrifice *for us*, to make us right with him. Communion celebrates the sacrifice of Jesus *for you*.

The Christians also used a new creed: "**Jesus is Lord,**" (Romans 10:9) which was quite a statement! It meant *Jesus* is Lord – not Caesar. It meant Jesus is *Lord* – God himself. You see as Jews, the early Christians had not stopped believing that God is one. The creed, "Jesus is Lord," proclaimed this basic belief. It wasn't until the 4th century that the doctrine of the Trinity got hammered out.

So the basic structure of worship hasn't changed much. You and I today, still use the same 6 parts: creed, teaching, prayers, song, blessing, and Communion. These are essential to our identity as followers of Jesus, as biblically-shaped believers. The creed, which grew from "Jesus is Lord" to the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, keeps our beliefs uniform, solid. It keeps all Christians unified – one God: Father, Son and Spirit. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is core to our faith. Forgiveness is essential. Eternal life gives us hope.

Our teachings are likewise biblically based. The Bible remains our sole authority for matters of life and faith. This too, keeps us unified and grounded as Christians. We pray because we are in relationship – think of it! – in relationship with God himself, as Father and Savior. We pray because in relation to him, we are humbled; we are, at the same time, both children and servants. We pray because we rely on God's power and wisdom, and prayer puts us in the place of trust.

And we sing. Oh, we sing! How can we keep from singing, as the song goes? Song is the natural extension of praise; it gives depth to our prayer as well. Song is a wonderful vehicle for testimony. As we sing, our faith is not only declared to the world, it also sinks deeply into our hearts. And finally, we are blessed. God sends us out with his own blessing.

My friends, we need to gather. We yearn to gather. All of you who are now worshiping in your homes in isolation, you know that it is only second best. It can only be temporary. The need to be together is very strong, and someday – in the not too distant future – we will again be able to gather in person, to worship God and to fellowship with one another.

But here's the thing. While our basic structure remains the same, it cannot be allowed to become rigid. Because rigidity keeps new people out, and we need to keep inviting them in. We need to make space for people from all over, with different customs, different songs, different perspectives. *Unity* is not the same as *uniformity*. So our structure needs to have some flexibility built into it. As we worship the same God, we need to remain flexible, so enough our family can grow.

Our community of faith is really a family. It's a big family. It's a family re-invented – just as worship was re-invented by the early Christians. Because now, we are a family *in Christ*. One of my favorite Coca Cola ads was produced together with Walmart and shown at Christmas in 2013. I'd like to share it with you now. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXXPik4v6aw>)

My friends, that's us. We are a re-invented family, in Christ. We all share the same DNA: Scripture, the fatherhood of God, the lordship of Christ, the filling of the Spirit. We share the same purpose: not only to gather, but also to share and to care, to reach out to others and keep adding to the family. You see, we were never meant to keep the good news of Jesus to

ourselves. From the very beginning we were meant to share it, going out to the ends of the earth. That's what Jesus told his followers before he went up to heaven, as we heard in Pastor Jonna's sermon last week. That's what Abraham was told in the very beginning, as this family was started: *blessed to be a blessing*. That's what God told Moses on Mt. Sinai when the family got a re-boot: "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Yes, a holy nation – set apart – to be God's family. And a kingdom of priests. So think about it: if we are all priests, then who is our congregation? My friends, the congregation is the world. Peter later repeated these words to this re-invented family, now not only Jewish but also including Gentiles:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.
(1 Peter 2:9-10)

As Luther later said, "The Church is always reforming."

Oh my friends – my family! You have been redeemed, through Christ – who makes everything new. It's not a passing phase. He is working in you to re-invent you in his image, daily. So let's continue to worship together – make it a priority! – and share with one another, care for one another, bringing in new family members daily. God's Spirit is on the move – to the ends of the earth.