

## **Transcript of Pastor Dan's 5/3/2020 sermon (extemporaneous)**

**Scripture: Acts 2:42-47**

Our Scripture reading for today talks about an idealized kind of community—a kind of community that we see in the early church. When I talk about the early church I'm talking about the really early church: that time right after Jesus had been resurrected and ascended to heaven, those first few years when Christianity didn't even have a name. They were still the same people they had always been, but something new, something special had touched their lives and they were trying to figure out how to make sense of that and how to grow and develop and move forward with that element in their lives.

In this time of the early church a lot of what we call church happened in the home; it was people gathering around the table and talking and teaching and praying and spending time together and figuring out what community looks like, what a new kind of community looks like. That's sort of where we find ourselves right now; it's certainly not what the early church might have guessed when they looked forward to the future, but the future is a many-splendoured thing and it's where we find ourselves now, seeking to make meaning and to figure out what community means for us as we go forward. I think about a quote from Helen Keller where she said, "Alone we can do so little but together we can do so much."

It's a hard thing to think about it—it's a hard thing to remember when we are spending so much time at home and can no longer gather in large groups or really experience togetherness in the same way that we've always experienced it... the sort of dictionary definition that we have built in our head for togetherness.

But I want to talk a little bit about four things, four elements of this togetherness that the early church experienced and that really were priorities for them. For us what that looks like in our world may look a little bit different than it did in the world of the early church, but that's okay—pretty much everything in our world looks different than the world of the early church. It's about translating it and experiencing it anew in this new modern world that we live in that's what being a Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is. So I want to talk first about community. There are four words that I'm going to go with: Community, Prayer, Breaking Bread—I'll admit that's more than one word—and Teaching.

I'm starting with community. For the early church, community meant things in common; it meant these people found not only things that they believed in common but things that they cared about in common and things that they did, things that gave their lives meaning that were in common. They also sought out common good and common goals. It wasn't just who they were that bound them together; it's what they wanted to be and what they wanted to do and how they wanted to care that bound them together. So as a group came together it started to figure out, okay this is important to you, this is

important to you and what would it look like in my life is it was important to me as well? As those ideas of common good and common goals spread outward from this group it started to involve everyone, and that when you were caring for other people and for their good it benefited you as well. They also cared about the wellbeing of all people; they cared about physical wellbeing and psychological wellbeing. That the needs of people were met, that was a huge part of the early church, and that community served to make sure that our own individual needs were met, the needs that the ones that we care about had were met, and the needs of people all around were met. It's sort of a "rising tide lifts all boats" kind of a thing. That's in-a-nutshell what community started to look like for the early church. I'm not going to spend too long giving you exactly step-by-step well this is how they lived and this is what they ate and this is what they bought at the store, all different kinds of things like that, because it was a whole different world back then. If you're interested in all of that you're welcome to research it yourself, but I don't want to waste too much of your time. I think the core elements of this are things that can really apply to our lives even though our lives look so different from what the early church had.

Something else that the early church cared about so much that I think many of you listening to this right now really do care about is prayer. Prayer was something that the early church did: they prayed to God because of all the great things in their life, but I also prayed to God for the needs of others. Prayer was an active thing, and it was something that came from a lot of different corners. See, Christianity didn't invent prayer, and the people who were the early Christians for lack of a better term, many of them—most of them at least at that time—were Jewish and had plenty of background in prayer and in communicating with God and communing with God. And so, a Christian life now I think means figuring out what was it is that you've always connected to something bigger than yourself, and focusing on them and also adding to them and watching how they grow. I think our relationship with God is one that is always evolving, and that as long as we're finding ways to connect to God, God will work within us and that relationship will grow and it will change. And it won't always look the same; the way that you pray now will look totally different I think than the way you will pray 5 or 10 years from now, and probably looks different than the way that you prayed 5 or 10 years ago if you prayed at all. Life changes and I like to think that God changes too. I like to think that our relationship with God and the way that we experience God is always in motion. We're never stagnant there, and an active prayer life is a way to connect to that, to grab on to that, and to experience that transformative nature of God in our lives. Now we can pray alone or we can pray in community, and I think a healthy prayer life does both of those things. We pray in church, we pray in worship experiences like this, we pray alone in our homes maybe before going to bed or maybe when we're having a really hard time or we really need something to go well... or we just stub our toe and we pray to God really hard in that moment using some

particularly choice language. But we pray how we do and I think God listens to us no matter how we do it. And I also think it's important to make time to deliberately pray with other people, praying alongside them. Whether it's praying in unison something like the Lord's Prayer that most people gathered know, or whether it's praying one at a time for each other—something like that. That's something you can do on the phone, that's something you can do through writing a letter. The term "prayer chain" which comes up a lot in sort of modern Christian contexts makes me think of "chain letters," and I could see having a pen-pal relationship with someone where I write a prayer on behalf of them or on behalf of myself and then send it to them, and they add to it and send it back. I think a prayer life that goes on is one that that involves others, it involves ourselves, and it involved a constant changing of how that relationship with God evolves.

There was also breaking bread; that's the third thing that I want to talk about that this early church community experienced. Breaking bread was such a priority to them—not just sitting down and eating and the actual physical breaking of bread, but it meant something to them to make meaning out of a meal. It wasn't just something that they did to survive, though that's a huge part of it; it was something that enriched their lives both individually and communally. Feeding yourself is survival and enrichment; feeding another is an act of love. Eating can truly be a communal experience. It makes me think of several families that I've talked to over the last several weeks who have talked about how, well, yes this is a terrible time that we're in and we wouldn't wish it on our worst enemy, but there are some opportunities that it's providing. Some families who because of work and school and sports and all kinds of different extracurriculars didn't really have the opportunity to always sit down and have that dinner every night or that breakfast morning or whatever it is: that moment to connect around the table, to talk about your day, to share some food over the last of whatever scraps of food are on the serving tray. Whatever it is that you do to make a family meal, a lot of families were missing that and it's been really a wonderful thing to hear that we have been having more time together to make this togetherness time a priority. Or at least to realize what it would look like if we made it more of a priority in our lives. I hope that that's something transformative that we can experience as we leave this time, whenever that happens. That we realize the priorities that we've made for ourselves—I'm thinking about conversation that I had with someone yesterday on the phone—the priorities that we make for ourselves in this time may inform—I hope they inform—the priorities that make going outside of it. This idea of sharing a meal together, of a blessing a meal and of making sure that everyone has something to eat, that's a deeply ingrained Christian thing. It was a huge part of Jesus' thing; he made sure that people had food. One of his most famous miracles was feeding the 5000, and one of his most famous prayers—the Lord's Prayer—happened when he was breaking bread around a table. And one of the most famous sacraments, one of those acts

that pretty much all Christian churches experience in one way or another, Holy Communion was built around breaking bread. Jesus liked a good meal, and I like to think that that's something that I carry in my heart from Jesus as well. Sharing a meal together, not only does it reflect something that was important to Jesus, but it also invites a place for Jesus. That's something that we do very specifically in communion when we ask the presence of Christ to be among us, but that's also something that I think we can do in every meal, and I think that's something the early church strove to do. Maybe they didn't make every single meal that they ate a big religious experience, or maybe they did; I don't really know, but we have that opportunity to bring the spirit of God in with us. What I was just talking about—where we share our stories of the day and we make jokes and we have a good time and we talk about what's important to us and we make sure that everybody at the table has but they need—those are all reflections of the spirit of God, and I hope that when you have dinner tonight or the next big meal that you have that you really think about those elements.

Now I want you to know that I'm not just talking to the people who have a big family that they're sitting around the table with. I myself, I live alone and I'm sure that many of you who are listening to this also live alone, and that's okay; you didn't have to just ignore everything that I just said or delete that out of your mind because it has nothing to do with you. Now, with telephones and with all these video conferences and everything like that we can have a meal together. This is sort of the extreme of that, but I'm thinking about an experience that a lot of people have on the Internet, it's called Mukbang. You have somebody sitting there with the camera in front of them eating a whole bunch of food, and then there are hundreds or thousands of people watching this and maybe having dinner right along with them. I haven't done a whole lot of research on it, but I've heard some people talk about how it's a way for some folks who live alone to have this sort of communal experience of a meal that maybe we have been missing since we were kids, or maybe we've never had alone. I'm not saying that's necessarily something that's going to speak to you, but calling up your friend and—provided that you're okay with the sound of a little bit of slurping and chewing on the phone line—having a conversation while sharing a meal together, maybe even making the same thing, is one easy way to have a little bit of community together. So many of us have been using Zoom or Skype or any of these other video conferencing technologies, and you could get your whole extended family or your friends or your knitting group or your sports team or whoever in together around however many tables you have with your camera set up and just have a nice meal together. It's a beautiful thing. And even when you just want to have a meal alone it doesn't have to be fully alone, because God can be with you. So in the experience of eating, the experience of filling our bodies and nourishing our bodies, we can also nourish our spirit. We can nourish them through community with others and through a unity with God,

no matter whether you're eating at a big spaghetti dinner or a three-course turkey Thanksgiving, or if you're just having a granola bar on your way to work in the garden or whatever it is you're doing. Each time we have a meal is a way to experience God and experience community, and I think that's something that the early church really made a priority of, and something that we can do as well.

The fourth thing is teaching. And that's something that was a huge priority to the early church because they were a new movement. They hadn't even really discovered that they were a movement yet, but they were passing on the teachings of Jesus and the good news that they had heard from Jesus and the lessons that had been passed down to them, and that's what teaching is. Even when you take the religious aspect out of it, teaching is passing down the lessons that come from before us. That's what teaching in school is, that's what teaching a child how to read is, or even potty training a child. Passing on a lesson from the past. That's something that was important to the early church and it's something that I think is a huge part of community, whether it's passing on the good news of Jesus Christ from the Bible or from your experiences in church, or you're passing on the wisdom that you've experienced in your life—or a mixture of the two, because I think God is active and God is always teaching us, whether it's something regimented and regular, or like listening to a pastor on a recorded Sunday worship telling you what he thinks about the early church and what that means for lives or something that you learned about working in the garden and seeing what the lady bugs are doing on the flowers. I think about Jane Goodall; I was doing some reading about Jane Goodall earlier, she's a well-known and such an influential... I don't know exactly what you'd call her, she's done so much, but she got a lot of her fame by working among the chimpanzees in Africa. Chimpanzees are primates like we are, and a lot of their communal experiences are mirrored in our communal experiences, and she learned so much by going out and being in nature and experiencing those animals and she's also a very spiritual person. I think that God is speaking to us in so many different avenues, and sharing what it is that God is teaching to us with others is a huge part of community. Now, not everybody is a knock-on-the-door-with-a-Bible kind of person, but everyone can teach something and everyone can share the wisdom and the love of God with another person, even if you live alone. I'm doing it right now, and all you have to do is pick up the phone and do it with somebody else.

If we can seek to do these four things:

*[full-screen graphic]*

#### **Four lessons from the early church**

- Community – commonalities, common good/goals, wellbeing of all
- Prayer – a relationship with God, for ourselves and for others

- Teaching – the wisdom God shares with us and the love/lessons of Christ
- Breaking Bread – sharing a meal for physical and spiritual sustenance

**for today and the tomorrows to come**

*[voice-over]*

—introverts and extroverts and everyone in between, people living alone and people crowded with family... if we can seek to experience and make a priority out of these four things, this time that we're in right now will not only fly by... but it will be filled with healing love. And that's the prayer that I have for you today. Amen.