

Why Do We Need Each Other
Acts 2: 37 – 47
September 27, 2009

I. Introduction

A. Coffee was always served at our church after the sermon

1. Says Richard Blake, of Los Angeles, California

a. One Sunday our minister asked one of the smaller members of the congregation if he knew why we had coffee hour.

2. Without hesitating, the youngster replied, "To wake people up before they have to drive home."

A. That might be a pretty good idea, but I suspect the pastor had a different answer in mind

1. Whether it's over a cup of coffee, or around tables at a carry-in meal

a. Or just the usual chatter in the foyer before or after a worship service

2. Church people tend to enjoy visiting with one another

A. If it seems as though such socializing happens more in some churches than in others

1. It's probably not by accident – churches usually develop those practices over time

a. In Mennonite and other Anabaptist congregations

(1) It's a tradition that dates back to our founding ancestors

2. And according to our scripture text, even back to the beginning of the Christian church

a. When believers were said to enjoy "breaking bread" and fellowshiping together

A. The question we want to look at this morning is this –

1. Is it just social interaction that we enjoy in our church fellowship?

A. Or is there something more, something deeper, that happens

1. When God's people get together and share with one another in community?

A. Is church just a place to meet people and make friends, or do we need each other?

II. We are continuing this morning, a series of messages based around the question

A. Of "Who are we" – or as Palmer Becker titled his little booklet on the subject –

1. What is an Anabaptist Christian?

A. We began last Sunday by sharing three core values that can be seen

1. As defining Christians in general, and Anabaptist Christians in particular -

a. Jesus is the center of our faith

b. Community is the center of our lives

- c. Reconciliation is the center of our work
- A. We looked at the first of those three last week
 - 1. And we said that an Anabaptist Christian believes
 - a. That Jesus' life and teachings are as important to our daily life
 - (1) As his death and resurrection is for the forgiveness of our sin
 - (a) And our hope of eternal life
 - b. A relationship with Jesus is the center of our faith
 - 2. We said that Jesus is to be the center of our interpretation of scripture
 - a. We'll look at that a bit more this morning
 - 3. And we said that Jesus is to be both our Savior and our Lord
 - a. That is, our first and primary allegiance is to Christ and his kingdom
- A. Today, we want to take a closer look at the second of those core values
 - 1. That is - Community is the center of our lives
- A. First, a bit of background on our scripture text, just to bring us up to speed
 - 1. On the setting for the verses that were read for us
- A. The place is Jerusalem, it is shortly after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension
 - 1. And it takes place during an annual festival that concluded with the Day of Pentecost
- A. The disciples and followers of Jesus were gathered together, in part
 - 1. Because of this special occasion in the life of the Jewish people
- A. They were also gathered together because of Jesus' instructions to them
 - 1. Just before his ascension back into heaven
- A. You may recall his words, found at the end of Luke's gospel
 - 1. As well as at the beginning of this writing of the Acts of the Apostles –
 - a. Stay in Jerusalem, Jesus said, and wait for the fulfillment of the promise
 - (1) Of my Father, when you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with power
- A. With the great commission ringing in their ears, to go out into all the world
 - 1. And make disciples, those disciples surely knew that they needed that baptism
 - a. They would need the Holy Spirit's presence and power in their lives
- A. And so they stayed in Jerusalem, and they met together
 - 1. Wouldn't you just love to have been there, to hear the conversation
 - a. The retelling of the stories, their new understanding of who Jesus was/is
- A. And then it happened – the sound of a mighty rushing wind
 - 1. What looked like flames of fire coming to rest on each one of them

- A. The astonishment and the immediate bedlam among those disciples
 - 1. Speaking in the different languages and dialects of the curious crowd
 - a. That gathered from all over Jerusalem to see what was going on
- A. And then, Peter's sermon – we might say it was the first sermon ever preached
 - 1. In the Christian church that was formed on that day
- A. And the text that Henry read for us begins with the people's response to that sermon -
 - 1. If this is all true about Jesus - his life, his death, his resurrection
 - a. If he truly is the Messiah as you say that he is
 - 2. And if we are guilty of having him put to death...
 - a. Then what should we do? What can we do?
- A. And Peter's words set the stage for what the church has preached ever since –
 - 1. Repent, be baptized, receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit
 - a. About 3000 people responded to the invitation that day
- A. And the very next verse says that they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching
 - 1. To prayer, and to **the breaking of bread** together
- A. In other words, they began to form themselves into a community
 - 1. A community that spent time together, listening to the Word, praying
 - a. And celebrating communion/fellowshipping together in their homes
 - 2. They even went so far as to put their possessions/resources together
 - a. In a common/community pool so that no one in the group would be in want
 - 3. Sisters and brothers sharing together so that everyone's needs were met
 - a. Does any of that sound like the church we belong to today?
- A. Somebody asked once - How in the world did the early church fellowship
 - 1. Without coffee and donuts? Well, I think they had their own ways
- A. In writing about this, Palmer Becker suggests that these two aspects of community –
 - 1. Worshipping together around prayer and the teaching of the Word
 - a. And fellowshipping together in small groups in their homes
 - 2. Was central to the church when it started
 - a. And it has been a core value of Anabaptist Christians ever since
 - 3. However, it has not always been that way in the church
- A. In the early centuries of the state church in Europe and the Middle East
 - 1. The emphasis shifted from close, family-style relationships in a congregation
 - a. To an emphasis on the large church, with elaborate buildings for worship

- (1) And a much more developed and hierarchical structure of leadership
- A. An early church theologian, named Augustine
 - 1. Taught that it was not possible to know who belonged to the body of Christ
 - a. And who didn't – "The wheat and the weeds grow together," he said
- A. And so a more sacramental faith developed, in which the focus of worship
 - 1. Moved away from group involvement in the teaching and discussion of scripture
 - a. To a more liturgical formula or format of scripture reading and prayer
 - 2. And away from a common, communal church life to more emphasis
 - a. On participation in communion, confession and forgiveness from ongoing sin
- A. Persons who had a desire to walk more closely with God in daily life
 - 1. Often separated themselves in monasteries and convents
- A. Giving the impression that a close, personal relationship with Jesus
 - 1. Or with other believers in the church, was not expected
 - a. From the masses of common, ordinary people
- A. During the 16th century Reformation, those who rejected the state church
 - 1. Turned to each other for spiritual counsel and encouragement
- A. Because of the persecution that followed, they were often forced to meet
 - 1. In small groups, in homes or in secret hiding places
 - a. They became communities that were set apart from society in general
 - 2. But they were, at the same time, very evangelical-minded
 - a. Eager to share their faith with others and invite them to join in their fellowship
- A. For many of these early Anabaptist Christians, a core value re-developed –
 - 1. Christ-centered community became the focus for all of life
- A. Being a Christian meant belonging to a group of fellow believers
 - 1. Practicing your faith seven days a week, in the context
 - a. Of "church" being a body of believers, rather than a place or a structure
- A. Mennonites and other groups that arose out of the Reformation
 - 1. Have continued to see the value in Christian community and fellowship
 - a. And today it has become the norm for nearly all Christian churches
- (1) Community is a central focus of our lives
- A. But what does that community look like? How is it different from other organizations
 - 1. Events or activities that bring people together in our society?
 - a. Is "belonging" important to us as a congregation here at Sonnenberg?

- A. This morning I want to look at three ways that Anabaptist Christians practice community
 - 1. Three things that set it apart from other organizations that bring people together
- III. The first one is that forgiveness is seen and practiced as a means toward community
 - A. Just as forgiveness is the means by which sinners, you and me, are reconciled to God
 - 1. Forgiveness is also essential for believers to be reconciled to one another
 - a. In order to live together in the church, in the body of Christ
 - A. Let me quote Palmer Becker here for a moment – he says –
 - 1. The central problem of humanity is not the lack of finances
 - a. The lack of education or the lack of power.
 - (1) The central problem is that we offend each other (end quote)
 - A. You can take that however you want to, but I believe there's a great deal of truth to it
 - 1. Human beings, by nature, do not always get along well together
 - A. Pride, selfishness, greed – all those things that get in the way of our relationship with God
 - 1. Tend to cause problems in our relationship with the people around us, too
 - A. Perhaps we think about that more in our work situations
 - 1. Where we may be forced to figure out a way to deal with differences among coworkers, or production will suffer, and our jobs may be in danger
 - A. Or in a marriage relationship, where we have to choose, sometimes on a daily basis
 - 1. Whether getting our own way is more important than being married
 - a. And if we value our marriage, then we have to figure out
 - (1) How to deal with the disagreements and conflicts that will arise
 - A. Any kind of relationship that we may be in – family, friends, even next-door neighbors
 - 1. Sometimes experience differences, disagreements and/or conflicts
 - A. Unfortunately, in the secular world, denial and defensiveness
 - 1. Are often the tools of choice when it comes to dealing with disagreements
 - a. And the results are fairly predictable
 - A. And because we are Christians, we sometimes think that we shouldn't have
 - 1. Those differences that cause offenses in the church – but we all know better
 - a. God's people are still people, after all
 - A. So, for a church to really function as a caring, Christian community
 - 1. Forgiveness, the only way our broken relationship with God can be restored
 - a. Is an essential ingredient in order to mend broken relationships
 - (1) And allow Christians to live together in harmony

- A. One of the things that sets the church apart from other organizations is that
 - 1. Forgiveness is seen and practiced as a means toward creating and maintaining
 - a. Christ-centered community
- IV. Second – our faith, and the way we practice it, are developed in community
 - A. We talked last week about the need to interpret scripture
 - 1. In light of the life and teaching of Jesus
 - A. One of the ways that the Anabaptists differed from the state church
 - 1. Was their belief that such interpretation of scripture happens best
 - a. When the whole community is involved in studying and discussing
 - 2. What the Bible says and means, rather than only the leadership of the church
 - A. There is a danger inherent in that belief, some would say that educated Bible scholars
 - 1. Are best equipped for the task of helping us understand
 - a. What the Bible is saying to us today
 - 2. Or in some Mennonite and other churches, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme in which biblical scholarship has been viewed with suspicion
 - a. And personal insight, conviction, or the ability to articulate a certain position
 - (1) Is often accepted as the voice of authority on scriptural interpretation
 - A. But the value of interpretation in the community of believers rests on the belief
 - 1. That the Holy Spirit can speak through many individuals, whether educated or not
 - a. And that listening to each other helps to keep the community
 - (1) From being led astray by the interpretation of any single individual
 - A. Anabaptist-minded Christians believe that Scriptures need to be studied
 - 1. Both individually and together in Spirit-guided community
 - a. In order to gain the clearest understanding of God's Word to us today
 - A. Community is built and grows as we practice our faith together
 - 1. And our faith and practice develops, to a large extent
 - a. Out of our interpretation of scripture in the gathered community
- V. And a third way the church community might be different from other organizations
 - A. Is in the way it is structured, the way it is organized
 - 1. If community is important, then the church must be structured for community
 - A. This may be difficult to envision on the congregational level
 - 1. But we are familiar with the concept in the broader church structure
 - A. Where congregations are joined together in groups that we call a Conference

1. Just as our congregation is a part of the Ohio Conference of MCUSA
- A. And Conferences are a part of the larger Mennonite Church denomination in the US
 1. Which is a part of the world-wide organization of Mennonite Churches
- A. It is possible for a local congregation to be structured in a similar way –
 1. That is, the primary units are the small groups that are formed within the congregation
 - a. Where relationships and fellowship are generally the closest
 - (1) Support and encouragement happens best
 2. Gift discernment and service opportunities are enhanced
 - a. And issues of accountability may be easier to deal with
- A. Small groups may be intentional, as many such groups are formed in this congregation
 1. They may be given specific leadership roles or tasks to perform
 - a. That's the way I like to think of the ministry teams
 2. Or they may be as simple as inviting someone to your home for a meal
 - a. With a desire to build relationships and fellowship together
- A. We often think of “breaking bread together” as a communion service
 1. Where the congregation is called to remember Jesus and his body broken for us
- A. But I believe the practice in the early church was not limited to formal occasions
 1. It happened whenever two or three were gathered, in small groups
 - a. Eating together with glad and generous hearts, praising God, as our text records
 - (1) Earning the good will and favor of all the people around them
 2. Wouldn't that be a wonderful image for people in the world to have of the church
- A. Sunday worship then becomes the time when all these smaller groups gather together
 1. To share their gifts with the whole congregation
 - a. And gain the benefits of being part of a larger assembly
- A. We may find that much emphasis on the small group to be a bit uncomfortable
 1. And there is the risk of exclusiveness, of getting comfortable with a few persons
 - a. And never reaching out to people beyond our small group
- A. But the value in a church structure that emphasizes relationships
 1. Is the possibility of helping us to feel like we “belong”
- A. Because, when the chips are down, and we need someone to turn to
 1. It's the individual relationships that we have in the congregation
 - a. The connections that we have made with a small group of members
 - (1) That will provide the strength and courage we need

- A. And, as we soon will be seeing pictures of some of the ways
 - 1. That we have personally, and as families, experienced God's blessing this summer
 - a. Think of it as sharing that helps us to know each other better
 - (1) Helps to keep us connected to the whole congregation/community as well

VI. Why do we need each other? We could list a number of reasons

- A. Martin Luther said that it is for strength to oppose temptation and the devil
 - 1. But Anabaptist Christians also believe that we need each other
 - a. In order to be all that God desires of his people, the church, the body of Christ
- A. And if community is to be the center of our lives, then we must remember -
 - 1. That forgiveness is a vital ingredient in building and maintaining community
 - 2. That faith and practice are guided best
 - a. Through the interpretation of scripture in the gathered community
 - 3. And that the church is strongest when it is structured for community
- A. We will always have our disagreements and conflicts that must be dealt with
 - 1. We'll talk about that more next Sunday, Lord willing
- A. But as someone once said - There are times when we discover that we make up a single body, that we belong to each other and that God has called us to be together as a source of life for each other.
 - 1. That's community, and that's why we need each other