

“The Church on Its Best Behavior”

Acts 2:42-47

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It is a memory deeply embedded in our psyche. It is a long time ago. We are children. The voice we hear is that of a mother or father or perhaps grandmother. The occasion is that someone important is coming to visit – an aunt or uncle, a boss or teacher. Or perhaps the occasion is that we are going out to some important location or event.

Whatever the occasion, the voice says, “Young man (young lady), I want you to be on your best behavior!” We know immediately what the words mean. We are to be quiet and dignified. We are to be kind and polite. We are not to scream or run, burp loudly at the table or insult Aunt Lucy’s new hairstyle no matter how ridiculous it looks. We are to be on our best behavior so that we can represent the family well.

What we have in the closing words of the second chapter of Acts is a collective memory deeply embedded in the psyche of the community of faith, an image of the church on its best behavior. Some would say these words about a people who love one another and serve God faithfully simply describe the early church as it is, and as we should be, but this is not a comprehensive image. The early church has problems which range from libertinism in Corinth to legalism in Galatia. The people who love one another soon fight over whose widows receive more care and whether or not to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Others would say this is a vision of an ideal community which never exists, and thus has no bearing on us, but the early church exists and people love each other and worship God. What we have in these words is an image of the church on its best behavior, an image of the church not as it always is, but as it can be and really is at times, not just in first-century Jerusalem, but in twenty-first-century Raleigh as well.

The church on its best behavior worships together and studies the teachings of faith. Acts says that those who are baptized into the new community devote themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship,

to the breaking of bread and prayers. The people gather together in homes and in the temple to praise God with glad and generous hearts.

It is an image of people for whom faith is a vital experience. They cannot get enough of it. They have believed in Christ, they have been baptized and they have experienced the presence of the Risen Lord, but they want to learn more, they want to experience more, they want to give themselves in worship and praise and be with others who share their experience and beliefs. To be sure, they are not always like this, they do not remain perfectly focused, but at their best, this is what they do.

So do we. We do not always worship together as we should nor are we always fully invested in studying scripture. We are not immune to the trends of our culture where worship attendance has been declining for decades. In 2009, the percentage of Americans worshipping on a given Sunday had fallen to 17. When we self-report how often we are in worship, the number is much higher, but actual attendance is declining.

There are many factors contributing to this decline – busyness, mobility, the loss of any cultural protection of Sunday as a sacred day, the increasing number of people who have left organized religion altogether. Surely worship forms matter. This is why we are exploring complementary forms in vespers services. And the rhythm of life for many people means we need alternative days and times. One day at one time will not work for all. But I suspect the biggest factor of all has something to do with the nature of faith in a culture of such abundance.

In third-world settings where many of us have done partnership mission work, we often sense a vitality in worship we would love to experience more. But what makes that worship so vital? Is it the form; is one culture better than another? Or is it not the case that people who have so little are profoundly aware of just how dependent they are on God each and every day and thus, they have a natural desire to give thanks and praise, while many in our culture function as if we can pretty much make it on our own? We think of God as an interesting concept to explore, not the very means by which we live and breathe.

But, of course, God is the means by which we live and breathe, whether we realize it or not, and at our best we do. So, we worship together and study scripture. We worship in this room, in the children's

suite, at Caswell and other places. We worship on Sunday mornings, at Fifth Sundays Vespers and other times. We worship with glad and generous hearts because our experience with Christ is transforming. We sense God's nearness, we hear God's voice, we offer thanks and learn more about how to follow Jesus. Not always, but at our best, we do.

But the church on its best behavior not only worships together and studies scripture; it devotes itself to fellowship and caring for those in need. Acts says that those who are baptized devote themselves to the apostles' teachings and to fellowship. The people gather and break bread together and have all things in common. This is what fellowship is. It is the intimate sharing of life. It is not just superficial conversation and casual acquaintance. It is not simply tea and cookies, though food and drink aid our efforts to build intimacy, and they are staples of Baptist life. The fact that early believers seem to eat every time they get together might qualify them for membership in a Baptist association!

But the word translated as "fellowship" refers to more than eating together. It involves intimate relationships which concern the whole of life, including financial needs. How can we claim to care about a person, watch him/her struggle and do nothing to help? Not just in this passage, but repeatedly in Acts, the early church engages in communal living, pooling resources, out of a desire to make sure all needs are met.

They don't always share their resources as they should. Two people described in Acts 5:1-11, Ananias and Sapphira, hold back some of their money, and when confronted, drop dead. Maybe we ought to use this as our next stewardship text... And the communal approach doesn't last because the people are poor. If you're going to start a commune, you need some rich folks! But kidding aside, at its best, the early church devotes itself to fellowship and provides for needs.

So do we. Sometimes our fellowship is superficial. Sometimes our busyness or fear of meddling prevents us from becoming involved. And sometimes we are unwilling to give what we know another person needs. But at our best, we experience authentic fellowship in this church and provide for the needs of our community.

When people suffer illness and grief, they are surrounded by the healing presence of friends. When people struggle with loneliness and

depression, there are fellow believers willing to share the burden. When the greatest joys of life are experienced – children are born, loved ones are married, reconciliation takes place – others share the joy.

A lot of this happens in the context of classes and other small groups because intimacy requires relationships of depth, and these relationships take time. We have to be willing to spend time with each other to develop the kind of caring connections we need. This is the primary reason why we had a churchwide retreat, why it was so meaningful and why we are working on the next one already.

Not everyone could go on this retreat, and I don't want any of us to relive those experiences of our youth when we missed the big retreat everyone talked about so much that we felt left out, but I do want to encourage future participation in retreats and other opportunities of service, learning and fellowship wherein we spend time with each other. That's how trust is built, that's how fellowship is deepened, that's how we learn to care for each other even better than we do now.

And I should add that we help each other with financial needs too. We may not practice communal living, but we have a crisis assistance fund to help church members, the Mike Morris Fellowship Fund to help people in our community and we help in many other ways. If the church on its best behavior has the kind of fellowship where all needs are addressed, including financial needs, we are often on our best behavior.

There is one other thing we should note about the church on its best behavior – it exudes a kind of joy that invites others into the community and helps build the realm of God. Acts says of the early church that they eat their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people, and day by day the Lord adds to their number those who are being saved.

Whatever else the early church does, it grows, but notice two things about this growth. First, it happens not because the people devise just the right program through which to send out messengers door-to-door to recite the four spiritual laws, but because there is a contagious spirit within the community which attracts others, a spirit of love, joy and generosity. Second, it happens because God uses this good spirit. *The Lord* adds to their number day by day. God gives the growth.

The early church doesn't continue to grow at this pace and we need to be careful not to take all the numbers literally, given how few people live in Jerusalem at this time. There are quarrels about whether Gentiles should be included and if they are, whether they should be circumcised, and when there are quarrels, growth is hindered; but on its best behavior, the early church is used by God to usher people into God's realm.

So are we. We do not engage in many overtly evangelical efforts. We are too bashful about our faith. And our spirit is not always joyful. Like all churches made up of human beings, we sometimes have differences we struggle to handle as we should. But at our best, and this is the vast majority of the time, this is a warm and inviting community with much to offer the world. The key is that we realize that when it comes to evangelism, like every other area of church life, who we are matters more than what we do; how we relate to and care for each other provides the most powerful witness of what we experience in Christ.

This is true of the witness we give to people who have all but given up on church. We need to model a way of love that overcomes the negative images they have. This is true of the witness we give to those who have never found God or been found by God. We need to exude the kind of joy that attracts people to faith. But this is also true of the witness we provide for our own children who learn more from how we live than what we say. They too are a part of our evangelical concern, though at times they are the ones who ask might us to be on our best behavior. Children often get it right more than adults.

Many of us saw the story about a group of people saving a family, including their four-month-old, from drowning in the recent floods in Texas. The rescuers were black, white and Latino; the family was white; but no one cared. There was an obvious need and the best of humanity came out. That doesn't always happen; athletes hear racial slurs, bigots are running off an Elon professor whose husband is Latino; but at our best as human beings, there is much to admire.

The same can be said of the church. We don't always get it right, we do some hurtful and petty things, but at our best, we worship God, we take care of people in need and we live in such a way that attracts others out to the faith. Not always, but at our best, we do.