

Acts 2:42-47 Christian Fellowship

The first twelve years of my life, my family lived in a close-knit neighborhood centered around a Catholic parish called St. Gregory's in St. Ann, MO. There was a school and a convent and a park called Mary Ridge right around the corner. Needless to say, most of the people that lived in the community were Catholic and attended the parish church. Most of the school-aged children attended the parochial school and played on the CYC soccer and baseball and basketball teams. In addition to the park the schoolyard served as a local playground and gathering place. Though I was never fully a part of it, being a baptist, I was struck by the sense of community in the neighborhood.

Furthermore, WW2 had been a kind of generational equalizer; people of slightly different ages spanning 10 years or more all got caught up the war, and then began their families at the same time, sort of harmonizing their stages of life for a while in a way that has disappeared from American life almost altogether.

And the neighborhood was built before the interstate system and people tended to live near where they worked, which for many of them, in this case, was a company called McDonnell-Douglas, which made airplanes, fighter jets mostly.

In most homes, there was one car, one telephone, one television with only 6 TV stations including the 3 networks, PBS, and a couple of local stations. There was no cable, no computers, no internet. Everybody watched Johnny Carson. People were likely to work at the same job and live in the same house, worship at the same church for decades.

Not everything was perfect, there was the usual display of human failure and sinfulness. Yet the forces drawing people together into "community" were stronger than they are now, stronger than those pulling them apart.

Changing Times

Times have changed. There is no use longing for a past that can't be recovered and wasn't perfect anyway. With the advent of interstates and air travel, the internet and social media, and the lack of universally-experienced culture-building events, it seems that the forces pulling people apart are stronger in recent times and stronger than those pulling together. The sense of belonging to a community is waning, at least for a time. People find community in a large variety of different ways.

There have always been "differences" that threatened hostility and had the potential for conflict, but now were

are seeing those differences played out in a way that rattles the foundations of our lives a little and raises our collective and individual anxiety levels.

We are in a period of social decay and decline. Nothing we do is successful against it, we see frustration and anger building all around. Some are frightened. It is hard to see a positive future.

Community in Acts

For the Jewish people in Palestine 2,000 years ago it was also a period of social decay. The institutions were corrupt and there was a sense of chaos. It was the first century of the Roman Empire, characterized by rapid change, untidy organization and violence. The Romans ran a vast military organization and pretty much rolled over any obstacles in their way.

By the year 70 CE Jerusalem would be conquered, “sacked,” as they say; depopulated. Collective and individual anxiety levels were high. The breaking down of the life they knew was already past.

It is in this context of trauma and decay that the Christian movement got its start. It is not surprising that one of the descriptions of it they remember well enough to put in their history was the sense of togetherness and community the church provided for

its members right from the start, while everything was falling apart around them.

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, and to the “fellowship,” to the breaking of bread and to prayer. There was a reverence for what was happening, and many miracles. They held everything in common in a way we do not, with our individualism and right to own property. They shared glad and sincere hearts.

Recent Events

Though America has always had its divisions, not to mention its national sins, recent events have exposed the diminishing of our communal life. Last year’s election as well as the racial division in our country that has been emphasized recently stand as examples of these events.

But there is something else going on. Last year we participated in the Delaware Family Festival, a “block party” event that arose out of the downtown churches and nonprofits. Over the fall the Delaware Community Coalition has enlisted the city government, police and sheriff departments, and several local congregations to work towards a better sense of community and racial healing. Last Sunday night there was a community worship service at First Presbyterian Church, and for

the foreseeable future there will be other 5th Sunday events.

In addition, there is work towards the building of basketball courts in Blue Limestone Park, and there is the tradition of first Fridays on Sandusky St. and on the night before the election, 200 or so people gathered at William Street UMC for an election eve service to pray for harmony and healing of what we perceive to be an increasingly broken community.

I am not sure where all these things are going but I am convinced they reveal an acknowledgment of lost fellowship and a deep hunger to restore it, in spite of powerful forces working against it.

Christian Fellowship

We long for something like what has been described in the Book of Acts. The word is “koinonia” and it means family among ordinary people, life in common.

I know that things today are not like they used to be, either in the first century or in the first few decades of post-WW2 America. In both cases, however, the church played the role of a catalyst for community; and it was not just an ad hoc phenomenon, it was policy . . . doctrine. From the very first they named it,

and they devoted themselves to it - koinonia - fellowship - community.

I am not sure what it might be like in the future either, but I am sure that the church ought to be a unifying force in a fragmenting world. There are some Christians who do not believe this and believe the church should separate from the world, and their case would be that this is “Christian Fellowship,” described here in Acts 2, not some watered-down secular imitation. And their point is well-taken. Others believe it is the church’s role to change the world, against its will, if necessary.

On a broad reading of the bible, however, the safe conclusion is that Christian Fellowship can drive the sense of community in the larger world; serves as the catalyst, especially in places where Christianity has been the dominant religious expression. When Christians lose fellowship - the world loses.

We are presently threatened by that loss. We may not be able to recover some past version of Christian Fellowship, we can, by the grace of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, discover it anew. Whatever else may be said about it, if the scriptures are our guide, then we can know some of its characteristics:

Setting aside of fear, absence of malice and anger, acceptance and inclusion of those who are different, generosity, compassion, mercy, courage, love.

And that is the teaching of the apostles, and along with devotion to prayer and the breaking of bread, the fellowship; they were devoted to it, and their devotion gave them hope, and gives us hope, that the deep longing for human friendship in community that is present in every age will come at last, in the name of Christ.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)