

“Day by Day in the Beloved Community”
Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
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Acts 2:42-47 Homily
First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
For Private Distribution Only

This is a wonderful text to be encountering on a Sunday when we ourselves are increasing our own numbers, isn't it? And, yes, it is one of the officially sanctioned lectionary texts for the day. As so often happens under the Holy Spirit's guidance, this passage fell on just the right day in the life of our church.

And a beautiful text it is, speaking as it does of having all things in common; of the awe, the wonders and signs, the selflessness, and the glad and generous hearts of the people of the very earliest church; not to mention, the goodwill of all the people around them. These are inspiring images, yes, but also a little intimidating, perhaps. Realistically, can we as a community of faith ever hope to soar to such heights? And, in a denominational culture that tends to value matters of intellect over the more emotionally charged landscape of awe and signs and wonders, is it even something we aspire to?

Besides, *these events* occurred at a time when Jesus' death and resurrection were the *recent memories* of first-person witnesses--at the first Pentecost: The fire and the wind and the tongues had just descended upon the disciples, attracted a diversity of devout Jews, and enabled them to suddenly and inexplicably understand one another's foreign tongues. Peter had preached a Spirit-filled sermon to the crowd, after which 3000 people were baptized. And, just like that, the fledgling Church grew from 120--just a few more folks than our own congregation--to 3120. Can we even begin to imagine that kind of spiritual power and magnetism in our midst, let alone that kind of exponential church growth? What would we even do if our ranks were to swell like

that? In this building, we'd have to have about 15 Sunday worship services to accommodate them all!

...And therein lies a major difference between us and them: with the physical structures and the human infrastructure, we now possess, our feet are pretty well rooted to the ground. They had a degree of freedom and flexibility that we no longer enjoy, encumbered as we can sometimes be by the physical and financial upkeep of a building and a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization. We have sound system and sexton duties to contend with. We have a steeple to be painted, an organ to be maintained, paraments to be changed, bulletins to be printed and distributed, meetings to be attended and minutes to be taken.--All manner of seemingly mundane details, which don't tend to feel very spiritual and certainly don't inspire anything in us that begins to approach awe or wonder. I daresay that, in this respect at least, their situation was much simpler, meeting in homes as they did, pre-dating formal church doctrine, a Roman Empire-imposed structure, and our global economy.

But lest we mistake the Early Church's situation for some kind of a long-term, primitive Christian utopia, we should skip ahead a little in the book of Acts. For two chapters later, in Chapter 4, Peter and John are arrested for preaching of Jesus' resurrection. So much for the goodwill of all the people around them... And then in Chapter 5, we learn that a couple has defrauded the community by selling a piece of property and secretly keeping some proceeds for themselves. So much for having all things in common ...

Not surprisingly, there has been a bit of scholarly debate over the question of whether Acts 2's beautiful description of the Early Church was indeed a *realistic, historical* depiction...or whether

it was always more of an *idealized* vision upon which believers could lay their hopes. Given the influence of Hellenistic philosophies at that time, it is quite possible that the author was presenting a *template* for the perfect church, the Platonic Ideal of which we are merely a shadow image.

In the end, I'm not sure it matters. Factually based or idealized, that author also provided us with the recipe for this healthy, growing church. Here it is

Step 1: Devote selves to the apostles' teaching.

Step 2: Devote selves to fellowship.

Step 3: Devote selves to the breaking of bread.

Step 4: Devote selves to prayers.

Repeat day by day.

Yield: Praise and awe, wonders and signs, glad and generous hearts, increasing numbers.

The upshot is that, when we focus on the right things —Christian fellowship and teaching, prayer and table communion—we can more palpably experience the Holy Spirit in our midst—within and between us, as well as the kind of generosity, hospitality, and joy described in Acts 2.

The Holy Spirit and these spiritual gifts she bestows, they are difficult to contain. And, frankly, why would we want to? Not only do they overflow with abundant love and energy, but they possess the seeds of creativity and vision, --those things that will lead us forward, helping us to re-imagine what the beloved community can look like in and for today's Cadillac and tomorrow's.

As much as we might like to, for the time being we can't abandon stewardship or building maintenance or meetings. But we can let the Holy Spirit we encounter in worship and fellowship and communion spill over into all of those earth-bound areas. We can invite her to come out to play even in the places that feel like work; to inform, energize and inspire us in *all* facets of our church life.

Today we can rejoice in the gift of these new members who join us in the beloved community. Tomorrow we shall see what God has in store for us next. Let's not let Acts 2's images of perfection overwhelm us. But let's not rule out the possibilities they point to either.

Amen.