

## “After Pentecost, Then What Happened?”

By Rev. Dorothy Churn LaPenta, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Psalm 29; Acts 2:37-47

I was inspired by the video shown this morning during the Time With Young Christians as some of our youth and their leaders **taught** us what might be included in a Christian Survival Kit; those items which remind and connect us to the teachings of our faith: a mustard seed, a needle, clay, a candle, a heart, a dime, a block, a toothpick, a stone, a passage of scripture to begin the day- each connected to a Bible verse.

What would you include in your Christian survival kit? I decided that, in addition to all that was named, there would be two books that I would put into my kit. (They're rather small. I think they would fit.) I would put in this Daily Prayer Book of Prayer, even though the writing gets smaller every day, because the scriptures tell us, “In everything by prayer and supplication, make your requests known to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

Then I thought that I also would need this book that I have come to rely upon as a pastor. It is called the “The Presbyterian Handbook for Pastors.” In Acts 20:28, we are told, pay careful attention to yourselves and your flock. The Holy Spirit has called you to shepherd the church of God.” This handbook takes real situations that come up in the daily life of a pastor and offers guidance with some humor, because we pastors tend to take ourselves too seriously. It's very practical, like “Nine Things About Parish Ministry That They Never Mentioned in Seminary,” “How To Avoid Becoming the Pastor You Swore You'd Never Be,” “How To Preach A Stewardship Sermon Without Sounding Like You're Begging For A Raise,” “How To Recover from Christmas and Easter” “What To Do When You Forget Someone's Name,” “How To Wing a Sermon When You've left Your Notes At Home,” and even “How To Get Out Of a Traffic Ticket.” (I have never consulted that one.)

Yes, I would add these to my Christian Survival Kit. I wonder what would have been in the survival kit of those earliest Christians, those followers of Jesus who gathered after Pentecost before they even called themselves Christians.

The story of how the early church laid its foundations is told in The Acts of the Apostles. That was such a long time ago. What could the first-century church possibly have to teach us? These first-century friends were quite a bunch, a very diverse group of people who were called to follow Jesus. Could their stories in some way enlighten us into the ways of using the lens of our faith to connect to one another and to the world?

For a few weeks this summer, the sermons will be based on texts from The Acts of the Apostles written, we believe, by Luke as continuation of Luke's Gospel. This is not a mere, dry institutional history of the church. Neither is it a harmless account of the people and the locations. It's quite an adventure, just like being the church today should be an adventure which requires genuine connection to God and to each other.

In her commentary on The Acts of the Apostles, Dr. Beverly Gaventa writes, “the church exists as evidence of God’s plan and God’s activity in the world. The church draws its existence from God’s initiatives rather than our own good ideas.” In other words, we have a job to do, a calling. We believe that it is God in Jesus Christ who connects us, unites us, brings us together in baptism, communion and through the gift of the Holy Spirit in order that we can bring God’s good intentions into play in our lives and in the world.

We still have the swooshes hanging in the sanctuary to remind us of last week’s Pentecost story; a rush of wind, the tongues of fire, speaking in different languages and Peter preaching. Well, how do you follow a story like the Pentecost story? What happened after Pentecost?

There was a lot of emotion. Those who experienced that day were cut to the heart. They were stunned. There was the realization of the truth in all the teachings of Jesus. Jesus, the crucified one, the risen one, was the Lord sent by God and just - as he had promised - the Spirit descended so that those early followers could continue the work of Jesus, Lord and Savior.

It was a conversion experience on that first Pentecost. Maybe we cannot pinpoint a singular moment or event in our lives as a conversion experience. But as we listen to those who have had this experience there seems to be an intensity of joy associated with conversion.

But we can’t expect to just continuously exist in that moment of intense joy and that’s the problem at times with conversion experiences. As soon as there is controversy or failure, or hardship, the convert becomes disillusioned. ‘What happened to my joy?’

Therefore, Peter seizes the moment when asked by those who have been consumed with Pentecost, “What are we to do?” The Holy Spirit has come upon them, but that was no guarantee for a continued haven of safety, success, comfort, and freedom from the cares of the world. This could be a long, hard road. In his answer, Peter does not offer helpful hints in leading a more fulfilled life. He doesn’t give them useful projects to work on and no feel-good platitudes. He says, “Repent and be baptized.” Turn from competing beliefs and connect to God by following Jesus. Be followers.

Truth be told, Jesus often said to the disciples nothing more than “Follow me,” That’s not always satisfactory for us. We want to know “why,” what to anticipate down this road and exactly what are the twists and turns. What are we in for? We get none of that. Just “Repent and be baptized.” Follow, stay connected to Jesus. And as these early converts taught us, we connect to Jesus by connecting with one another.

Gerald May who was a spiritual director in the DC area and started the Shalem Institute always said that spirituality can be a very unique and individual experience. Each person’s faith story is different from another’s story. But Gerry May did not mean that we exist in isolation with our faith stories and that all that matters is God and me. Our faith with all the hard questions

and uncertainties becomes realized and meaningful in the context of community where we can be nurtured and learn and discover and grow in faith.

These early faith communities had practices that brought them together and strengthened them and in the Acts of the Apostles, these practices get handed to us. Sometimes we read the Bible and we think, “what did I just read?” But you can’t get much clearer than reading about what these early followers did. They devoted themselves to **teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer.**

They didn’t have Bibles, but they definitively had their version of Bible study; hearing the Old Testament prophecies through the lens of Jesus’ life and ministry and listening to the apostles’ stories about Jesus and what was mattered to him. They listened to accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection and what it meant. They saw the signs and wonders of God’s healing at work in the world. They discerned their own calling in continuing Jesus’ work.

Where is your experience today of learning the stories of our faith? How are you taught as a lifelong learner of the faith? You have some good adult study opportunities at Prince of Peace. And there are leaders hard at work here making sure our children learn the stories of our faith.

**They devoted themselves to teaching.** These early Christians gathered for fellowship. The Greek word for fellowship is “koinonia,” It implies friendship. It is not necessarily the kind of friendship where we share our deepest, darkest secrets. This is a friendship where we hold things in common, trying to see the directions to which our beliefs point us. We may not all think the same or hold the same positions or agree on how to go about something. But we believe coming together matters. We believe that feeding the hungry is important, seeking justice, caring for creation, bearing hope in a world where things at times seem hopeless, taking love to places that need it.

Included in this fellowship is the generous practice of sharing possessions. The church is to be an inclusive community where the conditions of the least, the lame, the lost and the last can be transformed. The biblical scholar Robert Wall writes that when you read Acts the message that’s obvious is that there can be no economic policy more prudent than one that cultivates a community of goods in which divisions are dismantled so that there is enough for all. This is the sharing of possession practiced by these communities.

**They devoted themselves to fellowship and the breaking of bread.** They shared meals as Jesus so often did, inviting those to the table who might not have been included in other circles. For the community of faith, there is always room for another place setting, another table or chair to be added because salvation is for all.

**They devoted themselves to prayer.** The last practice listed in this text is prayer, praising God, worship. The gift of the Spirit brought together a community committed to work for the highest aspirations of human longing-unity, peace, joy, justice and praising the God who wants these things to happen.

I read an article by Jill Lepore called “It’s Just Too Much.” about “burnout.” The article begins, “Burnout is generally said to date back to 1972, at least that’s around when it got its name. By the 1980s everyone was burned out. It’s an informative article that traces how burnout has become the human condition. Now, there’s far more detail than I am sharing here. But towards the end of the article, she writes, “What can explain the astonishing rise of and spread of this affliction known as “burnout?””

Her next sentence which stopped me in my tracks was: “Declining church membership comes to mind. In 1985, seventy one percent of Americans belonged to a house of worship which is about what that percentage had been since the 1940s. In 2020, only forty-seven percent belonged to an institution of faith. Many of the recommended ways we have of addressing burnout-wellness, mindfulness, meditation are really secularized versions of prayer, Sabbath keeping and worship.”

I was ready to do cartwheels. But then she goes on to say “The explanation for burnout as the decline in membership of faith communities only goes so far because actually the emergence of the prosperity gospel has made American Christianity a religion of achievement. And it doesn’t seem that praying, honoring the Sabbath and attending worships services prevent people from burning out because church web sites are packed with warnings and articles about burnout and especially clergy burnout.”

So, what’s happening? Our practices cannot just be rituals that we check off a list as having accomplished. Within these practices passed to us by these early Christians, we must connect to Jesus and to one another, and that takes time, investment, and commitment.

I am so inspired by some of the communications I have read from the deacons to their small groups. There’s been a lot of discussion about these small groups in the deacons’ meetings because our deacons do not want these gatherings to become just an event to check off in a list of summer activities. They don’t know where these groups will go or what will take shape within the life of them; perhaps just one or two meaningful gatherings, perhaps something that will continue. What they want is a time and an occasion which invites connections which help us grow into all that the Holy Spirit gives to deepen our faith.

Now, back to those survival kits. As I hear and learn about these early believers and as I think about the messages our deacons have written to their small groups, I realize that I left out what’s most important in my survival kit. But what is **most important** is what I cannot possibly fit into any backpack and I wouldn’t want to. What I cannot do without is you, and you and you and all of you. You see this thing called faith is too demanding for one individual believer. I can’t do it by myself, and God knows that!

To survive we have been given the gift of each other: koinonia, fellowship and friendship because prayer and sabbath keeping and worship and Bible study and mission are not isolated events. What we experience together is not a fleeting spiritual intensity, but a different enthusiasm, one that involves praising God and desiring good will for all God’s people. It’s an

enthusiasm and an energy that requires that we stay connected to God and to one another. After Pentecost, what did the followers do? Acts 2, verse 44. All who believed came together in community with glad and generous hearts.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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