

Life: Bold and spicy

The Church: Wild and Free

Acts 2:40-47

September 30, 2007

11:00 AM Version

Six years ago we packed the entire family – me, Julie, four kids and no dog – and moved across the country from Minnesota to Long Island. Those of you who have made major moves know that you don't just change locations; you make all kinds of adjustments and adaptations. For instance, we had to stop calling things that support trees "Ruts"; they are "ROOOOTS." A "pop" is really a "soda." We learned that people fly through red lights as they are laughing and talking on their cell phones. We learned complicated last names – not Johnson and Olson and Nelson, but convoluted names with 5-6 vowels. We learned new ways of relating to people: how an in-your-face assertiveness can quickly give way to equally intense expressions of love and loyalty. You see, we didn't just move 1,300 miles; we joined a different culture, which, to some extent, involved learning a new language, new eating habits, new priorities, new practices, new rules, and new relationships. In the same way, becoming a follower of Jesus means learning a new culture, adapting to a new community, learning a new language, establishing new priorities, and developing new relationships.

In the little vignette you just heard, we have a picture of a much more profound shift from one culture to another: it's all about becoming a follower of Jesus. In this vignette 3,000 people moved from not following Jesus to become followers of Jesus. By the way, the author of Acts, a brilliant physician and historian named Luke, loved to drop these vignettes or short summaries into his story about the early church. He cared deeply about historical accuracy (see Acts 1:1-4) and editorial precision. In other words, he wasn't just making up tall tales. He was sifting through his various sources in order to piece together an accurate retelling of real historical events.

Now notice in this story to trust Jesus and join the church meant much more than signing your name on a membership roll; it meant that you had switched kingdoms. You had switched from the Kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of light. The kingdom of darkness involves all the things that used to hold us in bondage (see Ephesians 2:1-3 and Titus 2:3). Christ came not just to bring us into a church building; he came to set us free in Him to join a new kingdom. And this kingdom involves a new community. In biblical language of verse 40 we are saved "from this crooked generation." That doesn't mean that everyone around you is thoroughly rotten, creepy and unfriendly. It does mean that we live in a world bent away from the glory and goodness and truth of God (see Romans 1:18, 21). So when people who suppress the truth and don't give thanks and glory to God gather into institutions and communities and families and marriages, they form crooked institutions and families. All of these crooked institutions combined form a crooked and perverse generation. So we are told to be saved from this crooked generation – i.e. join a new kingdom.

And then, very importantly, we take the first step which declares our new allegiance, our new transfer of kingdoms: baptism (see verse 41). When a new follower of Jesus was immersed in the baptismal waters, she declared to everyone – God, angels, demons, friends, neighbors, family members – “I belong to Christ. I belong to His kingdom of Light. I am done with the kingdom of darkness. And I want the whole world to know it.” The outward act of baptism gives flesh to the inward reality of my new allegiance to Jesus and to His kingdom.

Let me stop and ask: do you belong to Jesus Christ? Have you ever switched kingdoms? I know that’s sever language, but we’re talking about a life turned around. Are you just hanging around church, dabbling and grazing in Christian spirituality? Or has it seized you so that you have been transplanted from the Kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of Light? How do I do that? You ask. See verse 21. You call on the name of Jesus.

Now what does this look like? How do those who belong to this new kingdom, this new generation, this new Savior named Jesus, how do they act? How do they live different lives in community?

Notice it begins in verse 42 by telling us, “They were devoted...” The word devoted is a strong word which means focusing hard, refusing distractions, and being strongly committed to something. It’s the opposite of playing around as the church. What were they devoted to as the new community?

First, they were devoted to learning. See verse 42 – “They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching...” As someone has said, the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem on that day. All of a sudden they had 3,000 new followers of Jesus and 3,000 new church members in spiritual kindergarten. So they became learners and the spiritual leaders of the church became teachers.

Throughout the New Testament there is a clear body of teaching that forms the core of Christian faith. The apostles did not have the right to invent it or to alter it; they merely had an obligation to pass it on as clearly and succinctly and lovingly as possible (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-3). That’s how we learn and relearn to adapt and live in our new culture, our new community. Now teaching, or passing on this body of knowledge, requires that we become learners. Are you a learner in God’s school? We’re never done learning. (Story about Dr. Bob Tuttle).

Teaching also requires a teacher, an instructor, someone who will teach us and lead us and mentor us. Notice who the teachers are: the apostles. Keep in mind that to many of us the apostles – with names like Peter and James and John – were famous, influential people. But remember that at this time they were nobodies. Actually, a few chapters later some of the religious leaders were amazed that the apostles could teach anyone because they were “unschooled and ordinary” people. So if you were in the early church, you might have sneered with contempt: “Why are they teaching me? Who gives them the right to be over me? What do they know that I don’t know? His or her life is far from

perfect; how can they mentor me in the Christian faith?” I can just rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to lead me into direct knowledge. Sometimes that’s true, but the usual means is for the Holy Spirit to work through ordinary means – ordinary bread and wine, ordinary hands lifted up in prayer, ordinary people in ordinary places with ordinary names and jobs and body odors, ordinary men and women who stand before us and open God’s word to us.

As shocking and as unspiritual as that may sound, that is the essence of Christian spirituality. That’s how the new kingdom gets into us: through others, ordinary people, ordinary hands, ordinary touch, ordinary bread and wine. That’s how we grow as followers of Jesus.¹

Are you a learner, a disciple? Dr. Bob Tuttle story.

Second, they were devoted to relationships. Notice verse “they devoted themselves to ... fellowship.” The Greek word for fellowship is a very important New Testament word: *koinonia*. Its primary root was sharing – not just things, not just time, not just a bagel or coffee, but sharing life together. That’s what Christians do: we share our lives together.

Notice how seriously they took this idea of sharing life together: read verses 44-45. Does that sound a little crazy, a little cult-like? Does that make you a little nervous? It should. On the one hand, I can calm your fears and tell you that they didn’t do this all the time. The Bible never abolishes private property as a rule. Both verbs in verse 45 are in the imperfect tense, suggesting that this happened as the need arose. It was one of the practices of belonging to the new community, the kingdom of Jesus. People care for each other on a deep level. It happened again in Acts 4:34-35. It’s mentioned again in 1 John ---. That’s how Christians lived.

Another way to say this, is that getting saved from a perverse generation, learning the new language of the kingdom, involves learning one new big priority: it’s the priority of loving relationships. In the kingdom of Jesus, love matters. Loving relationships matter – even when it costs us something.

In his book entitled *Unconditional Love*, Father John Powell tells the story about a twenty-four year old man named Tommy who is dying of cancer. At one stage, before his death, Tommy comes to Father Powell who asks Tommy:

“What’s it like to be only twenty-four and dying?”

“Well, it could be worse.”

¹ In Ingmar Bergman’s movie *The Serpent’s Egg* there’s a scene that powerfully illustrates this. A pastor has just finished a worship service when a middle-aged, needy, lonely woman walks into his office and starts sobbing and protesting that she is unlovable: “I’m so alone, nobody loves me! God is so far away! I don’t think he could love me anyway. Not the way I am! Everything is so dark for me!” At first the minister is tired and annoyed but finally he says, “Kneel down and I will bless you. God seems far away. He cannot touch you right now, I know that, but I am going to put my hands on your head and touch you – to let you know that you are not alone, not unlovable, not in the darkness. God is here and God does love you. When I touch you, God will touch you.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like being fifty and having no values or ideals, like being fifty and thinking that booze, seducing women, and making money are the real ‘biggies’ in life. ...

Then Father Powell comments: “The essential sadness is to go through life without loving. But it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.” In the church, the new family, the greatest tragedy is not being poor; it’s not suffering and heartache; it’s not failure; it’s not being scorned and persecuted for your faith; it’s not even losing your life for the sake of the Gospel: the greatest tragedy is our failure to love one another well.

So let me ask you: are there some people in your life that you do not love well? Are there relationships that are strained? That’s certainly understandable. We all struggle in this area. But are you willing to forgive? Are you willing to understand? Are you willing to love well? Are you willing to walk with people from broken relationships to healed relationships – as far as is possible on your end? Can you stand before a holy God, a God who bore the wounds of the cross, and say to him, “Yes, Lord Jesus, I did everything, and I mean everything, I could do to make that relationship right?” Can you really say, “Yes, Lord, I left no stone unturned?” If you can’t, then you have some work to do.

At this point, let me add one comment: this description sounds almost true good to be true. This is the church on its best day. Let me warn you: this is the ideal church. This describes a time in the church life when everything was running on all cylinders. The church doesn’t always look like this. How do I handle the times when it does not meet my expectations? I’m not talking about blatant abuse or emotional torture, but for the ordinary hurts and disappointments that we accumulate, let me offer not just words of comfort but also words of challenge. Ronald Rohlheiser said:

Away from actual, historical church community, whatever its faults, we have an open field to live the unconflicted life, to make religion a private fantasy that we can selectively share with a few like-minded individuals who will never confront us where we most need challenge ... In community the truth emerges and fantasies are dispelled. Not being involved with church because of the church’s faults is often a great rationalization. What is too painful to deal with is not the church’s imperfection but my own fantasies about my own goodness, which, in the grind of real community, will become painfully obvious. Nobody deflates us more than does our own family. The same is true of the church. Not all of this is bad.

Third, they were devoted to worship and prayer.

See verse 46. Notice that they did this together. Their togetherness, their worshipping together and being unified in it was so important to them. That’s why at Three Village

church we've said that our unity in worship matters more than our preferences for worship. But here are a two non-negotiable parts of worship that we have to balance:

1. First, their worship was both formal and informal. It took place in the temple courts and in their homes. The temple courts means that we were firmly established in the historical traditions of Jewish synagogue worship. It was ordered and structured and beautiful and historically-rich and influenced by thousands of years of tradition and rituals and symbols. They weren't just making it all up as they went along. But it was also informal and relaxed because it happened in their homes.
2. Secondly, it was both joyful and reverent. See verse 46 – “with glad and sincere hearts.” One of the fruits or signs that the Holy Spirit is at work is joy. As John Stott said, “It is right in our public worship to be dignified; it is unforgivable to be dull.” Joy should be the mark of every one of our worship services. At the same time, joy should be tied with reverence. Notice verse 43. This was a holy awe and respect.

Is that what you want to bring to God as we worship together – both the formal and the informal, the joyful and the reverent?

What happened as a result of this new community, the devotion of God's people to the things described in verse 42? Look at verse 47. People were drawn into their community.