



What Should Church Do?
Sermon by Reverend Andrew Packman
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
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Reading: Acts Chapter 2

Now, when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other disciples, apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone from the Lord our God, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him. And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came over everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who had believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." Word of God, Word of life.

Sermon:

Well, good morning, Bethlehem. It is good to be back with you in real human space. It's really good to be back in this pulpit after something of a long absence from it. As many of you know, I've been a little preoccupied for the last few months finishing a dissertation. And this meant I haven't done

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much preaching or really much of anything else besides writing and editing and scrutinizing over this document that is now finally submitted. So, but now that it is submitted, something I'm very grateful for, I'm also grateful to be back here with you. I'm grateful for the invitation from your pastoral staff and excited to turn our attention to something of real importance, this passage here in Acts Chapter 2. Specifically, I want to focus on the question that starts this passage off. It's spoken from the lips of those newly-converted Christ followers who had just witnessed the event of Pentecost. And the question is this. Friends, what should we do now? Now, this can be really the main question. It's what our family asks each other on the rare occasion we don't have a pre-ordained plan. We wake up in the morning, you don't have to go to work, we don't have to take the kids to school, and we look at each other and say, "How should we spend this one day together? What should we do?" But the question can be much more profound and the stakes much higher. The young couple that's been dating happily for a while will eventually start to say to themselves, so this relationship seems to be going in a good direction. What are we going to do about it? The children of an aging parent who is declining to the point that they can't take care of themselves anymore will eventually ask the question, so what should we do about dad. Or in a particularly vivid example, at least for this preacher, the graduate whose been working for years on an intense academic program finally reaches the finish line and asks, what should I do now. What was this all for? The question emerges in its most poignant form in these moments of life that are marked by thresholds, moments when it becomes clear that something significant has changed, that life can't go on as it had before. Young love matures into something more enduring, something that grows out and supersedes the bounds of a mere dating relationship. Aging bodies diminish and become dependent on the care of others. One career is finally getting off the ground and others are coming in for a landing as they retire. These threshold moments force us to make decisions about how to navigate these new circumstances that we don't know

how to navigate. The early followers of Christ in Acts are in just one of these kinds of threshold situations. They'd just borne witness to the miraculous events of Pentecost. They watched the Holy Spirit's descent in tongues of fire. They witnessed the apostles speaking in all manners of languages. Peter preaches a sermon so powerful that it convert 3,000. This was a lot to take in. And the scripture says that after all of this, the new converts were cut to their hearts. They knew in their bones that everything had changed, that they couldn't go on living as they had before. But what they still didn't know yet was how they would change or exactly what this would really mean for their everyday lives going forward. They were struck with a sense of confusion. And this is what lies behind the question that they asked Peter when they say, brothers, what should we do now. I think it's safe to say that we've been living through a threshold of our own, probably the most significant global threshold moment of our lives. This pandemic has left its mark on every corner of our planet. And to be sure, its impact has been grotesquely uneven, based on where we live and how much we have. But there is no human being on Earth whose life has not been somehow affected by the events of these last 15 months. And surely no one with a pulse could say that they haven't been cut to the heart by the sheer magnitude of this death and loss and grief that is ripping through our world. Even for those of us fortunate ones who never got sick, the difference between pre-pandemic life and whatever this is that we're currently living now is palpable. The patterns and routines that used to give order to our lives, school schedules, office protocols, grandparent visits, social norms as basic as handshakes and hugs, all of these have been transformed right before our eyes. It seems almost like we're inhabiting a different world than the one we knew in 2019. The same thing is said about the church. If someone told me back in 2019 that we'd been celebrating Easter and Christmas on YouTube, that the Friday morning men's Bible study that I lead would be meeting on Zoom for the better part of a year, and that Pastor Sarah would be leading congregational meetings from a desk in

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the corner of our bedroom at home, I'd have thought you were crazy. This all happened last year, and this is all a lot to take in. So even as pandemic life slowly creeps into post-pandemic life, it would hardly be surprising if we, like those early Christians outside of Jerusalem all those years ago, are feeling confused. We know in our bones that things have changed, but what that really means for us going forward or what it means for us about being the church in this brave new world remains an open question. What, church, should we do? I don't pretend to know the ultimate meaning of this event in the last 18 months. The pandemic isn't even over yet, after all, and clarity about changes of this magnitude will take years and decades, probably, to register. But I do think that in this passage, these ten short verses in Acts we find something of God's word speaking to us to direct us in this moment of confusion and bewilderment. In response to their confusion, Peter offers the church in Jerusalem two simple words of instruction. Repent and be baptized. Baptism is the most [inaudible] of the two. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, tells us that all 3,000 of these new converts went out to be baptized and dunked in the water and to receive baptism. The repent part is more complicated. I don't know what you hear when you hear the word "repent," but when I do, the image of an angry preacher wagging his finger at you and telling you to cut out all the drinking and smoking and carousing comes to mind. Repent, turn away from the ways that you've been living. At least in this context, though, Peter isn't scolding the church. He's not reprimanding anybody for succumbing to temptation. The Greek word here for repent that Peter used uses denotes really a much more encompassing and thorough going transformation. This is a call not just to dial back your personal license but to fundamentally and utterly reorient how you're living. To turn away from one way of being in the world and to turn towards something else, something richer, something fuller, something more ultimate. So what does this way of life look like concretely? Luke fills in the picture and in Acts 2:42 where he breaks this new way of life down to four component parts, the same ones that I just shared with our children. The earliest

Christians, Luke writes, devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. If this sounds familiar, this is because Christians have, in one form or another, followed this pattern for every Sunday for two millennia. Baptists and Methodists, Catholics and Lutherans, Orthodox and Pietists, all of these have attempted to recreate, in their own way, this model. It is the basic blueprint for Christians. When we gather we read scripture. We study the apostles' teaching. We spend time together to support and encourage one another. We engage in fellowship. We eat together and take communion, break bread. And we offer up to God our deepest longings and gratitudes. That is, we pray. Now, this four-part scheme is deceptively simple. There's a lot more to say about each of these practices, and a whole sermon could be given on any one of them. But the point I want to make today is that in this time of crisis and confusion, when the early church was on the threshold of something that they knew not what, Peter calls them back to basics. He brings it down to the brass tacks, what we're really about as followers of this Christ. And specifically, he gives them concrete things to go and do. I think there's real wisdom in this passage for us. It tells us that we don't have to have this all figured out before we start living into this next chapter. The earliest Christians didn't have a refined organizational structure or a coherent set of doctrines. That would take generations. Or a robust youth ministry. Those things didn't come about until the 20th century. All of that would eventually come, but it all started by focusing on these bread-and-butter practices of Christian life. The study of scripture, fellowship, communion, and prayer. And as I've already intimated, these bread-and-butter practices are already happening here. They're happening right now. In fact, they've been happening throughout the pandemic because of leadership that the pastoral staff and support staff who have allowed those things to carry on, even in the darkest days of this plague. I think there's wisdom, then, in times of confusion to going back to the brass tacks, to these bread-and-butter practices. And whatever is going to come, let

those converge with these core things that Christians have done for millennium. That's the first insight. The second insight I think is this. In addition to being disruptive and anxiety producing, times of crisis are also an opportunity to step back and ask deeper questions, questions like what we do now and what really are the bread-and-butter practices of Christian life. When everything seems to be going smoothly, these questions don't bubble up with quite the same force. The temptation is to say that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. But if I can mix metaphors, there's a fine line between falling into a groove and getting stuck in a rut. When the lack of faith goes on autopilot, it grows stale. The same thing can be said about churches as institutions. The programs that worked last year or for the last ten years may no longer align with a new thing that God is calling the church to be and to do here and now. And with this pandemic all of our personal routines have been disrupted, the good and the bad. Every program and ministry at Bethlehem has endured disruption, the ones that worked and the ones that didn't work. This is all bewildering to us, to be sure, but it also affords us a greater and precious perspective on our lives before God, one that is a little less influenced by habit and custom and maybe a little more responsive to the movements of the living God in our midst. That work of figuring out what stays and what goes is the work of Christian discernment, of discerning where God is leading us here and now in the aftermath of this pandemic. Now, this brings me to my final point. Up to now I focused entirely on the question, what should we do. What should we do in this threshold moment between pre and post pandemic? But I think the most important message from this early story of the book of Acts is that we are not the only actors on the scene. We shouldn't overlook the fact that the question, what should we do, only occurred to those early Christians in the first place because, as Luke put it, they were cut to the heart by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their decision to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to breaking of bread and to prayer was itself a response to a power that gripped them, this thing that Christians call the Holy Spirit, poured out on

them. Their resolution, which is described in the later portions of this passage, to form what's effectively a socialist organization, where each sells their goods and gives away what they have in order to meet the needs of those who don't have them, also comes in response to the beckoning of this Holy Spirit. This generosity that they found themselves having wasn't theirs. It was given to them from beyond. And when we come to the end of the passage and find that those same Christians who had previously been utterly confused and bewildered at the beginning are now praising God and meeting with glad and generous hearts, this, too, is the work of God's Spirit. The good news, my friends, the reason that we keep returning to the apostles' teaching to hear these stories is that the same promise lives on. That same Spirit that transformed this small, ragtag group of peasants from somewhere in Galilee into a movement that lasts 2,000 years later is because God's Spirit continues to work through this work, even in moments where it's not clear where it's going. So if during these past 18 months you found yourself reading the scripture or offering a word of encouragement to someone who needs it or breaking bread with someone, even over Zoom or praying, you've come in direct contact with this same power that was active in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. If you found yourself inclined to give generously to those who have needs, maybe more needs than you, you have been an agent of this Spirit. If during this dreadful episode that we're still kind of living through you've felt your heart strangely warm or a sense of comfort and peace come upon you unexpectedly, you've encountered the fruits of this Spirit. And if it's mostly confusion and uncertainty that you're feeling this morning, I pray that you find some solace in knowing that you're not alone. On the hand, you have all of us, too, who are also confused and frightened and unclear. But the better news is that confusion and fear and uncertainty has never gotten in the way of God's Spirit. And that whatever is to come for this church, whatever this threshold is leading us to, we go with a power of infinite guidance that will guide and comfort and bring us home. Amen.