

**Reflection: April 18, 2021, Easter 3**  
**Acts 2:43-47; Acts 8:26-38**

“Let us build a house where love can dwell...” we sang earlier, and that is a great aspiration of any faith community. Last week we began our exploration of what it means to be “called to be the church.” We noticed that the description of the Early Church given to us in Acts 2 begins in a place of awe and wonder, where people take time to notice and be amazed by the things God is doing around us.

This week, Acts 2 continues by describing how the Early Church spent much time together in community. “All who believed were together,” the scripture tells us, “and had all things in common” (Acts 2: 44). Being drawn together in community is part of what it means to be “called to be the church.”

There’s a story that is told of how a member of the church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. No one seemed to know the reason why, but it was rumored that he disagreed about a decision which had been made by the Church Board.

After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him.

It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited.

The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked out a brightly burning

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ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone; then he sat back in his chair, still silent.

The man watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more, with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

One coal alone, burns itself out. But together with other coals, it continues to burn, creating warmth and light that makes a real difference. One coal alone loses its spark, but with others, continues to burn brightly. COMMUNITY – being, worshipping, working TOGETHER, is part of what it means to be “the church.”

There are some who might ask, “Why is being part of a community of faith so important? I can be inspired by a walk in the woods as much as gathering on a Sunday to listen to a sermon or sing some hymns. I can live a good life, on my own. Couldn’t I just read the Bible at home, and follow the examples found in the Bible, on my own?”

Perhaps. And yet, it has been well demonstrated that our faith is deepened through interactions with others. Think for a moment about some of the reasons given for the importance of being part of a local church:

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- Christianity was never intended to be an independent endeavor... a kind of “Lone Ranger” proposition. We need each other.

- Our shared gifts, talents and resources make us stronger. None of us are as strong alone as we are together. And working together, each of us doing our part, builds up the body of Christ.

- We tend to drift spiritually when not connected relationally. Evidence shows that when you are connected to a group of committed believers, the likelihood of your continued spiritual growth is exponentially higher.

This can be seen clearly in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. He was an important official in the court of the Ethiopian Queen’s treasury – probably well educated. He seemed to be connected with the Jewish faith ... he had just come from worshipping in Jerusalem. So why did the eunuch need Philip to explain what he was reading?

Perhaps understanding something about him would be helpful. First of all, being Ethiopian meant that those in the temple in Jerusalem would have considered him as unacceptable from the standpoint of nationality and race ... he was a foreigner. He would have been among the marginalized on *that* basis, but also, being a eunuch (someone who had been castrated), he also would have been marginalized on the basis of dimensions of gender and sexuality.

Eunuchs were excluded from participation in Temple rituals and from full admittance into Israel’s community. He

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probably wouldn’t have had the benefit of being included in the circle of those who gathered to discuss and study the scriptures, for as a marginalized person, he would have been restricted to the outer court of the temple.

When Philip, directed by the Angel of the Lord and the Spirit, encounters him on the road to Gaza, the eunuch was reading the scroll of Isaiah, but it was not until Philip joined him in his chariot, and began discussing the scripture, that he came to understand how that passage was pointing to Jesus as Messiah. It was through his conversation with Philip that he learned of all the amazing things Jesus had done, and it was through Philip that he began to know the God revealed in Jesus and asked to be baptized.

Though reading or studying theology from a book may be a good place to start, it is through dialogue and conversation which we have with others that we are able to see different meanings and perspectives and come to know God more fully.

And it is through that dialogue that we come to a greater appreciation of how God is at work in us all, even those we consider “different” or have relegated to the outer edges of our circle. We are all made in God’s image, but we are all made differently. It is through looking for God’s Spirit in others that we are able to form a richer picture of God **who is** (in the words of our United Church’s Song of Faith)—Holy Mystery and Wholly Love.

## 5.

But learning in community isn't always easy. Being together and holding all things in common, doesn't mean the Early Church agreed about everything. When it comes to matters of faith, people don't always agree. And those disagreements can have a huge impact on our life together as "the church."

Some students from the Ecumenical Campus Ministry at the University of Guelph had been meeting for lunch once a week with the United Church chaplain. One student posed the question "Why are there so many different denominations?"

The short answer given was that when disagreements about theology or expressions of faith occurred, and they couldn't be resolved peacefully, it often resulted in a new branch of the church being formed. The next question was "So what does the United Church believe?"

That is not always an easy question to answer. It is not easy to define our belief as a denomination. The response shared was that the United Church believes there is space for people of different understandings about what it means to be a Christian, for people at different places in the faith journey, and it is through our differences that we challenge each other to learn and grow deeper in our faith.

In our efforts at being community, we need to work at avoiding the kind of attitudes that can be hurtful and cause harm. Some doctrines and interpretations of faith seem to preach segregation and hate, instead of the love and inclusion we see reflected in Jesus. But for those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, the call is simple, even if it

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may not be easy. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ... 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Mark 12: 30, 31).

We are called to love our neighbours in spite of the challenges we may face. Loving your neighbour doesn't always mean that you will agree with your neighbour, but it does mean that when you disagree—because at some point you probably will disagree—you will approach the disagreement respectfully.

Take the time to consider and understand, in the best way that you can, where the other person is coming from, and then be patient as you respectfully share your point of view. It won't happen instantly, but if you can open a channel of dialogue, you can create positive and lasting changes in a person's worldview. You might even learn something yourself.

It is through our interactions with one another—talking about what we believe, sharing a meal together, contributing to causes we care about, even across our differences—that we begin to build communities of care. And it is through our communities and networks of care that God's kingdom is revealed and made known to us in very real ways—a loving, if sometimes messy, kingdom where we are all drawn together in community and all are "called to be the church" together.