

Gathering Sunday, September 9, 2018

Being Church Together: The Perfectly Imperfect Church

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Scripture: Acts 4

I should have known it wouldn't go perfectly when the red patience candle wouldn't light up. It was our Pentecost service earlier this year, celebrating the birth of the church, remember? I had set up a candle for each fruit of the Spirit and we lit our own smaller candles with the fruit we'd most like to display and set them in a tray of sand.

I had grand plans for how great that service was going to be with me, the pastor, leading it. But as I prepared, a few of you felt compelled to offer me some unsolicited direction on how I should do certain things in the service. I do love you for that – but maybe not so much at the time.

Then, just before the service I lost my composure and snapped at someone, thus sealing the fate of that poor patience candle and taking another disastrous step away from the perfect service I had planned. I watched as the wax from your candles burst into a huge flame, saw your concerned expressions of fear drawing you away from worship and felt the hands of the clock speeding up as the service got longer and longer.

In the cloud of smoke that was left from the extinguished flame we also welcomed several new members to our community. We heard their faith and of God's faithfulness and were so very encouraged by them. We blessed some parents and their child in their desire to nurture a Godly home. We committed to be church family for these people and for each other. We shared communion, that ancient ritual that reminds us that we place ourselves on a common plain, remembering we are part of the Body of Christ gathered under the influence of God's Spirit.

I hold the memory of that service as a beautiful instance of a perfectly imperfect church.

Thank you for coming to be church together this morning! Our hymns and our scripture have told us a lot of what it is to be church

That is our theme for this Fall, Being Church Together. We will hear more sermons and have more opportunities to focus on that, including a day-long workshop on Communion that we are hoping you will all engage.

The story we just heard from the book of Acts is one of those core stories of a group we like to call "The Early Church" – a high aspiration that so many Christians over the centuries have tried to recapture. We think we need to be like them. But the church keeps lapsing into institutions filled with destructive power structures. Our

Anabaptist ancestors in the faith held up such hopes for communities, where things would be different than the institutional Church powers of their time. They wanted to be more like the Early Church. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* among other things hopes that “the church is the new society established and sustained by the Holy Spirit.”

When we think about the Early church we tend to focus on the part read earlier, where everyone shares their goods and everything was wonderful.

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

I take no issue with an ideal vision and that hope for the church. There was not a needy person among them? That is something I want that for us too and for the world.

But I do take issue with how often up an ideal version of a community of people has set up unrealistic expectations of perfection in churches. It creates ideal conditions for people in positions of power to understand themselves as guardians and controllers of that ideal and to forget that we are all laboring – or in many cases relaxing – under the influence of God’s transforming and creative Spirit. It is God’s church.

Look at Church history (Crusades, Colonialism, Wars in God’s name) or just the news in the last month:

- sexual abuse scandals among clergy irrespective of denominations
- fascists claiming to be defending Christian principles and Christians supporting them with their votes! (I’m not only referring to the border immediately south of us, this is happening in other places too)
- people using their financial donations to try to control the theological direction of Seminaries
- the persistence of patriarchy in our Church institutions
- the continued exclusion of women from ministry, not to mention the LGBTQ folk
- the complicity of the church in tearing children away from their parents in far too many contexts throughout history.

and on and on and on... The church is far from that perfect ideal. And there is a lot to undo!

And if we want to be more like the church at it's origins I think that focusing only on that little piece of how they lived as a community misses some important pieces of the story in Acts. One might say that little bit about the Body of Christ has been photoshopped. It's unrealistic body expectations for the Body of Christ. ☺

Here are some of the things that we've missed from our ideal version of the church, that are in this story we just heard. For example, immediately after this scene the someone cheats, people break into factions, and the church needs to keep growing in it's understanding of how to live together and how to follow Christ in their context. Just like we do to this day.

There are other things in that story. Very importantly, that Early Church was driving under the influence of their experience of the Holy Spirit. It was not guided by a five year plan – not that there is anything wrong with that. But these uneducated yet wise disciples did not lose sight that it was God's plan, not theirs, that was mainly at play. They observed what God was doing and reacted appropriately.

More importantly, that picture of the Early Church also begins with healing. Now we like to dismiss that because we don't think we believe in miracles anymore. But do we still believe that God's Spirit can help us heal our brokenness? The Early church was filled with hope for change (aka resurrection, freedom from oppression, changing of social structures, hope for justice). I'm not sure of what all our congregation might need healing from, but in my case it might be from needing to be perfect.

The church described in Acts 4 was heavily reliant on the Holy Spirit to direct, give words, empower, transform. It did not make claims for itself but it bore witness to what God was doing.

So now back to that body image idea. You know how magazines create a problem by setting up an ideal version of bodies? I don't know if you men know what it's like, but women have known about this for a long time. There's this beautiful photoshopped ideal and we start torturing ourselves because we are not like that. So we have this beautiful idea of a church and we start measuring ourselves against that.

One of the things that you learn when it comes to having more realistic body expectations, is that you start to name what is beautiful about the body that you have.

So I have a few pieces of beauty to remember about us: (what beauty do you remember about your time here?):

- I remember a crying teenager surrounded by caring adults who were not their parent
- I remember the people who quietly tend to our meeting space
- I remember a lonely painter working in the back hall that nobody sees
- I remember the funeral committee that just makes receptions magically appear
- I remember the people who meet to pray with each other outside of Sunday morning
- I remember our deep joy of singing together and of making music
- I remember kids lying on their backs during a Taizé service
- I remember the times we put our hands on each other's shoulders to bless someone on their way.
- And yes, I even remember Congregational meetings. There is beauty in them too.

One more story.

We should have known it wouldn't go perfectly when the guy we hired to call our TUMC square dance had to run to the bathroom to throw up – for the first time. We had gathered as a church to have a fun intergenerational time square dancing here in this space. We had done all that work and cleared out the chairs and we were eager. We had overlooked the guy's sparkly hat, his enormous pink bowtie and cheesy demeanor and were ready to dance. But alas, some of us gathered around the caller the second time he disposed of his stomach contents to encourage him to go home. No, he insisted, he'd keep going and even got a few dances in until the poor green-faced guy lost it into his hat and the event was finally called off.

Oddly enough I have fond memories of that ill-fated square dance a couple of years back. First because in hindsight, it's hilarious – though it was less so at the time. But mostly I remember the incredible amount of grace we had toward each other. I remember the married couples who gladly let their spouses dance with someone else who has a keener square-dancer than they were. I remember a mom dancing with her three kids, a tall hetero long time member dancing with a petite lesbian visitor, a young boy in a princess dress careening with his partner who was another dad. I can still conjure it all up. I remember in that moment being filled with love for you, for this congregation, for this church family. I turned to the other pastor at the time and I said: "this is our church!"

One of the organizers of that event told me later that it was in that pivotal moment that she learned to give up wanting to make everything perfect and to control everything.

It was another instance of the perfectly imperfect church.

This congregation is where we have chosen to gather each week to remind each other of God's love. And to experience that love through each other.

This is where we sing.

This is where we bring our kids into the proverbial village.

This is where we support each other in prayer and in practice
This is where we keep each other honest about our beliefs and our doubts and we urge each other to put them into practice.
This is where we kindle our hope for a different way of being, our hope for the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation and healing.
This is where we try to nurture justice.

We are launching into a new season here at TUMC. Chances are it won't go perfectly as planned. Let us hold our ideals firmly enough to know what we are aiming for but loosely enough to be fully open to the needs of those around us and to find God's leading. Let us carry on under the influence of God's Spirit, just as the Early Church did, willing to be healed and to extend Christ's healing beyond ourselves in perfectly imperfect ways.

Amen.