

Flawed yet Faithful Disciples: “Welcome Home” Acts 2:37-47

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Today is the third Sunday of Easter! What a joy to continue celebrating this incredible season together. Today’s reading comes from the book of Acts, chapter 2. We are continuing our sermon series on the apostle Peter, the flawed, favored and fundamental disciple in the life of the Christian church.

Acts 2 is usually known as the story of Pentecost. The time when the Holy Spirit came down and the disciples spoke in tongues of all nations. On this day, the scoffers scoffed and accused them of being drunk, but Peter insisted that 9am was way too early to be drunk, rather they were filled with the Holy Spirit. That was the beginning of his sermon, one of the first sermons in the Christian church. Very often we point to the Holy Spirit, the tongues of fire, the rush of wind and we call that the birth of the church. But the church wasn’t just born in that moment, it was midwifed into being through Peter’s sermon. His sermon references the prophet Joel and the Psalms. It connects Jewish scripture to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It’s a compelling and important sermon, albeit, probably the only sermon I’ve ever heard of that starts with the preacher declaring themselves not drunk.

All of this happened on the day of Pentecost. The birth of the church, but Peter isn’t content to preach a sermon and then sit back. Listen to the words of Acts 2: 37-47

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers,^[i] what should we do?” ³⁸ 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. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt

generation.” ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Life among the Believers

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[j] to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home^[k] and ate their food with glad and generous^[l] hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

This is the example that Peter gives us, that the author of Acts gives us, on what it meant to be a disciple at the beginning of the Christian church. The marks of the church are all evident. Acts 2:42 holds a particular and special place in my heart, and I think it summarizes succinctly how the earliest church members lived their lives. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Those four things persist to this day as how we live our best lives as Christians. We still devote ourselves to the apostles teachings every time we gather together and listen to scripture, study the Bible, or reflect on Jesus’ life. Our Christian fellowship brings us closer to one another in community and strengthens us to learn about each other. In breaking bread together, we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion and eat together, fed by one another and by Christ. We break bread together over donuts in Bradfield, contributing to our fellowship together as well. Finally, and essentially, we devote ourselves to prayer. Whether that is praying together for one another, or praying for the world, our prayers enliven our worship and community – giving us contact with God and with the Kingdom of God together. This is the church that was initiated by Peter. The rock on which Jesus built the church.

Matthew 16 predicts Peter's building of the church, when Jesus says "And I tell you, you are Peter,^[d] and on this rock^[e] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven". In the Catholic tradition, this passage is used to establish Peter as the first Pope. From the first Pope, Peter, the passing down of the papacy is called the apostolic succession, establishing a line of popes starting with Peter and going unbroken to the current pope, Francis. In the Protestant tradition, we do not affirm the apostolic succession in the same way that our Catholic siblings do. Instead, we turn to the idea of the priesthood of all believers, a tenet of our tradition that states that we are all called and equipped to do ministry, that every person in this room is a priest of the church, and a minister of the body of Christ. In a way, our apostolic succession comes from Acts 2, when Peter inaugurates the church and calls people to repent and join the church. So as heirs to the kingdom from Peter, what does our papacy look like? How do we mirror the discipleship set forth by Peter, whom Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom?

A good starting place is to look at the four aspects of the early church shown in Acts 2:42. As I mentioned earlier, I feel that as a church we do well when we reflect the four aspects of the faith community laid out in that verse. But I also think there's a big clue on how to be disciples earlier in passage. Notice verse 37 – they ask "what should we do"? to which Peter responds "Repent". Notice Peter's answer to their question is not "come back next week and I'll tell you more about Jesus", but rather a challenge to the people hearing. Repent. Turn around, turn back on the way you saw the world before and turn to work the good in the world. His call causes repentance and change in his hearers, not passive acceptance and a promise of good fortune, but repentance, baptism and the promise of the gift of the holy spirit. Being a disciple is part of an ongoing process that brings us daily closer to what we should be. Being a disciple is a journey whose goal is to continue journeying on the path. But discipleship also takes on a journey of disciple-making. The words of Matthew 28, the great

commission, lay plain that this call to discipleship also entails bringing others into discipleship. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”. As our mission statement at Covenant states – we are a disciple forming community something that is inherently an evangelical mission. However, in modern day America, the word evangelical has taken on a loaded meaning, so that evangelism seems almost to be a one dimensional activity, something that is the sole domain of a tradition that we do not subscribe to. So what does this mean for us?

Do we go out and preach the gospel on the street corner? Do we take up our megaphones and loudly denounce those we disagree with, demonizing sinners and shouting hellfire? Of course that’s not the way we make disciples, but it is the popular conception of what it means to evangelize. But we have been given the keys to the kingdom, apostles in the line of succession that started when Jesus promised Peter that he would be the rock. How do we, priests of the kingdom, make disciples? By being disciples, of course. As disciples, our mission should be one of encouragement and upbuilding; one of evangelism and kingdom building. By being disciples, we need to make space for other people to be disciples, we need to build spaces to allow others to flourish and explore their own discipleship. In the church, that means that we need to support one another, encourage one another’s efforts and explore the ways that we can individually use our gifts to move this institution to make a difference in the world. Outside of the church, it means claiming your faith as a motivator for supporting justice and supporting those who work to build the kingdom. As we support each other we then encourage each other to flourish as disciples.

Joseph Lemuel Morrow, a Presbyterian Pastor, reflected on his family’s history in a recent article in *Presbyterians Today* about addressing the injustices of the cash bail system.

When nonviolent protests and sit-ins increased in volume and intensity in the 1960s, the jails began to swell with protesters. As offenders, the protesters could languish in jail for weeks in unsafe conditions and be at risk for further brutality.

My great-grandfather, moved by the righteousness of the cause and dignity of the protesters, began paying the prohibitively steep bail fees necessary to release those who had been charged with disorderly conduct or disturbing the peace. After he had sufficiently agitated local officials by doing this a number of times, they insisted he take out a bail bondsman license – a bureaucratic and expensive process meant to stymie and intimidate would-be defenders of the protesters. But he persisted, obtained the license and continued providing bail as quickly as protesters were being jailed. Even with other acts of intimidation against his family, which led to the local NAACP providing round-the-clock security for a period of time, my great-grandfather never stopped being a creative and resourceful witness against inequality.

This family story is an heirloom of courage and persistence. It gives me encouragement in today's struggles against unjust systems and the often insidious ways they embed themselves in our common life.

His grandfather's discipleship was what enabled those protestors to continue agitating for the Kingdom of God. Not only that, but in his acts of discipleship he witnessed his grandson, paving the way for him to become a disciple himself, as the minister for evangelism at Fourth Presbyterian Church and chair of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board.

Our discipleship should motivate us in all that we do. Every aspect of our lives, if we claim our discipleship, should be influenced by our faith. This is our evangelism, this is our proclamation of the good news. Ray Jones, the director of

Theology, Formation and Evangelism in the Presbyterian Church was interviewed by the PCUSA stated clerk recently, and in this interview he spoke about living our calling to discipleship. He said “Our mission field is where we live, corporately and individually. We need to figure out how to be the church where we’ve been placed.” He goes on to say that as disciples grow “they make new disciples. That happens slowly but authentically... Once we stand with the marginalized, people will ask, ‘Why are you here?’ Then we have the opportunity to say, ‘Because we are followers of Jesus.’ Our discipleship has the result of making disciples. Our discipleship is a calling to make disciples. Usually, as Presbyterians we decide to lead by example, not speaking of our faith, but rather letting our deeds speak for themselves. I want to challenge you this week, when you take a stand, help a neighbor, love someone, that you think about how your faith has impacted that decision, and to share that your faith compels you to love. Our actions should pave the way to encourage other’s good actions, our words should pave the way to encourage others’ witness.

As Christians, holders of the keys of the kingdom, followers in the line of apostles from Peter himself, how can we better be disciples? I want to leave us with a couple things to ponder for your week. How does your discipleship make it easier for other people to build the kingdom of God? How have you been helped in your efforts by other disciples? The answers to these two questions can help you continue the path to discipleship, the answers lay your blueprint for following Jesus. The building up of one another in the community of faith, the encouraging and of one another shows your discipleship in crystal clarity. To be a member of a community, to be heirs to the keys to the kingdom of God is to provide for your siblings in Christ the opportunities for them to grow in their faith, and to utilize their gifts to grow in your faith.

So let us go, be disciples, make disciples, and be formed by the disciples in our midst.