

This morning we continue in Part 2 of our sermon series called, “Believe.” Part 1 was this last fall, and focused on the question “What do I believe?” Part 2 began at the start of the New Year, and focuses on the question “What should I do?” Many of us are reading the “Believe” books that go with the sermons, taking a chapter each week. Today’s sermon correlates to chapter 16, and is about the fellowship, or community, that we have together in the Church. Originally this sermon was set for last week, but it seemed odd to preach on community and fellowship when no one was here due to the snow. ☺ (Actually, we had 78, about half of our usual Sunday attendance.)

When we think of “Fellowship” in the church, we tend to think of hanging out together over a cup of coffee and a snack before or after worship service. A lot of churches have a “fellowship hall” which is where the people of the church gather together to “fellowship” together. **While this kind of social engagement is an aspect of Biblical fellowship, it isn’t really a complete picture.** Any group of people, regardless of their faith, can share time together exchanging pleasantries about the weather, the local sports teams, books their reading, music they’re listening to, an experience they’ve had, how work/school/family life are going, and so forth. There’s nothing wrong with that; I think we all enjoyed talking about the weather the last couple weeks. And all people, regardless of where they are on the faith spectrum, need community. We are all created in the image of God, God is in fellowship in the Trinity, and God says it’s not good for us to be alone. So fellowship is part of being created in God’s image; it’s part of being human.

But Christian fellowship is more than just “hanging out” together; it has a mission and a purpose to it. We aren’t bound together by an allegiance to a particular political perspective, or an allegiance to a particular university, or our hobbies, appreciation of certain musical styles, or anything else. We are bound together by, and because of, Jesus, and his mission and vision for the Church.

There are a number of facets and ways we can speak of our fellowship

together: We have fellowship because of our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We have fellowship because of the cross of Christ. We have fellowship because of our shared acknowledgement of our sinful nature and our need for God's grace...our need for Jesus in our lives. We have fellowship together because of Jesus and his mission for us as a church. This morning's belief statement puts it like this: **"I fellowship with Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, in the lives of others and in the world."**

You see, Christian fellowship is not just about having a nice conversation or a good time together. There's nothing wrong with that, but that's only part of it. Christian fellowship is about growing and living into God's purposes. There's some intentionality and direction to Christian fellowship/community.

The Greek word that gets translated as "fellowship" is *Koinonia*. It's in verse 42 of today's passage where it's translated "fellowship." It's also in verse 44 when it says that the believers were together "and had everything in *common*." That word, "common" is *koinonia* as well. *Koinonia* also means "to participate in something, or to have an association with someone." **In the word *koinonia*, there's a sense of fellowship that has some action to it, a certain degree of purpose and commitment.** And we definitely see that when we look at the fellowship of the early church.

And that's what this passage shows us. It's like a snapshot of the first Christians and their "fellowship." In fact, if you have a Bible with subheadings that have been added by the publisher to help us navigate our way through the Bible, you might have a subheading that reads, "The Fellowship of the Believers."

So what are the marks of their fellowship...of their community...what was it that they had in common? First, in the previous several verses, Peter has responded to some skeptics by sharing with them about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. And Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, writes that 3,000 people became followers of Jesus that day in response to Peter's message.

Then we come to today's passage where it says that they devoted themselves

to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. These are four aspects of the early church and their life together. In a sense, all four aspects are part of their "fellowship"...these things were what it meant to participate together in the body of Christ, or to be associated together...to have Koinonia together. In his vast commentary on the book of Acts, Joseph A. Fitzmyer writes, "...the four elements underscore the common accord of Jerusalem Christians" (Joseph A. Fitzmyer).¹ Let's look at these four elements briefly.

First, they were united by the apostles' teaching. It is clear, throughout the book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament, that the teaching of the Apostles is based on the teachings of Jesus, and their teaching always points people to Jesus. So to say that they were devoted to the apostles' teaching, is to say that they were devoted to Jesus, and to knowing Jesus better in their lives, and living out Jesus' call upon them individually and together as a fellowship, as a church community.

Second they shared in fellowship together. As I mentioned already, this really is kind of an all-encompassing facet of the Church. They are in fellowship together, in community together, united by the cause of Christ. That being said, "fellowship" is sort of an element of being in community together as well. This sense of fellowship, of being in relationship with people who have similar beliefs or interests, finds its basis in Jesus Christ. The amazing thing about the 3,000 people who came to faith in Jesus through Peter's preaching, is that they were from a variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Earlier in Acts 2, we read of the first disciples gathering together, and in a particularly Spirit-filled moment in worship they started speaking in different languages. This attracted the attention of others and drew a huge crowd to observe what was going on. And in Acts 2:7-11, we read what many of those observers said, "How is it that each of us hears them in our own language...we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

So the fellowship of the believers that we read of later in today's passage isn't based on nationality or language. It's not based on home towns. Their sense of fellowship finds its basis in Jesus Christ. Their connection to Jesus is

what they have in common, and it's so strong that it breaks down their other barriers. It overrides their differences. In Galatians, Paul writes that this sense of fellowship and community with Christ is so strong that, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** He picks three significant categories of how people divided themselves up in his day...three barriers to fellowship...and while the categories still exist, there is unity in Jesus that overrides those differences. Republican and Democrat, Husky and Cougar, Black, Asian, Latino, White...whatever categories and labels we put on ourselves or others to acknowledge the realities of our differences, the divisions they can cause all fall by the wayside when we are in Christ Jesus.

Third, Luke writes of the breaking of bread. This may mean eating meals together. The word for “bread” can mean food in general. So this could be a reference to simply eating meals together – perhaps closely related to times of worship together, or at other times. But more commonly – not just in the Bible but in other contexts too, the word means bread. In the context of Scripture it often references bread as in the bread that represents Christ's body, broken for us. So here we have a first-Century documentation of some of the very first Christians doing what Jesus did on the night of his betrayal – celebrating the Passover as an act of Christian worship and fellowship.

We don't get any more details about it here, but we do from Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth. There he writes what undergirds much of our theology and understanding of Communion, and the very words we use at Communion, **“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).** So very early on in the church what you and I know as the Sacrament of Communion was being celebrated, probably using these very words – Paul says he passed this teaching on to the church in Corinth, and he likely did to all the churches he planted. This was the

breaking of the bread, which Jesus himself started with his disciples at the Last Supper. Again, their community is in complete allegiance to Jesus Christ.

The last of the four elements of their fellowship that are mentioned here was prayer. And as with the other elements, there can be no doubt that this praying was rooted in Jesus. Jesus prayed, he taught on prayer, he prayed with others, he prayed for others. And the prayers of the church, right from the get-go, were in the name of Jesus. Why? Jesus himself taught to pray in his name. So prayer was a part of their community, their sense of being together, of being unified by Jesus. Prayer is a deeply spiritual thing. This element of the fellowship of the early church demonstrates the spiritual nature of their community. They weren't gathering together just for any old idle chatter: They were a spiritual community, and prayer was a foundational element of their fellowship. While we aren't told of what their prayers were right here, we are elsewhere; and from them we can see that they prayed for one another, they prayed for others, they prayed for health and healing, they prayed for the return of Jesus, they prayed for their mission and ministry together, and more. Again, as with the other three elements of their community, we see Jesus as the foundation for another aspect of their fellowship.

So these things are a window into the early church's fellowship. There can be no doubt that they would affirm this statement, **“I fellowship with Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, in the lives of others and in the world.”** That is what we see throughout Acts as well as the letters of the New Testament...and it all started with the fellowship Jesus had with his Disciples, and with Jesus' own sense of mission and purpose, and then it's carried on through the Church.

Put it all together, and *our* sense of fellowship ought to be similarly driven by the mission of Jesus. It's not just fellowship for the sake of being social. It's fellowship with a purpose. And I would suggest to you that that kind of fellowship...that kind of Biblical community – community with a focus/mission/purpose – is inspiring and attractive. If we think fellowship is simply limited to social interaction, but “Christianizing” it – whatever that's

supposed to look like – then we’re missing the boat. Biblical, Christian fellowship has a cause and a purpose and a mission and a vision that is established and driven by Jesus. And that’s attractive – we see this in Acts. It’s why so many people responded to the Gospel message.

Now, this doesn’t mean we can’t learn from examples outside the church. In fact, the last couple weeks in the midst of the snowstorm, there were some fantastic examples of community and fellowship that were united and driven by a cause. For instance, my family went sledding at Spinney Park here in Kirkland, and from 18 months old to old-timers like me, 150-200 people at its peak, were sharing sleds, building jumps together, giving tips on how to stay up on ones where you stand, laughing together, and more. It was a kind of fellowship. (Brief video of sledding showed in church at this point.) All this sledding was like this major community bonding experience.

But you know what? That isn’t really all that inspiring. It was fun...it was different...there was some relational development definitely...I’d do it again tomorrow if it dumped 8 inches of snow tonight...but it’s not like we got inspired to make the world a better place. My life isn’t changed because of the fellowship I experienced around sledding. **The mission-driven and purpose-minded fellowship in the midst of the snow that was inspiring and unifying and community-building was the fellowship that centered around working together to help one another in the onslaught of snow.** There was a purpose that people accomplished in their own lives and in the lives of others. There was this sense that we’re in this together and we’re looking out for one another, and we’re helping each other and taking care of one another. People who didn’t even know one another came together to push cars up hills, shovel neighbors’ driveways and sidewalks and roads, help in the midst of cars sliding into each other, open their homes to people without power, and encourage one another in the midst of some difficult weather.ⁱⁱ **That kind of mission-inspired fellowship happened all over the northwest the last couple weeks because we all had the same mission: Survive Snowmageddalypse together.** This brought hope and joy and other inspiring qualities into people’s lives.

What if the Church, including us here at RH, was that mission-minded? What

if we were so driven by the cause of Christ and unified by the vision of making disciples of Jesus that our differences were set aside or even seen as an opportunity to grow and learn from one another, so we could be stronger together in our mission-driven fellowship? What if we lived out our fellowship in a winsome, awe-inspiring kind of way, so that it drew people together – both inside and outside the church – and ultimately drew them to Jesus, giving them hope, joy, peace, and more? **What if our fellowship was that inspiring?** What if God moved that powerfully in our lives and in our community? It’s what we see in Acts. It happens some in the Church still today. And it can here, if our fellowship is driven by wanting to accomplish God’s purposes in our lives, in the lives of others and in the world. That kind of community – that’s united together around the mission of Jesus – is inspiring and attractive to others.

It’s more than coffee and doughnuts. It’s more than hanging out at a park, or getting together for dinner with friends. The fellowship of the church is centered on Jesus’ mission and vision for our lives, our life together, and living out our faith in such a way that others would be drawn to Jesus as well. That happens when we have a foundation built on Jesus’ teaching and the teaching of the Apostles that points us to Jesus, when our fellowship is united by that teaching, when we join together in the breaking of bread together, and when we pray together. That is Biblical Fellowship. May we live into that here at Rose Hill, so that our fellowship would have a gospel-centered purpose to it.

I invite you, as we are doing each Sunday in this series, to join with me in closing this morning’s message with this statement of belief about Biblical Fellowship: **“I fellowship with Christians to accomplish God’s purposes in my life, in the lives of others and in the world.”** Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ Anchor Bible Commentary, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 269.

ⁱⁱ This Seattle Times article gives a good example: https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/weather/unsung-heroes-of-the-seattle-snowpocalypse-tell-us-about-acts-of-kindness-you-saw-during-the-storm/?utm_source=referral&utm_medium=mobile-app&utm_campaign=ios as does a great video clip from Eric Johnson on KOMO 4 News, that can be found on his Facebook page (from 2/12 or 13 or thereabouts).