

Year A, 4th Sunday of Easter
Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

You've probably noticed that, so far, during the Great 50 Days of Easter we have had lessons from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, instead of from the Old Testament. Reading from Acts gives us an opportunity to see how the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles to grow the new Church, and what some of their practices looked like. It also helps us to see how some of their ancient practices can inspire us today.

It's generally accepted that Luke wrote both the Gospel of Luke, and the book of Acts. He wrote Acts for several reasons, one of which was to show the current Church *how* the the early Church had grown, until it existed throughout the Roman Empire. For him, this growth was the fulfillment of God's plan, through the work of the Holy Spirit. His writing about these events served to instruct and inspire the Christians of his period, which was possibly around the year 85. We are still struggling to date Luke's work with any accuracy.

In today's passage Luke is summarizing the activity of the 3,000 people who converted as a result of Peter's inspiring sermon. Three thousand at once! But like most of the numbers in the Bible, this one is symbolic, not to be taken literally. The impression Luke wants us to have is that the Holy Spirit is very active as a result of Paul's preaching, and people's hearts are being opened to receive Christ in great numbers. Once they become part of the community, they devote themselves to three things that are still hallmarks of Christianity: "the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers."

Does that phrase sound familiar? It should. We say it every time someone is baptized, as a part of the renewal of our baptismal covenant. On page 304 of the Book of Common Prayer, the celebrant asks the entire congregation, "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" And the congregation replies, "I will, with God's help." We promise to do these ancient practices: to read and study scripture (whether at home, or in church), celebrate the Eucharist, and pray. These three practices are such a vital part of who we are as Episcopalians, that our church says they are the standard practice for every Sunday morning. Ironically, today we're having Morning Prayer, instead of Eucharist. But we promised to continue doing these things, and we will—next Sunday.

Notice what else Paul says about these early followers of Jesus. "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles." Awe. When was the last time you were in awe? Something that came to mind for me was the solar eclipse in 2017. We were fortunate enough to be able to go to Jackson Hole, Wyoming for that August 21st event, where the **total** eclipse was visible. It still gives me chills to remember the gradual onset of total darkness in the middle of the day. We were all out on the lawn, watching with special

viewers of one kind or another. And when the darkness was complete, I had a moment of gut-wrenching, primal fear that surprised me. What if the sun didn't come back out again? What if this was the end? For several seconds we all watched, breathless, amazed, afraid, **in awe**. And then the sun began to appear, and the people erupted into shouts, cheers, applause, tears at the reassurance of the sun's returning light and warmth.

I imagine those feelings were something like what people experienced when they witnessed miraculous healings, and other signs from the apostles. Because they were motivated by their awe to own things in *common*, and sell their goods in order to provide mutual support. This idea was almost as radical then as it would be now. People didn't have as many possessions then as we do, but they were certainly as attached to them as we are. What would it be like to be so inspired that you wanted to sell everything you had, so that *everyone* had what they needed? Not surprisingly this practice of communal living didn't really sustain itself over time, except in particular communities, like monasteries and convents, and the hermitages of the desert mothers and fathers. Communal living was more for extreme practitioners of the faith.

What **did** catch on was the idea of taking care of those in need. Many people in the Roman Empire thought the Christians were a bit peculiar, but they did admire their interest in taking care of those who were sick, poor, or otherwise in need. That became another hallmark of Jesus' followers.

Another thing that Luke wants to show us in this passage is that there is no friction between these early followers of Jesus, and the Jewish community. He says that these converts spend "much time together in the temple." By the time Luke was writing, many gentiles had become followers of Jesus's Way of living, and we think that Luke himself was probably a gentile. But here he wants to show that Jesus's teachings are compatible with Judaism. Certainly, at various times there was friction between Jesus's followers and Judean authorities, but it's good to remember that Jesus was a Jew. He was preaching to other Jews about the way to live a faithful, Spirit-led, Jewish life. He wasn't out to start a new religion. That came later.

This section ends by describing a sort of Golden Age of the Early Church, "they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 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." As we look back on this, it's easy to wonder if we are seriously missing the mark somehow. I mean, how do we get back to that Golden Age?

Really, I think we might be headed for another one. The Church is rapidly changing, shrinking in a lot of places, and taking totally new forms in others. It's often leaving the building, going out to meet people where they are, instead of expecting people to come to it. In the past, whenever the Church has been in crisis, the Holy Spirit has inspired people to do new and different things. For instance, monasticism was the response to those people who wanted rigorous practice of Christianity in the lukewarm spiritual environment of the Christian Roman Empire. And protestantism was not even a thing—until it was. This is another one of those times

of crisis, and I'm excited to be leading this parish in such a volatile and changing world. You all inspire me. Let's see where the Spirit leads us. Amen.

The Rev. Melanie Lewis
Rector, Christ Church Millwood