

A New Beginning

Acts 2:42-47

Life is full of new beginnings. When we were born, as newly-minted human beings, we began the life we have lived to this day. As we grew there were several new beginnings: some of us became big brothers or sisters to younger siblings, then came kindergarten, high school, maybe college, new careers, relationships that may or may not have led to marriage. From there perhaps new beginnings as homeowners, as parents, and in time even as grandparents. Each new beginning brought promise and peril, as anything new will do. As the big brother or sister, you got to “teach” your sibling, but now you had to share everything, not just your space and toys but also mom and dad’s time and affection. How exciting it was to be entering school, but what if the other kids don’t like me you worried? I’m excited for this new job, but what if it’s not what I really want to do with my life you asked yourself? This new person in my life makes my heart do somersaults, but are they really the right person for me, could I be making a big mistake? Can you identify with any of these feelings about new beginnings?

In our reading from Acts the early Christians were excited about meeting together and learning about Jesus’ teachings from the apostles. This was a new beginning for the sect that became known as The Way. We can see from Luke’s description that they held fast to their Jewish roots, meeting daily in the Temple, even as Jesus had met with them before his death and resurrection as we learned in Matthew 26:55 -

Matthew 26:55 (NIV2011)

⁵⁵ In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, “Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me.

Just as Jesus had taught in the Temple, now the apostles taught the growing crowd of believers. What had begun as a group of about 120 at the time of Jesus’ ascension had grown to several thousand following Peter’s speech on the day of Pentecost. Luke tells us that the number increased steadily, day by day, as more people heard the teaching of the apostles and became believers.

It wasn’t just the teaching of the apostles that brought people to The Way. Luke tells us there were four essential parts in the process: attending to the teaching of the apostles, fellowship, shared meals, and prayer. People witnessed miracles performed by the apostles, like the time Peter and John cured the lame man begging at the Temple (Acts 3:1-10):

Acts 3:1-10 (NIV2011)

¹ One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon.

² Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.

³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money.

⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!”

⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”

⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.

⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God,

¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

The power of the Holy Spirit was at work for all to see and people were awestruck, just as they had been when Jesus was alive. This wonder helped draw people in.

As the gathered believers heard the apostles telling the stories of Jesus' call to care for the least of these, people sold their possessions, giving the proceeds to those who were in need. Luke does not indicate that everyone liquidated all their worldly assets, but that they were open to providing for the poor out of their own prosperity. This is illustrated best by these verses from Acts 4:

Acts 4:32-35 (NIV2011)

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all

³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

The believers also shared meals together. We know how social meals can be. Think about any holiday, birthday, or anniversary and you will find that a meal usually features prominently in the celebrations. Remember that the group of believers now numbered in the thousands, so meeting in one place for a meal wasn't very practical. Luke tells us they met in people's homes. Makes me think of small group meetings where people can share about their lives and concerns in a more intimate setting than in the larger arena of the Temple. I can imagine people around the table saying something like, "What do you think about what Peter said today? Do you understand the parables that he shared?"

Lastly, they prayed together. It's likely that they prayed the Psalms, the prayers they were already accustomed to praying. They may have prayed the prayer Jesus had taught them, the one we know as the Lord's Prayer. These prayers buoyed their faith and helped them to grow the Spirit in the fledgling Christian church.

As the believers settled into this new reality, the story in Acts can sound rather idyllic, don't you think? Anything new, while being exciting, can also be very trying. Yet here we read that everyone was happy together, sharing possessions and meals, and lifting their voices in prayer to God. History tells us that things didn't stay the way they started. Even in the Book of Acts itself, we see that things did not remain all sweetness and light for long. As new voices arose in the church tensions mounted and the apostles had to address arguments and disagreements among the members of the church.

Now fast forward 2000 years to the church today. How closely do we model the early church? Do we attend to the teaching of the apostles? We would answer,

“Yes, we do. We read the Scriptures in our worship services and our pastors expound on the Word.” Check box one.

What about fellowship? Well, we do have a time of fellowship after church and we have food during this time, so we can probably call that “breaking bread”. Check boxes two and three.

“And they devoted themselves to prayer.” Well, of course we pray. We have several prayers during the service, and we pray on our own at home. So, check box four.

We’re doing great, right? Or are we?

While we hear the words of Scripture as they are preached, are we allowing them to seep into our spirit and inform how we live our lives on a daily basis? Is there a newness in our spirits? Are we experiencing the awe of God growing within us and enriching us, as it did the early believers? Is that awe visible to those around us, that they might inquire about the source of our joy? This is what the early Church experienced.

This joy extended to sharing their possessions. Each gave willingly as they were able. How do we give of our time and talents today? Do we give freely or are we reluctant, afraid that if we give, we will be diminished, fearing that God will not replenish what we have relinquished? When we give, is it to causes that heal or bring hope to others? Do we support causes that build up rather than tear down? Are we actively working as members of God’s transformation team?

What would happen if all of us at Hatfield Church of the Brethren could recapture the awe and wonder experienced by the earliest believers? Try to think of a time that you were struck by the wonder of God. Do you remember that feeling? How it warmed you, excited you, and made you say, “Wow!” What if we found a way to share that with those around us? How might our communities be changed if others could witness the wonders that we perceive?

We will have an opportunity to witness to our community on Saturday, June 20, when we participate in the Grand Opening Open House for the new Hatfield Police Station. Please consider taking a shift at our table, greeting community members and telling them about who we are and what the Church of the Brethren has to offer. We can share about the food pantry that operates four times a month and about our day care that serves low-income families. We can share about our regular worship services and the variety of voices that share God’s word. We can let folks know that we are a welcoming congregation where all can come and worship as they are.

Time will tell what good things God will do in our community when we reach out in love to our neighbors. Thanking you in advance for your part in sharing God’s love with the Hatfield Community.

Prayer

Dear Lord,

We hear your words saying to us, “¹⁸“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?”” Isaiah 43:18-19a (NIV2011)

There is an old saying “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” We are very much aware that each new day is a new beginning. We ask your presence with us as we move into this new reality. Show us the places where you would have us go, who you would have us serve, and how we should share your glory with others. There are many in our communities in need of physical, emotional, and spiritual help right now. Bring these people to mind and inform us of how we can show your love and mercy. AMEN

Lynne McMullan Allebach

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