

June 15, 2014

Signs of Life series: How have I connected with my faith community beyond Sunday worship this week?

Pray for VBS in children's, recognize Disciples and Stephen Ministers and Arnold Lester, Trinity Sunday, First After Pentecost  
Boone UMC; Jason Byassee

## And One

Maybe its tacky to start a sermon by criticizing other sermons, but here goes.<sup>1</sup> Garrison Keilor, the radio host of *A Prairie Home Companion*, says this

I've heard a lot of sermons in the past ten years or so that make me want to get up and walk out. They're secular, psychological, self-help sermons. Friendly, but of no use. They didn't make you want to straighten up. They didn't give you anything hard. At some point and in some way, a sermon has to direct people toward the death of Christ and to the campaign God has waged over the centuries to get our attention.<sup>i</sup>

The sermon: a nice word that helps us feel warm and fuzzy.

If that's all it is, why bother? Just get a hallmark card.

Well here's a different description of church from the book of Acts. And whatever else you might say about it, it's not fuzzy self-help. It might be downright offensive. The disciples shared everything, there wasn't a needy person among them, all day they taught and learned, the Lord added to their number those being saved. Hear this word and I invite you not to be bored and maybe even to be a little offended.

Acts 2:42-47

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 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 to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous 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 word of God, it belongs to you, the Pentecost people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Are ya sure?!

We live in the South, Appalachia in particular, and I'm betting most folks walking around here know something about Jesus. Lots of us have prayed a sinner's prayer, asked Jesus into our hearts. There are 37 Baptist churches in Watauga County and between us in here this morning I bet

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<sup>1</sup> On screen plz

we have someone who's been a member of nearly all of them. And we Methodists have sent some of ours their way too. All of us have heard about Jesus and probably met him.

But have we met his bride, the church? Do you really know a person without knowing their spouse? Have we made our lives with others in the body of Christ? This is no small question. Look at our reading from Acts. Sharing our possessions so there is no one needy among us. And you know if you start meeting the needs of the poor, more poor people show up. Devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, and new people being saved daily.<sup>2</sup> There's a church in Ohio that has made this its slogan: "A pretty good church." It's growing fast actually. Acts suggests more than a pretty good church. It suggests a church on fire. Don't get too close unless you want to be lit up too. John Ed Mathison preached on this passage for us some years ago now and called his sermon<sup>3</sup> an "awe-full church," a church filled with awe. To get close to God like this is a fearful thing, like standing at the edge of a cliff, like falling in love, like approaching death or birth, full of awe.

This is the first of a series of sermons on our measures as a church. We call this series "Signs of life." We have a new mission statement, "Loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ." Like any organization we have to know whether we're achieving our mission. Our measures allow us to keep score. Measures are like stepping on the scale in the morning, it might not *feel like* good news, but it at least tells you where you are. Good business leaders count profits, universities count enrollment and job placement, sports fans count stats maniacally, knitters count stitches. What do we count in church?

<sup>4</sup>Today we count this, "How have I connected with my faith community beyond Sunday worship this week?" Coming to church like today is crucial, we have to do that, we're commanded to do that, without that our faith withers. But it's not enough. How have we connected *in addition* to that? We might think of this as church-plus-one. How have I connected with my faith community beyond Sunday worship?

Three parts to today. One, we are made for connection. Two, we are made for church. And three, we are made for God.

<sup>5</sup>One, we are made for connection. I mentioned a few weeks ago that human beings are the only animals who physically cannot give birth alone. Mothers have to have someone to deliver a child or she and the child will die. Experiments on animals show that if baby mice or rats are deprived of touch from others, they go crazy. Their brains don't develop right. Terrible *unintentional* experiments on humans in neglectful orphanages show the same thing happens to us—our brains fail to develop properly if we lack stimulation, engagement, touch. We can't even die right on our own. Someone else has to dress us, take us under, cover us up or burn us. Biologically and socially we are made for other people.

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<sup>2</sup> On screen plz

<sup>3</sup> "Awe-full church" on screen plz

<sup>4</sup> Measure on screen please

<sup>5</sup> I. We are made for connection

Do you ever notice that when two people are talking, say when you're spying on another table at a restaurant or eavesdropping or whatever, if they like each other they'll mimic each other's movements? Hand under chin, hand under chin. Arms folded, arms folded. Spouses start to look like each other after a while, and it's simple why--because they imitate each other so long—one smiles the other smiles, their crow's feet match. David Brooks, the NYT columnist, describes the way the brain notices social cues.<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Ali needed 190 *milliseconds* to note an opening in an opponent's defenses.<sup>7</sup> The average college student needs 21 milliseconds (1/9<sup>th</sup> Ali's time) to start syncing movement unconsciously with friends (and it took me a lot longer to find a photo of college kids with no one on their phones). We Americans like to think we are self-made women and men. But actually, we *are* the company we keep.

And that's why it's so crucial to spend time on church beyond Sunday worship. Think of how many hours we spend being marketed to. On the radio, on tv, on the computer, in the car, it's relentless, we're told who we are is determined by the happiness we buy. Or our time at work, 40, 50, 60 or more hours a week we try to do well with our God given gifts. How can 1 hour at church compare with that? Ready to feel guilty? Sorry, I did too when I saw this—think of the time we spend on email in a week. Go ahead, tally it up, 30-45 hours is not uncommon with the phones in our pockets and at home and at work. Now how much time do we spend in prayer? Ouch. See the point?

This is why we want to ask how we've connected with our faith community beyond Sunday worship. One hour a week won't do to shape us into people who love God and neighbor with our whole hearts.

A friend of mine worshiped in an inner-city African American church one Sunday. *Four hours later* he emerged, sweaty, and asked the pastor, how do you get people to church that long every week? "Wednesday too," the pastor said. Ok, Wednesday too, how? Well, the pastor said, my people spend all week getting beat up, told they're no good, looked down on. It takes me at least this long to straighten them back out. So too with us. We are *not* what we can buy or produce, we are *not* how beautiful we are or how healthy, we are *not* what others think of us. We are what God thinks of us: glorious, worth dying for, creatures full of resurrection.

But this is not just a question of hours in church. Some of our most faithful people can't physically be in the building. Michael Brown, pastor here years ago, tells a story about a shut-in in Valle Crucis whom he visited. She was there alone, rarely got out, rarely got visited, and he asked her how she seemed so joyful. She said it's easy, I sit in this chair, close my eyes, and feel myself wrapped in invisible arms. Prayer is a way of connecting beyond Sunday worship. And I don't have to add this—she turned the TV off.

To ask how we connect with church beyond Sunday worship is very Methodist of us. The early Methodists grew not because of Wesley's great preaching, Lord knows, we preachers put too much stock in that. Early Methodists spent an average of more than two years in a community

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.wpodfm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/muhammad\\_ali\\_versus\\_sonny\\_liston12-e1351986771524.jpg](http://www.wpodfm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/muhammad_ali_versus_sonny_liston12-e1351986771524.jpg)

<sup>7</sup> <http://engl3268.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/kids-on-bench.jpg>

group *before* they had a conversion experience.<sup>ii</sup> They didn't meet Jesus at a big rally with a preacher. They met him in a living room with food or other people's kids on their laps, and friends poking and prodding into their souls. Francis Asbury, our first bishop in America, called community groups "little families of love."<sup>8</sup> Wesley said this about them, "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and . . . to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it." Wesley says you've accepted Jesus? Good! Now, find your way into a group that knows your name, knows your struggles, prays for you, loves you. Malcolm Gladwell, the great journalist, studying small groups in big churches,<sup>9</sup> notes this,

Membership in a small group is a better predictor of whether people volunteer or give money than how often they attend church, whether they pray, whether they've had a deep religious experience, or whether they were raised in a Christian home.

Research shows how deeply our lives are determined by the company we keep. If your coworkers give money to charity, *you* are more likely to—even if you don't know they do! Somehow generosity gravitates and affects others. If the friends of your friends are happier *you* will be happier. Demonstrably statistically measurably happier. My friends and I used to joke in college about how women's dorms were all on the same emotional and biological cycle. It's true of men too—if a group is mean they all become meaner; same too with kindness. *We are the company we keep* (say that with me). So let's keep some with Jesus.

We do this lots of ways at church—Sunday School classes, UMW circles, choir, bible studies, Emmaus reunion groups are some traditional ways. Our Christian Adventure SS class started when its members were young parents in the 1950s. Sam Wotherspoon is their youngest member, at 88. They've gamely realized they need to move to a smaller room—this can't be easy. And they say, sure, we'll move to another room, which Sunday? Whatever you need. Bless them, we need them so desperately. That generation has always been about the good of the whole. Don't you want to look back on your life and have been a member of a small group like that?

For a church in a college town we need more bible studies going. Disciple Bible Study, that we recognize today, has born such fruit for us. Stephen Ministry is a newer way. Community groups are too—Vern Collins will unleash a new round of community groups in the fall that we need leaders for and followers too. I'm amazed at how many of you volunteer in our church—every time I see you leaving out my office window I want to call after you, thanks, your time is precious! But you already know that or you wouldn't be here, you don't do it for thanks. Connecting beyond Sunday worship shows we are a people, not just individuals. And it will make you live longer, happier, holier, better, what's not to like? We have a church-shaped hole in our hearts. See me or any of the ministers or other leaders for more about how to fill it.

<sup>10</sup>Two, we are wired for church. These verses in Acts give a pattern for what a church is, what a church does:<sup>11</sup> "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the

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<sup>8</sup> Wesley quote on screen plz

<sup>9</sup> Quote on screen attributed to Gladwell plz

<sup>10</sup> II. We are wired for church

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:42 on screen plz

breaking of bread and the prayers.” Sound familiar? It’s what we do every Sunday! Teaching, friendship, breaking bread, prayers. You miss one of those things and you’ve missed church. Do you see how doable those things are? In fact, we’re doing them now!

<sup>12</sup>Then this, “<sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Uh, what? What’d he say? Not so doable that. This is America where we have a whole industry<sup>13</sup>—storage—devoted to keeping our stuff we can’t even fit in our houses. And the disciples gave what little they had away? What do we make of this?

As usual the answer lies in the Old Testament. God promises Moses that in the Promised Land things will be different.<sup>14</sup> There won’t be hunger: “There will be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy.” The church *is* the promised land. So there should be no needy among us. How’s that working out for us?

In America we have vastly more material gifts than most people in world history—we live longer, are better educated, better fed, more comfortable. *And* very few of us feel we make enough money. How much for braces? College? Retirement? The nursing home? It always costs slightly more than we have. And the bible says to sell stuff, pool the money, and give it to the poor? Really? What world is this? You won’t be surprised that scholars think this never actually happened in the early church *or* the Promised Land. It was an ideal never achieved. A preacher friend calls this story the idealistic hippie stage of the church that lasted about 15 minutes.<sup>iii</sup>

Just goes to show the lengths we scholars and preachers will go to *avoid* doing what Jesus commands. The book of Acts is not so much impressed that 3000 people convert. It’s impressed, and awe comes on everyone, when those converts change their lives. When they pray, teach, befriend, break bread, and sell their possessions and give to those without. And here’s the thing—*we do that more than we think!* Every time we make a place for another at our table. Our annual Bazaars and ABC sales have us sell our stuff to give to missions and reduce our debt so we can give more to missions. I am often overwhelmed by the generosity in this community. Don’t sell us short on this giving away stuff business. What are we doing when we give in the offering plates and online every week?! As a buddy of mine writes, “It isn’t your decision for Christ that makes you act like a Christian but whom you invite for dinner on Wednesday nights.”<sup>iv</sup>

We can do more. One church I know celebrates Pentecost, this season of the church year, by bringing stuff to sell on Ebay. The proceeds become a benevolence fund to help the needy among them. They can’t all give cash, but even homeless folks have stuff they can sell. Another church I know owns yard and farm equipment in common. They don’t all need to own a giant mower, so they buy *one* and all use it. To share stuff because of Jesus is a sign of life. Our companion church FaithBridge in Blowing Rock has a food pantry—folks know they can show up and be fed—700 meals a month. Just like our youth Sunday nights. Our Blackburn House in Todd features young

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<sup>12</sup> On screen plz

<sup>13</sup> <http://freeassociationdesign.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/spaces-self-storage-02-larg.jpg>

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 15:4 on screen plz

people living in common—they share the coffee pot rather than horde it. We see a passage like Acts and think “No one can do that.” Actually we do it all the time, and to do it more will make us more human.

<sup>15</sup>Third and finally we are wired for God. Brain scans show that when, say, nuns—professional praying people—think about God, two parts of the brain fire. One, the part that engages when we’re excited about something. The vigilant alert hyper aware part that fires we need to fight or run or concentrate. *And*, two, the calming part. The part that relaxes us, chills us out, makes us at peace. Prayer makes us both more alert and more at peace. That’s your brain on God.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day in the church when we think about the triune nature of our God. God is always relationship, Father with Son with Spirit, shared with us in the church. The Trinity may seem hard to understand. But all its saying is this, when you see love, you see God. And church when we love we’re like God the Holy Trinity. Connecting beyond Sunday worship is just asking us all to be more like God, which is what the church is there for in the first place.

When I was in seminary I was attending a church where the preaching was good. That’s what I went for. In conversation with the pastor I asked how I could get closer to God. He said, well, you could try showing up for something other than Sunday. Ouch. Guilt meter up. I would never say that to you, don’t worry. But he wasn’t just trying to add something to my to-do list. He was trying to make me more human. Closer to God, more like the Trinity. When we serve, lead, share, help, get in touch with others, we’re becoming more human, more holy, more godly.

So how have you connected with your church beyond Sunday worship this week? It’s what we’re made for. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Quoted in Tony Robinson’s book *Called to be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day*.

<sup>ii</sup> Rob Moll’s book on God and the body is so helpful throughout here.

<sup>iii</sup> Nadia Bolz-Webber

<sup>iv</sup> This from Rob Moll, whose new book on neuroscience and God I’m using throughout this sermon.

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<sup>15</sup> III. We are wired for God.