

Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

Our story from Acts this morning is quite an impressive story. Jesus had ascended to heaven. The apostles were waiting around in Jerusalem, wondering what was going to happen next. All of a sudden, the Spirit comes down upon the crowd. It appears as tongues of fire and there is the sound of a mighty wind. There were p all kinds of nationalities in Jerusalem, hearing people speaking in their own languages. Peter takes advantage of the situation and preaches, sharing the story of Jesus death and resurrection, sharing the story of Easter. When he was done, the crowd asked, "What should we do?" "Repent, and be baptized," he answered. Three thousand people came to faith and were baptized. 3,000! A preacher with this kind of accomplishment would probably build a Crystal Cathedral or convert a basketball arena into a church. 3,000 people! I don't know about you, but I am impressed!

While these numbers are impressive, what is even more impressive is the transformation that occurred in the lives of these people who were baptized. The transformation I am talking about their becoming a close-knit, caring, community of faith, fellowship. They spent much time together in the temple, broke bread at home, ate their food with glad and generous hearts. They were a vibrant, vital community.

This description reminds me of the church I attended in my youth. This church was a large part of my life. It was a large brick church to which was added a large Christian Education wing in the 60s, located in the midst of Colfax Township in Grundy County, Iowa. It was surrounded by lush fields of corn and soybeans. On this large lot there was the manse, an unattached two car garage, a home for the custodian, a large cemetery, a large playground with all kinds of equipment, a picnic area, and a baseball

diamond. Every summer there were two events I enjoyed. One was Mission Fest, which was always on a weekday, maybe a Thursday. There were three worship services that day. One in the morning, one in the afternoon with two sermons, and one in the evening. The preachers were guests, often times missionaries. After the morning worship, there was a large dinner served by the women of the church. These women knew how to prepare a meal. After the noon dinner, we would have the afternoon worship service. And then there would be a break for a few hours for the farmers to run home and get their evening chores done. We would return to the church with another large dinner, and then the evening worship service. The emphasis was mission, and the money that was raised that day would go to mission. I don't recall how much would be raised. I know it was in the thousands, perhaps close to ten thousand dollars. That was a lot of money in the 60's. This was a time of spending time in the temple—the church—and eating food with glad and generous hearts. I truly looked forward to that day. I'll admit it wasn't for the worship. It was this gathering of a community, fellowship, and great food that I enjoyed and have fond memories.

The other event was Vacation Bible School. It would be the first full week after school began its summer break. It went from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and was a joint venture between the Christian Reformed Church in Holland, a small nearby town, and our country church about three miles from town. There would be 120 to 130 children. The days would be filled with Bible stories, making crafts, a morning recess, an afternoon recess, and a meal served by the women of the church. Food that kids liked: hot dogs, potato chips, watermelon, lemonade. Moreover, every afternoon there was a treat break, a fudgesicle, popsicle, or other ice cream treats.

Was I a well-behaved boy during those three worship services and four sermons at Mission Fest, listening to every word that was said, and fully participating in worship? Of course not! Do I remember everything I learned in those Bible lessons at Vacation Bible School.? Absolutely not! Was I well behaved in VBS? Are you kidding? I may have been the only child that was ever called to the pastor's study during VBS! You think it is embarrassing to be called to the principal's office? Wait until you are called to the pastor's study!

This experience of fellowship and worship with a community of faith left an impression on me. That "glad and generous" fellowship shaped my faith. I am who I am today because of those experiences in that community of faith. Don't get me wrong. I am no poster child for a person of faith. Don't put me on a pedestal! This fellowship shaped me and will shape me for the rest of my life. Some time ago some research was done about the effectiveness of Sunday School. It revealed that the people really don't remember what they learned, but they remember those relationships, they remember the fellowship, and that is what shaped their faith.

Charles, was a student at Cal Poly, and became good friends with Alan, Alan, a physics major. Alan got straight A's and later returned to Cal Poly as a physics instructor. Alan was extremely skeptical of anything religious, especially Christian. He was well read and well versed, and he argued his doubt like a scientist. Alan believed that Christianity was unable to pass the methodological requirements of science. He therefore pled agnostic; there simply wasn't enough evidence to warrant belief in God. Alan was usually happy to discuss religious subjects, which always gave Charles some hope.

Charles shared that even more intriguing was how Alan liked to hang out with Charles and his Christian friends. Alan didn't have many friends. He was rather unattractive, and much too serious. But Charles and his friends tried to reach out to him as best they could. Alan knew he could go with Charles' friends to the beach or on recurrent midnight runs to Taco Bell. They tried to include Alan in anything they were doing.

One evening something happened. Though Charles wasn't there at the time, a bunch of friends had gotten together for a praise night on the beach. Alan came along to enjoy the sunset and roaring bonfire. By the time the evening was over, Alan had made a commitment to follow Jesus. No one had spoken to him, nor did anyone even know.

The next day Alan came to tell Charles what had happened.

"But, Alan," Charles said, "what made you decide?"

"You see, Chuck," he said, "it came to me last night, while everyone was singing around the fire, that whenever I am around you Christians I am happy. Even when we disagree with each other, I find myself liking to be with Christians."

"But, Alan, I thought you were never going to become a believer unless there was first enough evidence."

"Yes, Chuck," he replied, "and I still require it. But that's precisely why I now believe. It's how you all love each other that strikes me most. I never considered that evidence before. A good scientist, you know, considers all the facts. I simply haven't found the love you Christians have for each other anywhere else. That's evidence enough for me that Jesus is Lord."

His love experienced in a community of faith led this agnostic to believe there is a God. Communities of faith can be impressive and influential. The church, the community of faith, is a powerful community, in which we are nurtured, loved, and empowered.

Blessed be the Lord, who has given us a new birth
Into a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.