

There's something I think you need to know about me from the beginning here today... I have a nickname among friends who aren't church-goers—Church Lady. It was given to me when I used to play pick-up basketball with some of our kids' teachers and fellow moms in my community when our girls were younger, and it's stuck to this day. Sometimes I'll be in Trader Joe's and hear, "Hey, Church Lady, can you dunk yet?"

I know it really was meant to be a compliment, but, truth be told, I've wondered what was really in their minds when they came up with that name. I often think about that along with what I wish the Church was, and it can make me cringe sometimes.

I'm not sure what your experience has been, but I know I've personally experienced both the best and the worst of "Church." I've been deeply cared for by the community of faith and deeply wounded. Let's be honest, church doesn't always conjure up the best associations! Around here, people can think church people are bigots, closed-minded, hateful, cynical and hypocritical. They know we talk about love, but they're quick to point out when they don't see it, and sometimes those impressions are right!

And this is where the tension lies because the Church is meant to be the hope of the world.

Today, the passage of scripture we'll look at shows how and why this will always be the truth. Let's set the stage...

A bunch of imperfect people—about a 120 them—had witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and He'd told them to wait for **someone**. So they did. Then, the Holy Spirit came upon them and filled them with power like they had never experienced. Peter, one of Jesus' apostles, started preaching in the streets of Jerusalem that were filled with people gathered from all over the world for a celebration at Solomon's Temple. He preached all that he had learned about Jesus—how He was the hope of the world.

This was new, and this was the birth of the church. We're picking up at the end of this first sermon that Peter gave and we're going to take a look at the movement in Jerusalem that spread far beyond their wildest dreams. They had seen the resurrected Jesus and it infused hope into them and everyone they told like they'd never known before. These imperfect people were compelled by Jesus to be the hope of the world.

How did they live? What can we learn from them?

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:40–47).

Peter concludes his sermon with a warning "to save themselves from a corrupt generation;" they were to be instead...

A New Generation/Community

Recently Millennials have been getting a lot of flack because of the obvious flaws many people see in their generation (kind of unfair!). But, if you think about it, each and every generation is really a "new" generation of people based on certain historical events and experiences they went through together. For example:

Builders (The Greatest Generation) 70's and 80's: They went through the Great Depression, World War II. Those things are part of how they fundamentally see themselves; who they are.

Boomers (50's and 60's): They went through or were touched by the Vietnam War, Civil Rights movement, Hippie era, assassination of JFK; those things shaped them.

Gen X (30's and 40's): The Challenger Space Shuttle exploding in the sky with a teacher on board, the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Millennials (20's and early 30's): New Millennium, 9/11, rise in tech industry/internet.

Each generation has distinctive qualities that make them unique. But Peter is begging the people in **his** generation to think of themselves altogether differently. What used to define them can't anymore. He's saying that even the identifiers that seem worked into your DNA are **not** your truest identity anymore. Jesus' forgiveness/salvation has the power to heal the results of all sin—spiritual, emotional, physical. He's calling them not

just to an “individual relationship with Jesus” that “would meet all their personal needs” and fulfill them, but he’s calling them to become believers in Jesus and thus identify themselves with a whole new community/generation—a new society, a completely new humanity.

If you’re a follower of Christ, your frame of reference is based on your experience too, and just like those first believers who accepted Peter’s teaching, our very existence has everything to do with the life and work of Jesus. To be a Christ-follower is to be part of a whole new generation who has a whole new identity. Now you’re defined by the historical events of Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection.

Do you see yourself that way? These early followers of Jesus did! Is Jesus just your personal Savior or is He the hope of the world? Your answer to that question changes the way you decide to be part of “church.” Three thousand were added to their number that day; talk about a mega-church from the get-go! These 3000 were something new; their identity had been changed. And it had been changed together! Together this new community was compelled to do things differently. They were a New Generation and they became a learning community, a loving community, a worshipping community, and a growing community.

A Learning Community

They (the 120 original believers and the 3000)—as one body with no distinctions between old and new—devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching. This verse literally says, “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostle’s teaching...” It’s important to note this term “continually devoting” because it governs all the other characteristics we’ll see of this young church where God is at work. It denotes a steadfast and single-minded devotion.

We know about devotion, right? How many of you have ever watched Steph Curry of the NBA Champion Golden State Warriors shoot free throws? Most of the time he comes up to the free throw line, sweaty and breathing heavily, always chewing on his mouthpiece, maybe a little dazed by the hard foul he just got. When he steps up to the foul line to shoot have you noticed? He seldom misses, right? He’s in the top three in NBA history! He actually makes sure that he makes five hundred 3-pointers every day before he leaves practice. How does he make it look so easy? By continual devotion to his task.

The text clearly states that the apostles did the teaching. These 12 men (actually 11 by then) were trained by Jesus from the very beginning and they had personally interacted with the resurrected Savior. Of course, they didn’t have a building dedicated to meeting together. No one had a home big enough for 3,000 people! Later, we’ll see that they broke into smaller groups to meet in many different homes throughout the week and they met as one body in a public area of the temple.

They didn’t yet have the completed New Testament. The instruction they received was based on the OT and the teachings of Jesus, simply gleaned and remembered by the apostles from their time with Him. Instead of writing a body of work, Jesus poured His divine knowledge into these people, and then He gave them His Holy Spirit to guide their interpretation of OT scripture to keep them right and true in their teaching.

We can learn the same way. We can learn on our own, and we can learn from one another and teach one another what we’ve been learning.

A Loving Community

They were continually devoted to the apostle’s teaching and to fellowship. I think this is the hardest part, don’t you? The people! Being devoted to teaching is a lot easier compared to this!

The Greek term for fellowship is *koinonia*. It refers to “a close association involving mutual interests and sharing.” Secular Greek writers used the term to describe the unique bond shared by a husband and wife. For a group, though, the word denotes a mutual personal investment of the members with one another.

I want to give you an example of this. I think there are two types of communities that are found in churches. One is like a bag of marbles. When they come together for fellowship, they clack and clatter, there’s noise and friction, they flutter and throw off light nicely, and they scratch each other. They connect, but they don’t really mush/mesh. That’s **not** koinonia. The other kind of community is like a bag of grapes. Shake the bag around a little and it starts to drip! Look inside and it’s not a pretty sight; it’s messy, but they sure are mashing! Each life bleeds into the others. **That’s** koinonia. That’s real, authentic, Spirit-empowered fellowship!

What do you think you’re more like? A marble or a grape?

Being a grape is hard. It requires vulnerability, requires you to love people when they’re vulnerable. Both are really hard. Vulnerability and time are required to be a grape and not just a marble. We can’t be too busy for this. We can’t be in authentic community unless we’re willing to let what’s in us get on other people and let what’s in other people get on us. Truly, that’s the deepest yearning of every human heart—to know and be known, and then to love and be loved without hesitation or conditions. God is the perfect lover, but He chose us to be His representatives and He has given us His Spirit so that’s possible.

How might this influence what we’re going to look like in two weeks when we move to the Fox Theatre?

In two weeks we’re going to be in a whole new environment with so many different people, ages, races, backgrounds, interests, etc. One thing to be careful of, to remind one another of, is that differences can become things to celebrate and rejoice over. Differences anywhere outside of the church mostly breed

comparison, envy and pride. But inside the church, they should bring grace and celebration and new vision of Jesus. It's gonna be messy, but, differences can melt away as we look to Him. This was why the church was the first institution in history to bring together equally—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free. There's hope for us! When people who, for the most part, have a lot of reasons to be divided, come together and love one another, something pretty amazing can happen.

How will **we** be perceived? Can we, with God's help, be different than the negative things we can be known for? The early church was a loving community, but it was also a worshipping community.

A Worshipping Community

We read in verse 42, "They devoted themselves....to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (literally, the breaking of the bread and to prayers). This suggests a reference to the Lord's Supper (Communion) on the one hand and prayer services or meetings—(rather than private prayer) on the other.

These early Christians prayed with faith just like Dominic talked about last week. There's two parts of the early church's worship that illustrate its great balance.

It was both **formal** and **informal** because it took place both in the temple courts and in their homes which is an interesting combination. They didn't immediately leave what might be called the "institutional" church. They do seem to have attended the prayer services of the temple. At the same time, they supplemented the temple services with more informal and spontaneous meetings (breaking of bread) in their homes.

I think it's always good when the more formal services of the local church are complemented with the informality and joy of home gatherings, don't you? Haven't you experienced that? There's something about being in a home. There's no need to polarize between the structured and unstructured—traditional and spontaneous—the church needs both!

The second example of balance of the early church's worship is that it was totally **joyful** and totally **reverent**. There can be no doubt of their joy because they're described as having glad and sincere hearts which literally means "in exultation and sincerity of heart."

Every worship service can and should be a joyful celebration of the powerful acts of God through Jesus Christ. I love British theologian John Stott's description here: "It's right in public worship to be dignified; it is unforgivable to be dull!"

Everyone was filled with awe as we read in verse 43, which seems to include the followers of Jesus as well as those who were not. God had visited their city. He was in the midst, and they knew it. They bowed down before Him in humility and wonder. So, it's a mistake to imagine that in public worship, reverence and

rejoicing are mutually exclusive. The combination of joy and awe, as formality and informality, is a healthy balance in worship.

A Growing and Outreach Community

When you love something you tell people about it—ice cream, Jesus—you can't help it! It's a come-and-see thing. It's the same with Jesus; we want other people to experience Him. Those first Jerusalem Christ-followers were never so preoccupied with learning, sharing and worshipping that they forgot about reaching out to others with the Gospel.

From these earliest believers in Jerusalem, three things stood out to me:

1. The Lord Himself—that is, Jesus—did it: "the Lord added to their number." And, certainly He did it through the preaching of the apostles, the witness of the members of the church community, the impressive love that was demonstrated in their everyday life, and their example as they were praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.
2. What Jesus did was two things together: "He added to their number...those who were being saved." He didn't add them to the church without saving them or save them without adding them to the church. Salvation and being part of this community belonged together and still do.
3. The Lord added people daily. Literally, He "kept adding" daily. These early believers' evangelism/outreach with the Gospel wasn't an occasional or sporadic activity; no, just as their worship was daily, so was their outreach to others. Praise and proclamation were both the natural overflow of hearts full of the Spirit.

Looking back over these characteristics of the first "hope of the world" community, it's so evident that they all were about the church's relationships:

- They were related to the apostles and eager to receive their instruction, ready and willing to obey what Jesus and His apostles taught.
- They were related to each other in love. They persevered in fellowship, supporting each other and meeting the needs of the poor.
- They were related to God in worship. They worshipped Him in the temple and in the home, in communion and in prayers with joy and reverence.
- They were related to their community/world in outreach, continually. No self-centered self-contained church absorbed in their own affairs.

When God put His mission in the Church's hands—our hands—that was risky! But, that was His Plan A; there is no Plan B! He still chooses messy, imperfect people. It's going to feel risky to be at the Fox; it's gonna push us; we'll be interacting with the

community. Will we be the hope of the world to them? People will know God loves them because we love them. It's the messiest thing you'll ever be a part of. In the next two weeks, will you pray and be on the lookout for one person to be-friend and enter a grape-y relationship with?

If you're wondering if we can still be the hope of the world today I have a story for you: Earl Palmer, one of my favorite (former) Bay Area pastors, was once defending the church against critics who dismissed it for its hypocrisy, its failures, its inability to measure up to the New Testament's high standards. Palmer deliberately chose a community known for its cultural un-sophistication.

"When Milpitas High School orchestra attempts Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the result is appalling," said Palmer. "I wouldn't be surprised if the performance made old Ludwig roll over in his grave despite his deafness. You might ask, 'Why bother?' Why inflict on those poor kids the terrible burden of trying to render what the immortal Beethoven had in mind? Not even the great Chicago Symphony Orchestra can attain that perfection.

"My answer is this: The Milpitas High School orchestra will give some people in that audience their only encounter with Beethoven's great Ninth Symphony. Far from perfection, it is nevertheless the only way they will hear Beethoven's message."

"I'm going to remind myself of this story the next time I start squirming in a church service or see someone—even me—act in a way that doesn't reflect Christ. Although we may never achieve what the composer had in mind, there is no other way for those sounds to be heard on earth."

It's going to be risky business and more worth it than any other endeavor I can think of. The Church is the hope of the world—of Redwood City—and we get to be a part of it!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.