

Pentecost Sunday

WHAT MAKES A GREAT CHURCH?

Acts, 2:1-4; 14-21

Newbegun United Methodist Church

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It is ironic that the UM church today has difficulty in attracting and keeping new members. It's ironic because attending church is easier today than ever before. In this country you are not likely to be arrested and executed for attending church. It won't hurt your career, in fact, it ought to help it. Our church buildings are comfortable. We have air-conditioning; we have efficient heating; we have Public Address systems so it is possible for everyone to hear without the preacher having to shout; we have cushioned pews so no one has to sit on those hard wooden benches; and the services don't last for hours like they did in past ages. You would think that with these changes that the church would be larger than it was fifty years ago. Unfortunately the reverse is true. Then you read about the very, very early church and you have to wonder – what did they do that we don't do anymore? I don't think we can go back and imitate perfectly what the early church did and make it happen now. It was a different time, a different social system, and a different world. Yet we can still look at the beginning and find certain qualities that caused the first churches to prosper in the midst of oppression. When we look at the second chapter of Acts and see how dynamic was the first church and look at the reasons why the first years were so powerful we can take away some lessons for our future – for your future with Newbegun UMC.

Pentecost Sunday

I see in this reading today that one of the things that made their church great was that they listened to the words of Jesus first- before they acted on anything. You might think that the words in verses 2-4 about the mighty rushing wind and the flames of fire on their heads would be the key to their greatness, but it wasn't. The key verse in this passage is verse 1 when it states that, "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place." I can hear you saying, "What does that have to do with anything." However, this verse is so revealing. You see, after the disciples met Jesus in Galilee they returned to Jerusalem and there Jesus was with them until he ascended into heaven. Now, just as he ascended into heaven he told them to: "Remain in Jerusalem and wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about." Lo and behold, they did what Jesus asked them to do. They didn't scatter; they didn't go back to fishing; they did what they were told to do – they stayed together in Jerusalem. In other words, because they listened to Jesus' words, they were all together in one place. That simple logic is so important and so ignored. Before you act, find out what Jesus said and obey together! That makes a great church.

Then, while they were waiting they believed that Jesus would fulfill his promise. "In a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit," Jesus said. Who would not want to wait on that? Who would want to miss that? There are promises in the Bible that a great church waits upon and believes wholeheartedly. Promises of fruitfulness; of peace and hope; of life and death; of goodness and righteousness; and promises of abundant lives. A great church embraces those promises – together.

Another thing that strikes me about this first encounter and its dynamic growth is that the early church was hard to ignore. Well when tongues of fire dance on people's

Pentecost Sunday

heads and uneducated disciples start talking in dozens of different languages, that is rather attention getting. People in the crowd were: “Utterly amazed, saying, ‘Are not all these men Galileans?’” They asked, “How is it that we hear them in our own language?” They had different emotions. “Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, ‘What does this mean?’” You see a great church attracts attention to itself so that people cannot help but notice. Of course, you want the kind of attention that is radically lovable, not scandalous. A great church finds all kinds of ways to speak of love and changed lives to all people. A great church calls attention to itself by its radical hospitality and its love for Jesus Christ.

It goes without saying that the first church invited all kinds of outsiders. On Pentecost the very first thing that divided us – the Tower of Babel and the creation of different languages causing us to be divided – that was mended. It is important to see that by speaking in the languages of the different nations the Holy Spirit was working through the disciples to mend things that divide people. It is interesting that one of the first controversies in the church was whether or not to admit non-Jewish people. Even the experience of Pentecost that mended divisions had to be re-learned over and over again. In the past others have sought to exclude others for one reason or another but the first church, a dynamic church, a great church, first finds ways to mend divisions; to build bridges; and to include everyone.

Racial exclusion? God said, “In the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all kinds of people.” Gender exclusion? God said, “Your sons and daughters will speak prophecies.” Age exclusion? God said, “Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.” A great church finds way to make everyone feel loved.

Pentecost Sunday

The last thing I see that made the first church so great was it kept to the message of salvation. In Acts chapter two Peter says, “Then anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of your sins” And Peter also said, “And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The mission of the church is to proclaim salvation by faith in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. A great church grows committed converts and disciples.

Three churches – Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian – worked together to sponsor a community-wide revival. After the revival concluded the three pastors discussed the results. The Baptist minister said the church gained 4 families as new members. The Presbyterian minister said they did better than that for the church gained 6 new families as members. The Methodist minister said they made out best of all saying, “We got rid of our ten biggest troublemakers.” In other words, great churches don’t grow by trans-denominational transfers. It grows by converting people that don’t know the Gospel and committing them to Jesus, not a church, denomination, or building. It has always been; it always is; and it always will be the message of the Gospel preached to all people. The message we send, the message we believe, makes a great church and a church great. Amen.