

“Blest Be The Tie” GPPC 8-5-18
Psalm 133, Acts 2:42-47

The sermon this morning is the first in a three-part series on Christian unity. Today we focus on unity through fellowship.

While walking down the church hallways, I sometimes take a moment or two to scan the various committee bulletin boards. I commend this to you as well. It’s good to know what the church is up to and you sometimes discover *surprising* opportunities.

A case in point. A few days ago I happened to stop and look at the Fellowship Committee’s bulletin board in the hallway just outside the sanctuary. On that bulletin board, someone (the committee chairperson, I presume) had posted a sheet of paper asking for suggestions for church fellowship activities. And someone had written “Bunco Night.” For those of you who don’t know (and I did not know) according to Wikipedia, Bunco is “a social dice game involving 100% luck and no skill (there are no decisions to be made).” I hate cards. So this sounds appealing to me. And indeed one person had written, “Let’s do it again.” A couple of people had chimed in by writing, “Yes! Yes!”

Jeff Paschal

Someone else had written “Whist would be fun again too.” And for those of you who don’t know (and I did not) Wikipedia explains “Whist is a classic English trick-taking card game which was widely played in the 18th and 19th centuries.” So apparently we have some historians in our church and our folks want to play dice and cards.

But then I noticed someone had also written at the top of the suggestion page one last helpful fellowship idea. And it may end up being even more popular than Bunco or Whist—you tell me. Someone had written, accompanied by a little smiley face, “Spin the bottle.” Hey, who’s in? Raise your hands. According to Wikipedia, “Spin the bottle is a party game...” Okay. I think you know the rules.

“Spin the bottle.” Only at Guilford Park Presbyterian.

Clearly our congregation believes that fellowship is important. And so has the church universal through the centuries.

The entire book of Acts is really about the work of the Holy Spirit in calling the church together to be God’s instrument of witness and ministry in a needy world. This morning we pick up in Acts chapter 2, following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with all its

Jeff Paschal

pyrotechnics, amazing speech, and even more amazing, the ability to listen and understand. What follows such a dazzling display?

Well, because they were church, they went to church to be together as church. As Luke (the author of Acts) puts it, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” What were they doing? Studying and listening together. Engaging in fellowship. Having meals together, probably to include Holy Communion, though they may not have made that distinction, since they may have considered *all* meals eaten together to be holy. And they had time together in worship “the prayers.”

We do not get any indication that being a Christian was something you did alone, something you accomplished apart from the ongoing encouragement and formation of the church community. As someone said, “80% of life is showing up.”

So they were gathered together as church, doing normal church things, and what happened? Well, miracles happened. Miracles.

Jeff Paschal

Luke says, “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.” But Luke doesn’t say what these “wonders and signs” were. Or does he?

He says, “All who believed were together and had all things in common.” The Greek word for common here is *koinonia* and it doesn’t translate so simply into English. But according to the dictionary it means a “close association involving mutual interests and sharing,” a “communion, fellowship, close relationship.” In fact the word is sometimes used as an expression “for the marital relationship as the most intimate between human beings.” *Koinonia* means “harmonious” fellowship and “unity.” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker)

Preaching professor Fred Craddock told about a time when he was a very young pastor. He was serving a little mission church in the Appalachian mountains of Tennessee. And it was the practice of that congregation to have immersion baptisms on Easter evening at sundown. The church gathered at a lake. Persons to be baptized moved into the water with Craddock, and after being baptized they changed clothes

Jeff Paschal

behind a booth, then went to the shore where the church had gathered around a fire, while singing and cooking supper. After all had gathered around the fire, a long-time church member introduced the new members to the congregation. And there was a ritual that church followed. Each person in the circle around that fire said his or her name and then followed with a comment. “My name is..., and if you ever need somebody to do washing and ironing...” “My name is...If you ever need anybody to chop wood...” “My name is... If you ever need anybody to baby-sit...” “My name is...If you ever need anybody to repair your house...” “My name is... If you ever need anybody to sit with the sick...” “My name is..., and if you ever need a car to go to town...”

And Craddock says it continued like this all the way around the circle. Eventually the church ate supper and had a square dance. Then a leader announced it was time to go home. He and Craddock stayed back while he kicked some sand over the fire. Craddock says, “...He saw me standing there still, and he looked at me and said, ‘Craddock, folks don’t ever get any closer than this.’ And Craddock says, “In that little community, they have a name for that. I’ve heard it in other

Jeff Paschal

communities too. In that community, their name for that is ‘church.’

They call that ‘church.’” (Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. Mike Graves and Richard Ward, 151-152.)

“Folks don’t ever get any closer than this.” Luke has a name for that too. *Koinonia*. It’s one of the miracles of the Holy Spirit, isn’t it?

And Luke says this koinonia led to some amazing behaviors in the church. He says, “They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Well, this sounds like communism and it makes us a little queasy, doesn’t it? But it’s not a forced communism like some countries. It was simply a chosen, Spirit-empowered, Spirit-led, overflowing generosity with each other. “My name is...and if you need...” Church. Koinonia.

And Luke says, “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, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

So worship and meals together were central in their lives. And what strikes me also is how they were given “glad” (the Greek word

Jeff Paschal

means “a piercing exclamation, exultation”) they were given “glad and generous hearts.” The church was glad, generous, joyful.

Now if you watch many movies, as I do, you may notice the church is often depicted as a glum, judgmental group, populated by people who spend much of their time trying to make sure nobody is having any fun. And, yeah, sometimes that happens. How sad when it does. And when that happens in church, when the church takes *itself* too seriously and God not seriously enough, when it loses its sense of humor, and becomes so serious it becomes *deadly* serious, then it's in trouble and needs to pray for renewal. But has a glum, judgmental church *usually* been your experience in real life?

It has not been my usual experience. When we come in here for worship, the hallways and sanctuary are filled with people who give hugs and handshakes. They're glad to see each other. When we go to committee meetings, (you'd think committee meetings would be the dullest things on earth!), but when we go to committee meetings people talk and laugh and pick on each other and have fun. And when we have fellowship events or mission trips or vacation Bible school, or Sunday

Jeff Paschal

school, people have a ball. And I do not believe this is phony or manufactured by sheer force of our wills. I believe this is the Holy Spirit at work. Do you believe that?

Luke says when the Spirit came upon the early church, the people in the church behaved in amazing, generous, joyful ways. And this was attractive, practically irresistible to the people outside the church. They wanted to know what in the world was going on that these Christians loved each other so much. And people outside the church wanted to be a part of it. So the church grew not only spiritually but numerically as folks came and joined this strange and wonderful fellowship.

I suppose they did not play Bunco or Whist or even Spin the Bottle back then. But when the church came together in the unity of worship and fellowship and meals and service together, it was a miracle, koinonia.

The miracle of koinonia is not confined to the church in the first century or a little country church in the mountains of Tennessee either. Wherever the people of God gather together in worship, study, fellowship, mission, and meals that miracle still happens today. It still

Jeff Paschal

happens. Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. Blest be.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal