

18 March 2018

Play and Community

Acts 2:41-47

After the Day of Pentecost, when thousands heard the gospel of the Risen Christ, the apostles realized they had a problem. What were they going to do with thousands of people? We read what they did in Acts 2, verses 41-47:

⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

In my first sermon in this series I mentioned a study I had heard of – an in-depth study of the lives and background of several serial killers. The researchers were looking for common factors that might explain how those people became remorseless killers. They found only one common element: none of the killers they studied had ever really known how to play.

So I've been wondering about that since hearing it. What does the ability to play reveal about us, or teach us? Here are some of my musings: Playing teaches us that not everything we do is important. We don't have to take everything seriously. I think that matters. I think we have to be able to identify which things are not as important, or we will never know which things really are. Second, I think we need the release of sometimes doing things just because we feel like it, without stressing over whether they are *working*. I do crossword puzzles. Just for fun. They accomplish nothing, and when I finish one I toss it out and forget about it. That's all I want. People keep trying to tell me that crosswords are good for me: "You know that's a great way to keep your brain active as you get older." Whatever. I don't do them because they're good for me. I just enjoy them. Furthermore, because I know they're just for fun, my self-esteem is not invested in them. If someone tells me, "Christianity is stupid" or "Pastors are all hypocrites," I might take that personally, because those are two of the ways that I define myself. But you can tell me that crossword puzzles are for morons, and I won't care. I'll still enjoy them. So that's a third benefit of knowing how to play: it teaches you perspective. Not everything is crucial, and not everything is personal. Quickly, a few other ideas: Play teaches fairness (lopsided games aren't fun, so you try to make them fair) and conflict resolution (if someone takes his ball and goes home angry, no one can play, so you try to work it out). I'm sure some of you have thought of other advantages of knowing how to play, but this should be enough to show how really, really important it is. We need the experience of play and we need playtime, or we are not complete. I read recently about a school that changed its schedule to cut back on classroom time in favor of more recess. Grades went up.

In other words, that note on your kindergarten report card, "Plays well with others," may be one of the most important things on any of your report cards, ever. It is through play that we

learn how to live in community with others. Play teaches us to share, to cooperate, to resolve differences, to put aside our own feelings for the sake of a shared goal. Play teaches us that sometimes we lose, and how to do that with grace. A person who cannot play is someone for whom everything is personal, everything revolves around himself, and every other person is either a rival to be crushed or a tool to be used and then discarded. That person doesn't understand community. That person will live and die alone.

So let's apply these thoughts to us, the Church of Jesus Christ. The Greek word that we translate "church" is *ekklesia*, which means "community." It is a reflection of the Hebrew word *qahal*, which means, "community." The definition of "church" in every language is "community." Linguistically, community is not one characteristic of the church; it is what the church is. And it's how the church began. Earlier we read the first description of the early church from Acts. That church *devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to breaking bread and prayers. They were together and had all things in common; they spent much time together and broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.* This was above all a community, a place where no one had to be alone, no one had to suffer in silence or bear a burden by herself. This was a time when "church" lived up to its definition.

Last week I talked about how we American Protestants, with our strong work ethic, had forgotten how to relax, how to put aside work and honor a time of sabbath. Today I want to add that, while we in the American Protestant church haven't exactly *forgotten* how to do community, we have at least forgotten how important it is. Have you ever heard anything like this: "Those people only go to church to see their friends!"? As if that were a bad thing. Or, "I can't stand that Bible Study; it's really just a fellowship time!" Yeah, shame on those fellowshiping people! Or "Ssh! This is church, not social hour"!? Behind all those statements is an unspoken assumption: that socializing and fellowship is an obstacle to doing church, which apparently is about listening to teachers and learning things. We have, nearly unconsciously, defined the church in terms of its teaching and moved everything else into the background.

In fairness, it's not entirely our fault, this focus on the intellectual side of church. The Protestant Reformation took place just as the Scientific Revolution was beginning which led into the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. It was a time of faith in Reason. Science was going to explain everything, and we were soon going to stamp out ignorance once and for all. So it isn't surprising that the church that began during that time emphasized the intellect over everything else. We demanded highly-educated clergy and built colleges – like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the American colonies – for the purpose of training those preachers. And we made the sermon, a long speech by one of those highly-educated ministers, the center of our worship service. We began to think of church primarily as a place to learn and faith a matter of intellectual agreement.

But we were wrong. I don't mean that learning is bad. Remember that even in our reading in Acts, it said that they *devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching.* But that was one line, which was followed immediately by a whole paragraph about eating meals together. Is it possible that we've gotten some priorities confused?

The church historian Diana Butler Bass thinks so. In her book, *Christianity After Religion*, she says that for the past five-hundred years we have approached church in this order: Believing, Behaving, and Belonging. That is, our first concern has been to make sure that people believe as we do, are in agreement with our creeds and denominational teachings. Once we've settled that, then we've focused on Behaving – making sure that those people who believe as we

do are acting according to our moral and spiritual expectations. Finally, once people believe and behave according to our specs, they are accepted as belonging to our group. Bass says that we need to reverse that order. First, people need to know that they belong. People need community, need to know that they are not alone. After that, we can think about what that means for our behavior. How do those who belong to Christ's community live their lives? And only after that do we go on to what we believe, teaching people the foundation, the reason that this community even exists.

That's a fairly radical reversal of the way we've been doing church. I'm inclined to agree with Bass, but even if you aren't sure, I think we can agree on a few things. First, community matters. For too long we have acted as if fellowship were a fringe benefit of the church, but it is not. It is at the very heart of who we are called to be. Socializing is not a thing that gets in the way of "real" church; it *is* real church. Yes, there's a time for Bible study and learning, and maybe don't chat during the piano prelude or choir anthem, but coffee hour is as important as anything else we do. Greeting each other as we come in and before the service is crucial. On any given Sunday, the most important thing someone may take from their Sunday morning experience is not anything that I've said but rather the assurance that they belong. There are people in this community who love you. You are not alone.

Second, community is the message that our world needs. Far more than solid doctrine, far more than rigorous morality, we need community. We live in a society that has been divided by race, by gender, by sexuality, by politics, by immigration, and yes, by religion. Millions upon millions live their lives in crowded isolation, surrounded by noisy argument. What the church has to offer – once we remember who we are – is exactly what our fractured society needs. This is one reason that we are doing more of our "worship" experiences in the Fellowship Hall, around tables with food. This is why we're going to have a Bible Study after Easter at dinner time in a coffee lounge that serves sandwiches. This is why in June we're going to have a Sunday morning worship service in Owen Park, a worship service that will turn into a picnic. Because community is not just a thing that we do; it is the thing that we are. Community is not one of our tasks, but it is the way that we do all of our tasks. Believing stuff is good. I do it all the time. But we can't expect anyone to care what we believe until they know we as a community care about them.

And here's the good news: community is the most enjoyable part about church and always has been. Being in community, belonging, knowing that you aren't alone, is fun. This is where church becomes play, a thing that we do because we want to, something that we look forward to, something we willingly invite others to be a part of, something that always has room for others. We've been very serious about church for a very long time, and it would be all right, every now and then, to play.