

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

HE IS RISEN!!

Easter, 2009

Sermon Series: Follow the Leader (reprise)

They Followed Their Leader

(Acts 2)

Introduction: It's about LIFE - yours and **HIS**...

This weekend, you and I have spent a good bit of time thinking about death - Jesus' death.

This morning, we think about life. After all, Easter really is all about life!

And for the next few minutes we are going to think about the resurrection life of Jesus - and how that life impacts our lives.

For the early disciples, life went on after the death of Good Friday and the LIFE of Easter Sunday morning.

As we begin, then, let's fast forward fifty days past the day Jesus died.

By fast-forwarding, we are moving from the Feast of Passover (the day on which Jesus died) to the Day of Pentecost.

Those Who Followed, Empowered! (Acts 2:1-41)

The Arrival of the Spirit and His Power!

Time and place

We are still in Jerusalem. But it's a month and a half later. Instead of early April, it's mid to late May.

But the crowds are still in place. There were crowds at Passover. There are also huge crowds gathered to celebrate Pentecost.

Thousands and thousands of people have convened in the precincts of the Temple for worship. Among those thousands are the one hundred and twenty disciples of Jesus. In the middle of the morning, in the middle of the crowd, the Holy Spirit fell upon those one hundred and twenty disciples.

Evidence of the Holy Spirit's arrival

It's the arrival of the Holy Spirit, an event predicted by Jesus.

The Spirit's arrival was announced by the sound of a great, rushing wind. Then tongues of fire rested on one hundred and twenty heads. And then the disciples of Jesus were given the ability to speak in languages they had never learned!

Understandably, there was great confusion among the crowds. Some were saying that the disciples were drunk. Most had no explanation at all.

Peter Preaches with Spirit Power!

Peter explained

And that's when the apostle Peter stepped up and explained it. He announced that what was happening had been predicted not only by Jesus, but hundreds of years earlier by the prophet Joel.

Joel had promised the outpouring of God's Spirit - and THIS was THAT!!

And then Peter - the same one who had denied Jesus three times on the night before He died - this same Simon Peter, preached to a crowd of thousands.

Peter preached!

The beginning his sermon looked like a short history of the Jewish people. His message ended with all the subtlety of a sixteen pound sledge.

[Acts 2:29] “Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. [30] “And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, [31] he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. [32] “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. [33] “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. [34] “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says:

‘The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at My right hand,

[35] Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” ‘

[36] “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Three Thousand Added by Spirit Power!

The call

Of the many thousands of people who heard Peter preach, several thousand of them responded, *[37] “Brethren, what shall we do?”*

And Peter told them, *[38] Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

And they did. They repented of what they had been believing about Jesus - that He was a blasphemer and a criminal.

The response

They heard Peter’s convincing words. They saw the amazing manifestations of the Spirit. They noticed the confidence of the disciples - men and women who fifty days earlier almost all behaved like cowards.

The crowds were convicted and convinced and converted. They came to believe that Jesus is Lord! And they turned to the Lord Jesus for salvation.

The Bible says that on that day *“three thousands souls were added.”*

Added to what? Added to the church of Jesus Christ! So at the end of the day there are 3,120 believers in Jesus. And the question that comes to our minds is, *“Now what?”*

What are these newly minted Christians to do? Well, let’s watch what they do. The final section of the second chapter of Acts gives us the answer to the question, *“Now what.”*

Remember, at this point, the band of Christians was made up of strangers, men and women and young people who didn’t know each other, many of whom hailed from different countries, and (aside from their Jewishness) had little in common.

But what we read in verses 42-47 comes across as more of a family reunion.

First, we read about a fellowship of believers who were interested in worship. And that heart for worship is manifested in three different ways.

Those Who Followed, Enlivened! (Acts 2:42-47)

Devoted to Worship (v. 42)

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Learning together

One, they continually devoted themselves to **the apostles' teaching**. They needed content to which they could respond and by which they could live.

Paying diligent attention to the truth of God as they heard it from men who had been with Jesus gave them their marching orders.

Surely the apostles taught whatever they could remember about Jesus teaching.

They had all been present for the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and I'll bet they keyed in on that. Jesus' parables likely got air time. They would have told the stories of the miracles He performed.¹

And the apostles would have highlighted Jesus' commands, His encouragements, His warnings of persecutions to come and His instructions about how they, His followers, were to love each other.

Then, these brand-new believers also prayed together.

Praying together

God's people have always recognized that prayer is essential for spiritual growth and spiritual health. Old Testament Jews knew this, and Christians have always known this.

Since the Christians who made up the first church ever were all Jews, they were all immediately on the same page of seeing the importance of prayer.

- The members of the first church ever were filled with gratitude to God for their salvation. What better way to tell God, "*Thanks!*" than through prayer?

¹ I would imagine they explained Old Testament passages that had been obscure, but were now as clear as a bell in light of the crucifixion and the empty tomb. Isaiah, chapter 53, Psalm 22, Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2 and many other passages were explained to the church in light of who Jesus proved to be.

- They expressed their joy over the blessings God had heaped on them through prayer.
- They voiced their need for God's strength to live for Jesus through prayer.

It makes a world of sense, it should be expected, that the church would pray. And what form did their prayer take? We don't know - don't have a clue!

We don't know HOW they prayed, only THAT they prayed - continually and together.

Praise, thanksgiving, petition, intercession - all kinds of prayer at all times. Large group prayer meetings, small bands of pray-ers gathered together. You name it!

And in addition to feeding their souls with the apostles' teaching and nurturing their relationship with God through prayer, they "***broke bread***" together.

Breaking bread/Lord's Supper together

What the larger group of 3,120 did was not all that different from what the 12 had done with Jesus on their last night together.

There in Jerusalem, they would get together on a regular basis and re-enact the Last Passover meal's breaking of the bread and the passing of the cup to remember Jesus.²

Luke does not tell us how frequently they observed Communion, only that they were "continually" breaking bread.

When the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper, they would do so as Jesus and the disciples had observed the Last Supper, around a full meal. This meal came to be known as The Love Feast (or agape).

² I checked out seven different commentaries concerning this particular reference to "breaking bread." And, while consensus among commentaries is no guarantee of anything, the agreement of seven Bible scholars does carry *some* weight. Every one of these scholars believed that the reference here in verse 42 was to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The church members would all bring food and drink to the Love Feast, enjoy fellowship around the table and end the meal by remembering Jesus' death with a final morsel of bread and His resurrection with a final cup.

By paying close attention to the word of God, by prayer, and by taking the Lord's Supper together, the earliest Christians worshipped together. They were all about **worship**.

As well, this collection of individuals became - seemingly in an instant - a fellowship devoted to community.

We see this community in the development of a "garage sale" mindset.

Devoted to Community and Generosity and Service (vv. 44-46)

[Acts 2:44] And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; [45] and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. [46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart

"garagesale-ism"

Remember that the Jews who were in Jerusalem, who had heard the sermon preached on Pentecost and who had placed their faith in Jesus had come from all over the world.

Among other things, that meant that they didn't have homes, material possessions, or a lot of cash. They were on a road trip.

Many of those who were now a part of the church were running low on funds and had to be supported by the Jewish residents of Jerusalem.

So, the members of the early church showed each other real, tangible love. They did what was necessary in the situation to meet needs.³

³ At Qumran, a community dedicated to holiness and asceticism that lived in the deserts, the pooling of material resources was required for entrance into the group.

Those who had means decided that, from time to time, they would let go of a portion of their wealth to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

The early church simply would not tolerate anyone in the church being in material need.⁴ They were all about **generosity** and **service**.

So, they established a common fund, from which the needy among them were given assistance.

They shared their material resources with each other, as any had need.

And, they were friendly with each other.

Friendly

Friendliness in the Temple

That may seem a funny word to use when describing the relationships in the first church ever. But I think it fits.

Here, are friends, friends linking arms and standing shoulder to shoulder, engaged in an epic quest and having the time of their lives.

Listen to this line from Acts 2:46 - "***And day by day continuing with ONE MIND in the temple...***"⁵

See, groups of them would move in clumps to the Temple. They were going to worship, of course. The Bible says that they were of "***one mind.***"

I don't know what that phrase "***one mind***" brings to your own mind.

⁴ Having been listening to the apostles' teaching, they knew to carry out what Jesus said they should do, namely "***love each other.***" (John 13:34-35)

⁵ The early church was not seeking a break with traditional Judaism. This is seen from their easiness at continuing in worship at the Temple, praying at regular Jewish hours, etc.....

Some might see it as an unattractive sameness. There might be the thought that the early Christians were cookie cutter look-alikes who had the same opinions about everything.

No way! Impossible!!

This incredibly diverse group of people would have had differences of opinion about politics, the economy, the state of Israel and the role of Roman government.

They probably had different opinions about child-rearing and schooling choices. They might have been rivals in the business world.

They came from different countries and different cultures, so they probably had very different opinions about music, dress, food and leisure activities.

BUT, these early Christians were caught up in Jesus. He was their core commitment, and they related to each other from that core.

So, when Christian A was ready to go to the Temple to worship, he didn't allow the politics or the economics or the demographics of Christian B to be a show-stopper. *"Those issues can be worked out, brother. Let's go to worship Jesus."*

And so they did, day by day.

And there was another context in which they shared life together besides the Temple. They shared life in their homes.

Friendliness in homes

[46]...and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, [47] praising God...

Doesn't that sound friendly? In the first few weeks following Pentecost, the first Christians routinely gathered at Solomon's porch in the Temple area for worship.

And, in the in-between times, they took meals together in the informal setting of private homes, where they engaged in the same activities as at the Temple.

I'm not suggesting that there was a formal prayer meeting at every evening meeting or an inductive Bible study over every dessert.

But the same Jesus-centeredness that prevailed at the Temple prevailed in the social gatherings of the friends who made up the first church ever. They were all about **community**.

And as they were sharing life and experiencing true community, they shared the message of Jesus with those who were not a part of the church.

Devoted to Witness (vv. 43, 47b)

[43] Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles⁶... [47b][They were] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

God was active!

There is no question that God was active in Jerusalem!

The overtly miraculous acts of healings and miracles and personal transformations were all evident to everyone. Everyone was impressed.

God's people were active!

But the non-believing residents of Jerusalem were impressed by what they saw of the Christians, too. There was a winsome attractiveness about these early Christians.

⁶ The multiple miracles that took place through the apostles in the weeks following Pentecost is a partial fulfillment of Jesus' words in John 14:12 - ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go to the Father."***

And what was the vehicle that the Lord was pleased to use to bring about these “*day by day*” conversions? What method? Well, the Bible doesn’t tell us directly, but a little thought might suggest a reasonable answer.

All of those who believed in Jesus had, only days or weeks earlier, NOT been believers in Jesus. That means that the church members had social networks in place with people who did not believe in Jesus.

And in the days and weeks following Pentecost, the members of the church naturally used their social networks to tell their friends the wonderful truth that Jesus saves!

That’s right. The reason there was such great evangelistic impact is that the Lord was doing what only He could do - performing miracles and changing lives - and the Christians were doing what only they could do - sharing their faith with their friends.

They were having a few believing friends over to the house for dessert and invited their unbelieving friends to enjoy the time. In that way, people who didn’t know Jesus were exposed to LIFE.

The audible tongues-speaking and the sound of the wind and the visible tongues of fire weren’t done in secret. Nor was the sharing of material needs and the on-going works of God in miracles and personal transformations hidden from view.

Everybody in the city knew of it. Everyone in Jerusalem knew that they were witnessing the dawn of a new age - the age of Jesus.

And, as a result of the First Church of Jerusalem’s winsome testimony of love, and the obvious works of God in their midst, more and more people were being added daily to the church. They were all about **witness**.

So, the first Christians were devoted to **worship, community and generosity and service, and witness**. And WHERE did these Christians get the bright idea to organize their lives around **worship, community and generosity and service, and witness**?

From Jesus!

At the beginning this morning we fast-forwarded fifty days from Passover to Pentecost. Now, hit the rewind button and go back to Passover.

Those Who Followed - and Who Follow!

The End of the Story

Jesus has just been taken off the cross. He’s dead. The hopes and dreams of each of His followers were just as dead.

Friday evening would have been a nightmare. All night Friday and all day Saturday and all night Saturday would have been an interminable horror of emotional pain, loss, and emptiness for the disciples.

And then comes Sunday.

The Re-BEGINNING of the Story!

Jesus - leading on Sunday

Two women made their way, courageously, to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea to finish the embalming work that had been interrupted on Friday, it being Passover.

When they arrived at the tomb they found chaos. There was a rolled-away stone and an empty grave. They ran to tell others.

Peter and John ran to the tomb and found things just as the women had told them. And without seeing a living, breathing Jesus, they were convinced of His resurrection.

Mary, hanging around the tomb, saw a man she thought was a gardener. It turned out to be Jesus.

She embraced Him when He called her name. And then He told her what she was to do: *[John 20:17]...“Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”*

Later that day Jesus appeared to two disciples who were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a village about seven miles away.

While walking together, they were prevented from recognizing Him. But He opened the Scriptures to them, explaining how everything that the Old Testament had said about Messiah had come true in His own life and death and resurrection.

And in the evening of that Sunday, the disciples (for some reason, minus Thomas) were all gathered in the same upstairs room where they had eaten the Passover meal three nights earlier.

All of a sudden, Jesus was with them! The resurrected Jesus breathed peace into their hearts.

Jesus was dead. Now He is alive. And alive, He is leading, taking charge, giving instructions, teaching, giving gifts.

Jesus - leading forty days more

He continued with them for another forty days.

Sometimes in Jerusalem, sometimes in Galilee. Jesus appeared over and over again.

He showed up in the same upper room - this time with Thomas present, a week after the first appearance.

He showed up at the shore of the Sea of Galilee, cooked and ate breakfast with the disciples, ministered grace and forgiveness to Peter, and gave John a vision for a lifetime of ministry.

At one time, He appeared to more than five hundred people!

And then, right before He ascended to Heaven, He met with the eleven disciples one last time. It was on this mountain-top meeting that He gave what we refer to as "The Great Commission."

[Matthew 28:18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Jesus led His followers during the years of His life on this planet. He led His disciples on the day of His resurrection and for forty days following. Jesus led His followers in the days following Pentecost, as we saw so clearly from the second chapter of Acts.

And do you know what? Jesus is STILL leading.

Jesus - leading still

Have you ever noticed that all around the world Christians are dying. They die normally or are killed by persecutors - and the church never misses a beat. It just keeps on going.

That's because Christians don't lead the church.

In the first church, there was never a power struggle about who would lead the church. There was never a contest between Peter and Paul as to who would be "king of the church" in Jesus' absence.

Everyone knew who was leading the church: Jesus!

During His time with the Twelve, Jesus led into worship, generosity and community, servanthood, and witness.

Our Leader continues to lead us, today, into worship, generosity and community, servanthood, and witness.

We don't live the way we do to honor a revered leader who has died.

We live the way we do because our Leader is still leading, alive and well, directing what happens in His Name.

His leadership was seen in Acts 2 and it is just as evident in 2009!

HE IS RISEN!

HE IS RISEN, INDEED!!