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A Loving, Beloved Community 1: Serving – Acts 2:42-47

This January, we're looking at the church as a loving, beloved community. That's what the church is! Scripture tells us that the church is the Bride of Christ, and you cannot be more beloved than that. We spent a good deal of time looking at the loving part, how Christ calls us to love one another as he loves us; now we're going to talk about how that is lived out in community with other people, particularly the community of the church.

I've been thinking a lot about the early church for a while now, and this passage is just about as early as you can get – right after the church came into being at Pentecost – but it also gives us a glimpse into what life was like for them. And that's what gets my attention. How did they spread our faith so well? Things sure have changed, haven't they? I doubt very much if these believers who gathered together every day to learn and share meals and pool their resources would recognize what the church has become.

To look at the differences, we have to start with an important foundational point: really, what the church was intended to be was a support system for believers to be energized and recharged to go out and spread the wonderful news of Christ – through growing in the apostles’ teaching and through fellowship – and for people, who were attracted to what the believers clearly had, to be able to learn what it was to be a believer, a follower of this Jesus, the Messiah.

In a very real sense, the church didn’t come into being to be a community, but it became a community as it was the church.

I really would love to have some of that spirit that they shared, too – you heard the last sentence: “The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.” If we had a cup of whatever it was that was poured on that early church, there aren’t enough church buildings to hold the people who would be trying to find out what we have!

So, something happened. How do we get back? That has to do with our orientation, the changes over the centuries. Part of our problem is that we know what Christ saved us from, but not what he saved us for. We know what Christ saved us from, but we’ve lost our grip on what he saved us for.

I knew a man years ago who’d had throat cancer as the result of smoking cigarettes, and had a tracheostomy. The doctors saved his life from that cancer, but the problem was that he kept on smoking – through

the hole in his neck. He'd been saved *from* cancer, but the *for* wasn't so he could go on smoking.

Most Christians are a lot like that. Saved from, and that's it – all about me. But is that the church that we were created to be?

How did the new church live out being a community that served God? Well, this short description tells us a lot: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to the prayers.

They met every day. They ate together, learned together, they served one another and the world. And it built their community, the community of the church. The beloved community came into being because of service, providing it to each other – the apostles' teaching and the shared meals – and to others, the gospel, the pooled resources, and the prayers. The beloved community came into being not because of what it was saved from, but what it was saved for: service, service in God's name, spreading the good news, helping the poor and hungry, being a community not just beloved by God, but by others as well. And in all this, proclaiming Christ and inviting others to be what they were.

All this for a fringe group of people who listened to Jesus of Nazareth, and believed he was the son of God.

What a difference! We get together once a week for an hour, and share a meal once a month! Not the same thing, is it?

So what about Valley as a beloved community? We don't serve as we once did, spreading money around; we have less of it to share than we once did. But we serve in other ways, too – Casa Nueva Vida de los Ninos is one exciting new example, but the steady service of those who go down to Crossroads Mission to cook and serve meals is another, much older one. We still give to help, which is one way in which we share resources, but we're volunteers in our Green Valley community too.

But here's one thing that's important about the early church's example: they didn't just keep what they had together to themselves, they welcomed others to serve with them. They got to know one another and the people who came to them to be part of them. That's one thing we can say: if you're not building friends, you're not participating in the beloved community, because the beloved community is about building relationships.

And reaching out to others isn't pulling people to us to add to our numbers, but for us to be attractive to them for them to want to be equipped and be like us as we seek to be the beloved community.

I said before that if we could have just a smidgen of what those early believers had, we wouldn't have enough room to pack all the people in. All because of the primary purpose of the church, the community that the church became: that primary purpose is to tell

people that God loves them, about what Christ has done and is doing, and to help them learn how to share it, too.

That's a long way from where we – or nearly any – church is today, but it's not impossible, because it's God's plan for our community of the church. We have a lot of changes to make, and they are big changes if we're serious about them, but they don't have to be made in the next few months or years – they just have to be done.

As G.K. Chesterton once famously observed, “Christianity hasn't been tried and found wanting; it's been found difficult and not tried.” Well, let's try. I've been asked what my vision is for Valley Church, and this is it: that we who are a loving, beloved community will grow into the beloved community that displays God in all his glory, and where lives are changed for God.

Who's up for that?