

St. Paul: On The Same page

05.04.14 for Easter 4a

Day One: Acts 2:42-47

And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

There were many miracles at that first Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit launched the Church. The gift of languages – the healings – the people sharing their wealth. But here’s one you may not have thought about. Where did all of those homes come from? Who would be so ready to turn their house into the meeting site for the church? Would you do that?

Letting a group of people meet in your home can be a big sacrifice. A friend recently told me that his congregation was trying to get people to join small group Bible studies, but

they couldn’t seem to find people willing to host in their homes. They decided it must be because of double-income work schedules, and people unable to find time to clean. So they remodeled their church to create several comfortable living-room-like areas for small groups.

Is this all it takes to keep the Body of Christ from gathering around God’s word?

Just think – this is all Satan would have to do to stop God’s church in its tracks. If no one was willing to open their home to the church, where would new believers grow in faith? Without open homes, without people willing to adjust their personal plans a bit, the doors would have stayed closed to the lost.

What simple things might still keep the door closed today? Do we have a spirit of openness and welcome others in, or do we leave them out in the cold? Do you have a chance to open a door for someone?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, my heart is open to you, but I have too often closed it to others. Teach me to welcome those whom you love, and so learn to know you. Amen.*

Day Two: 1 Peter 2:19-25

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

What would you give for a chance to suffer? Whoa! That sounds backwards, doesn't it? And yet Peter seems to say that it's a great thing to have the chance to suffer for our faith in Jesus, or to share in his suffering.

The English Standard Version translation above says it is "a gracious thing" to suffer. The NIV translation says that it is "commendable." But the Greek word used is the word for "gift." It is a gift for us to endure hardship for the sake of our faith in God.

When we pray for gifts from God, what are we picturing? We consider health and wealth to be signs of God's favor. We consider children or grandchildren a gift from God. We may even

call the snow or rain a gift from heaven. But God told Paul that his strength was made perfect in weakness. God told Peter that he would be called upon to suffer for Jesus' sake.

What trial have you endured, what flames? And what is the golden treasure that God gave you in the experience?

We may enjoy comforts, but we learn very little from resting or sleeping. We look forward to vacation, but it's not on our vacation that we grow the most. Instead, it is when we are working, when we are serving, when we are studying, when we are carrying a burden that we grow stronger, wiser, more humble.

We like happy songs in worship, but one of our less well-known hymns tells us the truth about God's gifts.

Prayer: *Must I be carried to the skies On flowery beds of ease, While others fought to win the prize, And sailed through bloody seas? Sure I must fight if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord. I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, Supported by Thy Word. Amen.*

Day Three: John 10:1-10

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

What do you think it means to have life “abundantly?” I think of some TV or movie characters who are always happy, bubbling over with positive mental attitude. Little Orphan Annie, Maria in the Sound of Music, or Giselle in Enchanted, they all sang songs in sad times. Is that what Jesus desires for us?

Perhaps, in a sense. There have been Christians who sang songs while they were being persecuted. Paul and Silas sang songs after they had been beaten and thrown into prison in Philippi, but those were probably not cheery songs. It’s more likely that they sang the courageous psalms that express confidence in God even when times are hard.

So what does this abundant life look like? Jesus warned that it would include persecution and trouble, that we would have an enemy who prowls about like a lion. A thief would come to steal away our gifts, to kill our bodies (and even our spirit if he

could) and to destroy us forever. But that thief would fail.

Just a short time after Jesus said these words, his good friend Lazarus became deathly ill. The thief had come to steal away his life. And he certainly stole away the joy of life from Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus.

But when Jesus finally arrived, he challenged them to believe, because those who believe in him would have abundant life. And then, of course, he raised Lazarus from death.

“Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies.” We have a life that is more abundant than just the few decades we mark with birthdays. We sing for joy because our life is greater, longer, more immeasurable than anything the thief can steal.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, the life you have given me will never end. I have been anxious to get the things I want while I can still enjoy them, but you have more life still to give me. And more. And more. Lord, fill me with the joy of knowing your gift that I may share it with others. Amen.*

Day Four: *Is our church open?*

Have you ever been to a company that was open for business, but it seemed closed? I remember a small factory I had to go to when I was a machinist. It was “open” and busy, but all locked up. There was a blank steel door in a windowless wall. No signs. You had to push a button, wait for someone to talk to you over the intercom, and then open the door when it buzzed. Even after you entered, the people you met did not seem to want to see you. That business closed not long after.

Is our church open? The answer to that question is not as simple as making sure the doors are unlocked and the lights turned on. When people walk in who are strangers – who feel unsure of themselves – do they find open hearts and open arms and welcoming smiles? Are we open to questions? Open to concerns? Open to people in need?

The first Christians opened their homes to people they did not know. We might enjoy coming to church to see the people we know and like.

But Jesus calls us to be open to strangers. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me...”

Will you help us to learn to be more open? Next time you come to church, look around with the eyes of a stranger. What do you need help understanding? Can you tell where you should go and what you should do?

When we are strangers in a new place, we tend to look around for someone who seems approachable, not someone who is busy in conversation. If you look around with the eyes of a stranger, can you find someone else who is looking for a person to talk to?

If our church is called “God’s house” then is it a place where God’s people feel welcome?

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, you opened your kingdom to me. Give me the chance to open that door for someone who is still outside. Bless our church that those who come to our doors will find them flung wide in welcome. Amen.*