

Second Sunday of Easter
April 7, 2024
Glorify Your Heavenly Father Again
Acts 4: 32-35

Easter Sunday, last week, we asked you, “What are you doing here today?”

I mean, I gave you all kinds of examples of where you could have been instead of at church with your Lord...and yet you all seemed to agree, while I preached, you chose wisely to be with your Lord on the day He rose from the dead.

So, I can say, without reservation, you know why you are here, the question is now, “How are you here?”

And I poured over this question realizing that it is horrible English, sorry Ric, but I could not come up with a clearer question as to what we are focusing on for this season of Easter. We know why we are here, now the question is, “How will we be here?”

Timm Leikip has been working feverishly on his Vitality refresh for the congregation to help “How” we will reach the inactive members we welcomed back to church this last Sunday. And I know, you were just as excited as I was that they were back, but I also know that you, like me, wish we did a better job of keeping them with us to begin with. You, like me, remember all the times when we were altogether and how special that was. You, like me, remember when things were so great with them here, how they were active and participating, how they were a part of the ministry and all the great things we did together!

That’s exactly what was happening in our Acts of the Apostles Lesson today! Jesus is risen from the dead! Everyone was together! Everyone recognized what they had was a gift from God to be used for His glory and not just for themselves.

Philippians 2 echoes the spirit and sentiment of Christians living in the joy of their resurrected Lord saying, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each one of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the

form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be stolen, but made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father.”

And so they were doing just that, glorifying God the Father because the Holy Spirit worked through them creating their faith and hope in their risen Lord Jesus. Not out of a compelling communistic force of the Law, but rather from the pure joy of being together in Christ as a family of Christ.

Almost every church starts out this way, for sure - revitalized churches as well. There is a spirit of joy in Jesus and our common purpose of loving one another just as He first loved us. This is the green safe zone you see there on the screen.

But then comes the inevitable *at-risk* time of every church. Once a church is successful in the eyes of the world you will frequently see the sinful selfishness of successful ministry. This is the time when resources are plentiful, and our provisions seem to be self-made and the ministry begins to look inward. The spirit of outreach that joyfully welcomed the stranger by grace, now turns to the church looking suspiciously at the outsider not sure they want to let them in.

This happened in the early church as well, as Dr. Kari Vo characterized it in her Lutheran Hour daily devotion, Tuesday, saying, “But of course it didn’t stay this way, not for long. In the very next chapter, two people try to lie their way into an honored position in the church. And in the next chapter after that, the church has divided among ethnic lines-and the needy people of one group aren’t getting the same care as others.

Maybe it will always be this way, until the Lord Jesus returns. We can’t sustain that level of love and unity for very long. Sin comes and ruins out unity.

And yet, every time that happened, the early Christians repented and started over. Surely, we too, can find our way back to unity and love, even if we keep falling and repenting, again and again and again.”

Well said Kari, well said.

Yes, we have all been there. We were all apart of those ministries that just had it all. Everyone in one accord. Everyone doing their part for the Lord. Everyone understanding the power of the Gospel of our Risen Lord to save us from our sins.

So pure, so perfect, we didn't need anything else, we truly had it all.

But then others came along, excited to ride the waves we were on. And we welcomed them at first and then, not so much. Then factions assembled, lines were drawn, and conflict arose. Nothing a mature Christian can't handle. But for those weaker in the faith, they may have thought that they had lost their perfect church and unannounced, wandered away.

At risk, straying, strayed.

We, like the early church, just want to make sure we're doing everything we can to make sure they don't stay that way. And our lessons in Acts this Easter Season show us exactly how they did that in the early church.

They proclaimed the Gospel again, they spoke truth to those in authority that opposed them, they shared the Gospel lovingly with those outside their culture, they baptized and catechized by the power of the Holy Spirit, and they added leaders when they lost leaders knowing their ultimate leadership was from Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles will help us in this season of Easter. We know the why, now we will focus on the how of sharing the gospel, looking after the at risk and straying and finally reaching out again to the strayed.

Ahh, church life today, it can be such a conundrum especially when your new to a particular church.

When you come to a church as a new pastor to the ministry, you usually have one of two types of churches when you arrive.

The first is a church on the rise. It's growing, the leadership is positive, and they are just waiting for you to come aboard so they can continue the work with you.

That was pretty much Faith when I arrived. Leadership was in place, lines of accountability were firmly defined, and everyone knew what they were doing. Just get in there and do your job pastor, and we'll be just fine. It took me about five years to figure that out, but I got there eventually and the well-oiled machine, that is Faith, ran with precision and efficiency despite my obvious flaws.

Then there is the church that is on the downward spiral.

Now that can be a church that has been declining slowly or even imperceptibly, or it can be the church like I encountered in my first call in the ministry.

They had no constitution because they were advised to set the by-laws aside so they could call a pastor faster. They had lost over 40 percent of their members in the 2-5 years before I arrived, and they were clinging to a budget that could not afford to pay for me without district aid. Also, they had no inclination that I would stay for longer than a year or two at the most, being a fresh-faced kid right out of seminary.

But the best part of all, they did not pick me as their first choice out of seminary. They had three of us to pick from and I was their 3rd choice when the congregation voted, the proverbial, "Well, I guess we'll take that guy if we have absolutely have to." And the elders saw that my salary requirements were the least of the three and they put me at the top of the list when they sent it into the seminary, lying that I was the voters' first choice, just so they could save money.

I knew none of this when I started on day one.

All I knew was they lost so many members, simply because they didn't want to come to a church that didn't have a regular pastor.

So, I took the old church manifest, and I made appointments to see people, and I went and sat down in living rooms and introduced myself saying, "I'm the new pastor at St. Peter. Marcy and I are building a house out in Green Cove, so I live right by y'all, and if you think I'm alright, I would sure love to see you at church."

Let me be clear. That is all I did. I got really busy after that, being a pastor and all, and just didn't have time to worry about it much. And for the next 5 years that church exploded for no other reason than they were simply the church that invited everyone, celebrated everyone, and made sure everyone that was already there was an evangelist. Because without a constitution, we didn't have an evangelism committee. They realized that was everybody's job.

And they also realized it's not that hard to let people know Jesus loves us and showed us by dying and rising from the dead for us.

I know what you're thinking, did it stay that way? No. No church stays that way all the time, as Kari reminded us earlier. But when you've been there, you always know how to get back there again.

Look to your risen Lord, and not only will He show you why, He will show you how so you can glorify your Heavenly Father again.

AMEN.

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