A DIFFERENT KIND OF GATHERING

Acts 2:42
(They gave constant attention to…fellowship…)

The Twentieth sixth Sunday after Pentecost

In 1980 I was assigned to the St. John Church in Columbus, Ga. It was a worshipping congregation of about 75-80 depressed and discouraged people who were waiting on one or two more families to leave so everyone could feel justified in leaving as well. St. John was in one of Columbus' growing areas, but it was dying. God blessed the nine year pastorate I had with that church. When I arrived the people decided to give it more one chance. We worked together as partners. God brought blessings and when I left the church was a worshipping congregation of over 200 people with a new fellowship hall as a sign of its growth and hope for the future. The next seven years were characterized by the same growth and excitement for the future. But, then something began to happen within the body of the church and when I went back for a funeral about five years ago, the worshipping congregation was down to about 50 or 60 and it was closer to death than it had ever been in its history. Many were sure it would soon cease to be.

However, back in the summer of 2004, the dying St. John Church and the struggling neighboring St. Andrew Church came together to create something new, a church which would be called St. Peter. I was privileged to go back and preach to the St. John congregation on one of its last Sundays before the creation of the new congregation. Like any former pastor I had been distressed and heart broken over its deadly decline. When I preached that day it truly did seem that God was about to do something new with that church which would be an answer to the many prayers which had been offered for it. This week I received my weekly newsletter from St. Peter and read about a worshipping congregation of over 200 people planning and preparing to build its first sanctuary. A church that was once given up for dead has been given life. God is doing something new on that corner in Columbus, Georgia. It is something which has never before been done.

The story of St. Peter is told because it seems to be an appropriate way to open our text for the day. This is the third time we have come to Acts 2:42, a verse which says,

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching
> and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

As has been stated at other times, this verse is the first description of the early church after the morning of Pentecost. Early that morning the Holy Spirit was poured out upon a group of disciples gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. A violent rushing wind swept through the room, tongues of fire rested over the head of each one present, and the gift of language was given in such a way that every person in Jerusalem was able to hear the message of Jesus in their own language. It was the kind of thing which attracted a large crowd. Peter seized the moment of opportunity, preached the first nine o'clock sermon for the early church, gave an invitation, and three thousand people were baptized and became members of a church which had not even existed a few hours earlier. God did something new that day. He did something which had never before been done.

He created a new spiritual community which continues today and is known as the church. The church we have beautified, memoralized, humanized, sanitized, and politicized was much different in that moment of beginning. It was a community where people were single minded about spiritual things. The last sermon on this text helped us see our calling to give constant attention to the Word of God and today as we move forward, we hear a divine Word calling us give constant attention to fellowship within the church. We have thought about what it means to give constant attention to the apostles' teaching, or the Word of God, but what does it mean to give constant attention to fellowship? Does it mean making sure the church is warm and friendly for new visitors? Does it mean doing a new pictorial directory every year? Does it mean making sure everyone goes to Wednesday Night Life, our major midweek fellowship event?

In order to understand what it means to give constant attention to fellowship, it is necessary to understand what kind of new community was brought into being on the day of Pentecost. What He brought into being was a new kind of gathering. What God brought into being was not a book club, or a political caucus, or a social gathering of like minded folks, but a spiritual community characterized by four specific things. When we go back to verse 38 we see those things being lifted up in the invitation part of Peter's sermon.

> Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The four things which defined the fellowship were repentance, baptism, forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit. Those who were a part of the new spiritual community were those who had repented or turned away from relating with others on the basis of the world's teaching and were now relating to each other according to the teachings of Jesus. The new spiritual community was one created from those who had been touched by baptismal water. The baptismal water was a visible sign that the person belonged first to God and could be counted on to be about God's work in the world. It was, therefore, a sign of commitment to Christ and a sign of spiritual accountability to a community. And, so it is not surprising that it was also a community where forgiveness prevailed. They had

received forgiveness. They had learned that prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer which included those words, "Father, forgive us as we have forgive others." It was not a community where people gathered to expend energy in gossip, judgment passing, and undermining others inside the community, but a gathered spiritual community where forgiveness and mercy and love undergirded every relationship. And, finally, it was a community created, shaped, and directed by the person and the power of the Holy Spirit. What the individual wanted for self was always subject to what the Holy Spirit desired for the community.

When Acts 2:42 calls us to give constant attention to fellowship, it is calling us to give constant attention to caring for people who are a part of this newly created spiritual community. As the scripture talks about fellowship, it is not talking about making sure every one gets a warm fuzzy feeling every time he or she steps inside the door. It is not about the kind of music we sing. It is not about the food we eat. It is not about the way we do or do not attend a midweek event designed for fellowship. It is instead about creating a spiritual community where everyone knows they will treated with the same kind of personal care and love that Jesus showed every person He met. It is about being a part of a spiritual community where the gifts of the Spirit are welcomed, forgiveness is dispensed freely and unconditionally, people are truly joined together through repentance and baptism, and where those within the community can lay down a defensive posture out of a confidence that they will be treated with the kind of love seen in the heart of Jesus.

To give constant attention to the fellowship means giving constant attention to the kind of things which will create this new kind of community right here in our midst. The new spiritual community brought into being on the day of Pentecost still exists in some places that bear the name of church, but not in all them. Some churches have really become social gatherings, heritage societies, and service organizations. However, the church really does continue to exist as it did on the day of Pentecost in those places where those within give constant attention to caring for and loving not only those who are far away from its doors, but also those who gather week after week inside its doors. It continues to exist where everyone within its walls is treated with the kind of love seen in the heart of Jesus. It really does continue to exist…if not in all places, at least, in some of them.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on November 13, 2005.