

Vision 20/20

*“Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes”?”
(Matthew 21:42 ESV)*

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”
(Matthew 25:13 ESV)*

Gather

November 3rd, 2019

Acts 2:42-47

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning church! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 2.

Last week we were reminded of the general mission of the church. We are called to be disciple makers. We’re going to make disciples by going into all the world, by leading people into a saving relationship with Christ, by baptizing them and by teaching them to obey his commandments. We’re going to plant churches locally and we’re going to partner with churches globally because we believe that the local church is the means by which God is going to change the world.

Now in these four final weeks, we’re going to get really practical. We’re going to attempt to spell out very clearly how each of us as individuals in this local church can play our part in accomplishing this mission. Today, we turn our attention to step one. Let me read now from our vision statement:

To realize this particular vision we need each and every member of this church to do the following:

1. Gather

A Body by definition is a gathered and connected whole. We cannot be who we are called to be and we cannot do what we are called to do unless we are together on a consistent basis. We need you to attend faithfully, regularly, joyfully and intentionally. We need you to watch for newcomers and to listen for the Spirit and to sing with the congregational choir. In an increasingly individualistic and uncommitted culture our commitment to regular, faithful gathering will constitute an indispensable component of our witness as a church.

This morning, we’re going to root ourselves in Acts 2:42-47. Look there with me. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, living and active word to us today:

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In this brief snapshot, we catch a glimpse of the kind of gathering that God smiles upon. Now, this isn't to say that the church in Jerusalem had it all together. They had their problems, just like we do, and Luke is forthcoming in presenting their flaws and failures throughout the book of Acts. They weren't perfect, but – and here's what I want you to see – when Christ looked at their gatherings, he was pleased! Look again at the end of verse 47:

And **the Lord added** to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47b ESV)

This church understood what it meant to be the people of God and the Lord was pleased to send more people their way. Today, we're going to think about how each and every one of us can contribute to making these gatherings the kinds of gatherings that the Lord delights to send people to. With that end in mind, let's look to the church in Acts 2 as we seek to answer this question:

How Can You Contribute to the Gathering of God's People?

First of all, you can:

1. Meet with God's people formally and informally

Look again at verse 46:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:46 ESV)

They were gathering in the temple, and then they were breaking bread together in their homes. BOTH gatherings are important. BOTH gatherings contribute to a compelling witness. One commentator writes:

Luke is giving a description of the ministry of these disciples to one another in a variety of contexts, not simply telling us what happened when they gathered for what we might call 'church'.¹

Both the formal and the informal gatherings of God's people matter. If you are neglecting either – if you are making a habit of missing Sunday mornings or if you are isolating yourself from other believers throughout the week – then you are robbing yourself of something that God GAVE to you for your good and for His glory.

¹ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 159.

Everything that we're going to be looking at today applies to Sunday morning, but it also applies to that small group you're attending midweek and that prayer group you're hosting in your home. Because "church" is not a building, nor is it an event on Sunday morning. We are the church. Something special happens when we gather together on Sunday mornings, but something special also happens when you host that dinner party at your house on Wednesday nights.

Every time we assemble with the people of God, we should be mindful of our identity as the church and we should be intentional about glorifying God. Have you ever been to a home where this was lived out really well? I have, and I can attest that it was SO refreshing! We sang out our prayers with our children before we shared a meal together. Our discussion around the table was all about Jesus and what he has been teaching us in our lives. After the meal we tackled the dishes together, and then we broke out a bunch of drums and tambourines and we sang worship songs with the kids. Watching my kids worship God with their friends while they danced and played their instruments was like medicine for my soul. I left that night longing to spend more time with God's people.

Think about this: Every time you host another believer in your home, you have the opportunity to build them up in their faith. You have an opportunity to point them towards Jesus. Isn't it sad but true that we often waste that opportunity and instead spend our time talking about our money, complaining about our co-workers or grumbling about our circumstances?

When we invite people into our home, it ought to look and feel different than the world out there. So, does it? Look again at verse 46:

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. (Acts 2:46-47a ESV)

Let's praise God with glad and generous hearts as we gather large, and as we gather small. The Lord delights in that.

Second, if you want to contribute to the gathering of God's people:

2. Devote yourself to the Word

In verse 42 we are told that the church "devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching."

Let's take a second to note here that, even in the earliest days of the church, the Apostle's teaching was seen as authoritative. Commentator Richard Longnecker explains:

"The apostles' teaching" refers to a body of material considered authoritative because it was the message about Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed by accredited apostles.²

You will likely come across articles and memes online which claim that the teaching of the Apostles wasn't accepted by the church until a council got together 300 years later and put their stamp of approval on it. That

² Richard N. Longnecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John-Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 289.

argument pops up on Facebook from time to time and it is verifiably false. From the earliest days, the church recognized the authority of the Apostolic teaching.

They recognized it, and they DEVOTED themselves to it.

Devotion is a powerful word, isn't it? Wouldn't it be wonderful if people used that word to describe us? I want to be a member of a community which could truly be described as being devoted to the teaching of the Word.

So, what does that look like, and how can we each contribute to this culture of devotion to the Word?

For starters, let's come to our Sunday morning gathering with a genuine desire and expectation to hear God speak. I think it says something to the unbeliever when we all come into this place with our Bibles and our notepads. I think it says something when the room is filled with the sound of rustling pages as we turn together to study a passage of Scripture. I think it says something when we read the Word and then respond with one voice "thanks be to God!" But of course, all of that can become a formality or a mere tradition if our hearts are not in it.

One of my consistent prayers for this church is that we will be characterised by a HUNGER for the Word of God. I pray that we would sense very deeply that we need to be challenged, encouraged, rebuked and corrected by the Word in every aspect of our lives.

I pray most of all that we would be a responsive people. Because simply hearing the Word is not enough. James wrote:

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:25 ESV)

Do you want to contribute to the mission here in Orillia?

Show up to the Sunday morning gatherings, and to small groups, and to visits at your friend's house with a Bible in your hand and a HUNGER in your heart. Find every opportunity to have the Word of God wash over you and respond with the help of the Holy Spirit EVERY TIME God calls you to.

That is a recipe for kingdom advancement.

Third, if you want to contribute to the gathering of God's people then you need to:

3. Devote yourself to fellowship

Look again with me at verse 42:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Luke 2:42 ESV)

These brothers and sisters truly believed that they were a family, and they lived it out day by day. They worshipped together corporately, they helped each other financially, and they met together in their homes to break bread. Now, there are some commentators – about 30% - who understand the breaking of bread here to be referring to communion. We love communion, and we're going to partake of it this morning, but I don't think that's what Luke is talking about here. One commentator notes:

To 'break bread' was to eat together. The adoption of this term as a title for the Lord's Supper is not formally attested until the second century AD... The reality of Christian fellowship was expressed from the earliest times in the ordinary activity of eating together.³

I love this! Here's a really easy way for you to be a "doer" of the Word of God: Invite your brothers and sisters over for dinner. In doing so, you are furthering God's mission in the world.

Seriously.

I won't belabour this point because we spent a great deal of time discussing it a few weeks ago during our family of God sermon. If you missed it, you can find that online. But let's at least allow ourselves to receive this reminder once again: The quality of our love for one another in HERE will provide a compelling witness to the world out THERE.

In a culture that is increasingly individualistic and isolated, we preach a Gospel that miraculously binds together the young and the old, the rich and the poor. That's weird! That's compelling. And that is one of the ways in which we are going to see the kingdom of God advance in this city.

These brothers and sisters loved each other so deeply that they took radical measures to meet the needs that arose within their congregation. Once again, let me just take a moment to say that I have watched you do this over the last few months and I am so proud to be your brother and your pastor. I love you, and I love what seeing what God is doing in and through you. Keep it up.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35 ESV)

Amen. I pray that the world would increasingly see that kind of love in our gatherings.

Fourth, if you want to contribute to the gathering of God's people then you need to:

4. Devote yourself to prayer

That's the next step we see in our text. Look again at verse 42:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

If you want to further the mission of the church – if you want to be a part of advancing the spread of the gospel both here and abroad – there is no better way for you to help than to devote yourself to prayer.

Because God is the One who brings the growth.

We see that in this text. The LORD added to their number! It wasn't their programming. It wasn't their compelling preaching. This church grew because the LORD was pleased to bring growth.

³ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 160.

Therefore, if we want to see growth and advancement in our church and in our city then we must devote ourselves to desperate, urgent prayer. We can't do this. We can't change the hearts of our neighbours. We can't even change our OWN hearts! But we have access to the One who can. So let's come to him as often as we can. Charles Spurgeon once said:

A prayerless soul is a Christless soul. Prayer is the lisping of the believing infant, the shout of the fighting believer, the requiem of the dying saint falling asleep in Jesus. It is the breath, the watchword, the comfort, the strength, the honour of a Christian.⁴

Likewise, a prayerless church is a Christless church. You can water that church, and change the soil, and place it under the perfect sunlight, but you'll never see growth. Because they don't have the Seed.

Very practically, I want to challenge you this morning to do one of two things.

First of all, I would challenge you to attend a weekly prayer group if you're able. I recognize that those of you with young children will struggle with that, and that others of you have difficult work schedules, but if it is possible, you should find yourself a prayer group. Praying out loud with God's people is a gift and there are many people in the church who have no idea what they're missing out on.

Second, I would encourage you to carve out a consistent time in your schedule and devote it to personal prayer. Ideally, this will become a daily practice for you, but maybe you need to start with once a week. Might I suggest Wednesday night from 9:30-10:00? Our brother Keith has been faithfully e-mailing prayer lists and sending reminder texts for the past two years. There is a whole slew of us who drop what we're doing every Wednesday night to pray in our individual homes at the same time every Wednesday night.

Schedule it in. Don't let people move it. If you had a meeting with your boss and your buddy asked you to grab a coffee, you'd likely say: "I'm sorry man. I've got a meeting." Well the King of the Universe is eager to meet with you! Schedule in some time and treat it like you would any other important meeting in your life because I can promise you that it's the most important meeting in your planner! Ask Him to save your lost loved ones. Ask Him to save your street. Ask Him to save our city. Ask Him to change the world! Because He is the ONLY One who can! Devote yourself to prayer.

And finally, if you want to contribute to the gathering of God's people then you need to:

5. Worship with God's people as often as you possibly can

Look again at verse 46. DAY by DAY, whether it was in the temple or in homes, the church assembled together.

Time spent together works wonders! Imagine you were asked to provide marriage counselling for a couple. They felt as if the fire in their love life had all but gone out. You ask them to describe their typical week and they go on to explain that the husband works on the road and is only home on weekends. Saturday, he spends the day catching up on chores in the backyard while his wife spends some time with her friends. But they don't see a problem with their schedule because every other Sunday they block out 90 minutes for a date.

⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening Devotions*. (Lynchburg, Virginia: The Old-Time Gospel Hour), 4.

How would you counsel this couple? Why is it that the fire is all but extinguished?

Could it be that 90 minutes every other week is simply not enough time to nurture and maintain a healthy relationship?

Exactly.

It is widely lamented that there has been a dramatic shift in the church. Various polls and studies have shown that the Christian who considers himself a faithful attendee only comes to church twice a month.

Let me reiterate – this isn't the wishy-washy Christian. This isn't the "I'm just checking things out" Christian. This is the "I love the Lord with all my heart, and I think someday I'll even be an ELDER" Christian. He comes two Sundays out of four. 26 times in a year. That's the high bar in our culture. That's alarming.

The crazy thing is, we look at that and we think: "Well, what's so weird about that?" It's hard for us to assess our own culture because this is the water that we're swimming in. But our aversion to coming together – our prioritizing of anything and everything else over the gathering of God's people – is unique to our day and age.

And it is wildly dangerous.

Hebrews 10:24-25 says:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, **and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.** (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV)

Do you hear that? God's authoritative, inspired, HOLY Word says that the closer we come to the return of the Lord the more CRITICAL it will be that we meet together frequently. And yet, the North American church in all of her wisdom has decided to do exactly the OPPOSITE! We spend less time with the people of God than any generation that was before us. We are the most independent and isolated people in the history of the church!

Brothers and sisters, if God's Word is still true and authoritative on our lives then this HAS to change. God is telling us here that the harder it gets out there, the more important it will be that we come together in here. It should come as no surprise at all, then, that the Devil is doing everything he can to keep us apart.

It's time for us to point at the Devil's strategy and to say: "I see what you're doing, and I won't tolerate it any longer." He thinks he can separate your family from the flock of God. He uses work, the cottage, sports, rest; you name it, he's got it all in his toolbox. He thinks he can pull us apart. But he's wrong.

We've been giving him too much ground. Enough is enough.

This week, for the first time the Lord used Major League Baseball to convict me. The League is looking to move the Devil Rays out of Tampa Bay, and do you know why that is? It's because the support for the Rays in Tampa is absolutely abysmal. When you watch the game on television, all you can see is a stadium full of empty seats which is absurd because the team was actually really good this year. The attendance and the enthusiasm do not reflect the product on the field. It's gotten to the point where the league is discussing whether the city even DESERVES a team anymore.

And as I read the report, I wondered how many times newcomers have come into this place only to see rows of empty chairs. How many times have they listened to quiet, passionless singing and dry, unengaging preaching? How many times has someone left our gathering thinking: "If their God IS real then this must be embarrassing for Him!"

Do you want to further the mission? Show up and worship!

Can you imagine what it would be like to stand in this room and to listen as the sound of 100 voices shouted out songs of praise?

I can. I dream about that all the time.

I hesitate to even call it a dream because I know that it would be so EASY to accomplish. That could be our reality every Sunday if we followed TWO simple steps.

Step one: Everyone show up. Skip hockey practice; catch up on sleep later in the day; come home from vacation a day earlier; take care of whatever it is that keeps 40% of our people away on any given Sunday.

Step two: Make a decided commitment today to sing like you mean it. It might not always be your favorite song. It might not always be your favorite style. You might not have the greatest voice. But if the words are true, and if your Saviour is worthy, then SING! Give him your very best even when you don't feel the best.

Imagine if we all followed those SIMPLE steps – if we all showed up each week and sang from the bottom of our hearts – can you imagine what these gatherings would be like? That would be compelling! That would be uplifting! That's the picture we see in Acts 2.

And their worship bled over into all of life! In today's text, we catch a glimpse of people who didn't see worship and prayer as something that was reserved for the Sabbath. They praised God at the temple, but then they continued to praise Him in their living rooms. Their lives were marked by joyful worship and earnest prayer.

Could the same be said of you?

For too long we have given ourselves the liberty to make excuses. Let's throw them away, once and for all. Let's worship with God's people as often as we possibly can, and all the more as the Day draws near! God's Word warns us:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8 ESV)

Now is not the time to stray away from the flock. Now is the time to prioritize the gathering of God's people. Let's get together formally and informally, in churches and in our homes. Let's devote ourselves once again to the word of God, and to fellowship and to prayer. Because He is worthy of our praise! Amen? Let the praise and worship that rises up from our gatherings paint a clear and glorious picture of the amazing God that we serve. And let it begin today.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.