

June 27, 2010 – How Jesus-centered community changes lives

Over the summer here at Two Rivers, we are working our way through the New Testament book of Acts. Acts gives some wonderful pictures into the events that happened and the people involved with this movement of Jesus' earliest followers. Right after Jesus was crucified, resurrected, and then ascended to heaven, we see this movement launched, this thing called the church, this group of people giving themselves wholly and often sacrificially to knowing Jesus, growing as disciples of Jesus and then going, going to make a difference in Jesus' name by continuing in the ministry that Jesus had started.

Specifically, this summer we're focusing specifically on a number of stories in Acts where people hear the good news about Jesus and respond... what could be called conversion stories. As I mentioned last week, with and through these messages, it's our prayer that God would do a couple things with us this summer: First, one of our core dreams for Two Rivers is that our church could be an environment where lots and lots of people can begin a life of following Jesus. And so we pray that God would use us, and our church in that way, and give us a greater and greater passion to see people connect with Jesus for the first time. Our second prayer is this: that each of us would see how we can experience and be empowered by the Holy Spirit - much like what occurred with the early followers of Jesus in the book of Acts.

This morning, we're going to pick up in Acts 2, right where we left off last week. The day of Pentecost has just happened, where people experience the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. After this, one of Jesus' followers, Peter, gets up and preaches... explaining, not only what had happened that day, but how that was connected with what God has done in making Jesus Lord and Messiah through his death and resurrection.

Let's pick up again in Verse 37 of Acts 2.

***37** Peter's words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" **38** Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** This promise is to you, and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God." **40** Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation!" **41** Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.*

***42** All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper, and to prayer. **43** A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. **44** And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. **45** They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. **46** They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity — **47** all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*

This morning, I want to talk about how God uses Jesus-centered community to change lives. This seems to be a really big deal to God... that Jesus-centered community would be the instrument by which real hope and healing, transforming and change would come to the world. Even as God reveals Himself and relates to each one of us as individuals, the context in which we most often discover Him, and particularly grow in God... is this Jesus-centered community called the church.

Here's a snapshot of what I want to cover this morning. First, we want to look at the defining qualities of this early Christian community.

Secondly, what came about through this group of people, what resulted from their community. And finally, I want to spend some time dreaming about what God could/might do today, through our expression of Christian community here at Two Rivers. Sound good?

So, first: what were some of the defining qualities of this early Christian community? In this passage we find 5 key qualities: 1) Devoted Learning 2) Authentic Relationship 3) Centered Identity 4) Unified Prayer 5) Powerful Impact

We won't go into great detail, but let me briefly touch on each of these... First, we read that these new believers were devoting themselves to learning. These believers knew that something amazing had happened with them... their basis for living had totally changed because of their encounter with Jesus and the gospel. And now, they were doing all they could to grow in this new foundation for life, devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles.

A second defining quality we read about is authentic relationships, this quality described as "fellowship". Fellowship is a word that we sometimes throw around in church, but we don't often know what it means. In my growing up days, "Fellowship" meant the time after the church service when kids got to eat oreos and jello squares, while the adults drank watered down Folgers coffee. Anyone else have some of those kinds of experiences with "fellowship"? In reality, fellowship is more about joined lives... about companionship and commitment that goes beyond lip service.

One of my favorite movies is the first film from the Lord of the Rings trilogy... the title of which is: The Fellowship Of The Ring.

Here was this diverse band of men, joined together by the common goal of returning “the ring” to Mount Doom. These men gave their lives for one another, fighting for and protecting each other, all while growing in deep friendship, connection, and brotherhood. I don't know about you, but to me, that seems to be a bit more accurate picture of “fellowship” than oreos and weak coffee... :)

Here's a third quality of this early community: centered identity. Twice in this short passage, we read about the believer's practice of the Lord's Supper... this practice of taking the bread and cup to remember what Jesus had done. This wasn't just about a ritual – it was about identity. These believers were, very intentionally, saying to themselves and to those around them, that their lives were rooted and centered in the person of Jesus, and what he had done by dying on the cross.

Fourth, we read about unified prayer. This is such a common theme in Acts, that we can almost gloss over it. In instance after instance throughout Acts, you'll see these early disciples of Jesus joining together in prayer. Sometimes that come ahead of amazing things that God is doing, sometimes it's in the middle of heavy persecution, and other times it is after key events, where they are rejoicing together in God, thanking God for all He has done. Whatever the case, over and over we see this commitment to unified prayer.

A fifth defining quality we see here in Acts 2 is powerful impact. As we'll talk about more here as we go along, but...God worked in and through these early Christians to make an impact that has lasted for over 2000 years. In some fashion... you and I are here today, in 2010 because of what God began with these first believers in Jesus.

As we look quickly at those 5 defining qualities, what thoughts go through your mind? What starts stirring in you?

Here's a couple things I think of right away... first, that this kind of community sounds awesome. Who wouldn't want what is described here in Acts 2? But, my second thought comes quickly after that... I think about how far away we, as the church, often are from this kind of community. This is really tough thing for a number of folks... how many scores of people are frustrated with the state of the church at large, many making the decisions to partially disengage or even give up because of the disconnect between what they feel like Christian community could be and what it is.

Whenever I battle those thoughts, here's what gives me hope: Jesus is the head of His church. He has given His very life for the church, and has said emphatically, "I will build my church" (Jesus says). "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." That gives me tremendous hope... that however imperfect we are as expressions of Christian community, Jesus is committed to us, and to using us, as His followers, to bring hope, healing and real life. If that is something you struggle with... be encouraged today. Ultimately it is Jesus' work to build this kind of dynamic community we read about in Acts 2... yes, it involves us and our engagement, but it's His work first and foremost. If we give ourselves wholly and completely to Jesus, I believe there are some awesome things that can happen!

Real quickly here... what were some of the results? What kind of impact came because of this this early community of believers in Jesus?

One result we see is that God was glorified.

That's a fancy term to describe that, in and through all of these amazing things that were happening, including powerful signs and wonders - it was clear that it was God that was empowering it... it was more than what these guys and gals could muster up on their own. That led to people worshipping, praising God... acknowledging God as the source of all these good things.

Secondly, there was great joy in generosity. People were selling property and possessions, so that the needs of others around them could be met. And rather than it being a burden or a duty... it was great joy to them. That's what sacrificial giving and generosity are meant to be and feel like.

Another result we read about is that these believers enjoyed the good will of the people... they had earned tremendous social equity in their city, likely in large part because of the generosity and active love that they were displaying. Now, we can't always guarantee that we'll have the good will of people outside the church, but if that does happen, it is a great gift and something that can make full use of.

A few weeks ago, I heard a great little saying that relates to this point... it goes like this: When Christians do good deeds in Jesus' name, it builds good will, which opens people to the good news about Jesus. Good deeds produce good will, which opens people to the good news. I think that is largely true.

That's certainly what we see in these first days after Pentecost... which brings me to the last result I want to touch on... that daily, God was adding to their numbers, every day new people were committing their lives to following Jesus.

I talked some about this last week... but can you imagine what it must have been like to see thousands of people encounter Jesus in a single day? And it wasn't just that one day... but each day after that, it says that more and more people were hearing this message about Jesus and responding. There was something so dynamic happening, that each and every day new people were being drawn into relationship with Jesus and committed themselves to following Him.

Wouldn't that be awesome to have God do among us? Wouldn't that feel like an expression of the church Jesus has committed to build? I think it does, and that's one of the things we dream about. Let's finish up with some more on that and some other dreams we have... ways we dream about God being at work in and through this expression of his church here at Two Rivers.

So... as you could gather from what I just said. One of our dreams here at Two Rivers is that we'd be a place where God could be found. That, as God is stirring in people's lives all around Greater Mankato, and using us in that process that the community of Two Rivers Vineyard Church would be an environment where new people could come into a life-changing connection with Jesus Christ.

Today, dozens and dozens of you are here worshipping God because somewhere and sometime there were people that welcomed you into community and into relationship with Jesus. For some of you, that first happened here at Two Rivers. One of our dreams is, that, like we see in Acts 2, that God would make us into a community that day after day, week after week, new people could encounter Jesus and commit their whole lives to following Him.

A number of you have heard me talk about our friends at the Vineyard church in Duluth. Over the past few years, they have seen God do some amazing things. In 2005, the Duluth Vineyard was already a really solid church of 300-400 people. They had some great things going on, but they were also eager to see God do more with seeing new people connect with Jesus. And so they went at that goal with great intentionality and fervency. They prayed, they recentered, they started new initiatives... all with the hope of seeing more and more people connect with Jesus for the first time. And here's what has happened: In 2005, they saw 20 people come to Christ through their church. In 2009, it was 290. Overall, in the past 5 years, they have seen 814 new people surrender their lives to Jesus. Isn't that amazing?

As we're going to talk about some tonight at our leadership meeting... we have felt like God is starting a new season for us here at Two Rivers as we are approaching our 5 year anniversary as a church. God has done some great things over the past 5 years, but we believe He has much, much more in store... one of those being that over the next 5 years, in this next stage of our church, we dream of God using us to see lots of people connect with Jesus for the first time. That's our hope and our prayer.

Here is another dream, one that goes along with and some ways may even precede the first dream... We dream of touching the spiritual and practical needs of people in such a magnitude that Greater Mankato is an awesome place to live for everyone, whether or not they ever come to Two Rivers. Another way to say that might be: That, as people in Greater Mankato are looking for hope, help, and/or healing, that TRVC would be a community where that could be found.

Last month, when I was at a seminar that is part of the CECL program I am in... one of the speakers posed a challenging and interesting question: he asked, "Tomorrow, if your church suddenly disappeared, would anyone in your community at large notice? Would anyone outside of your church care or feel a lack because your church disappeared?"

How's that for a challenging question? While you think on that... let me share a short video I saw later that week at CECL. This comes from a church in California, that is seeking to be used by God to meet practical needs of people, whether or not they ever come to their church. Watch this: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnAA0VF7GKI> Isn't that powerful? Do you think the people of that California city might miss that church if they suddenly disappeared? I think so.

I don't know all the ways that God might lead us, or things that we might do, but it is our hope and dream, that we would be a community that loves in action, in particular in the direction of people outside of connection with church. Whether they ever come to our particular church or not is a whole separate (and largely unrelated) question. We simply want to be the hands and feet of Jesus to our city and beyond and trust that God will use that to His glory.

Here's a final dream I want to touch on this morning. We dream that pursuing these goals, as part of growing as disciples of Jesus together, that it would be the most satisfying and joyful experience we could ever imagine. There's much more to say on this than I have time to get to right now, in short, let me, come back to an illustration I mentioned earlier, this group from the movie the Fellowship of the Ring.

As you can see in this picture... it's quite a diverse group: 4 an elf, a dwarf, a wizard, 2 "men" and 4 hobbits. Different as they can be, but they banded together for a common goal, and committed to guard and protect one another. If you've read Tolkien's book or seen the Lord of the Rings movies... you know that the journey was anything but easy. But it was worth it.

That's a lot of what life in Christian community is like. Is it hard. Absolutely? Are there times when you feel like giving up out of frustration or disappointment. You bet. But is there more than just those hard things? I think so. Just like this "fellowship" of the ring, as followers of Jesus, there is an adventure and a journey we've begun. One that will require everything that we are and have, but one that reaps rewards beyond anything we could imagine. We get to be connected with the creator of the universe, who has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. We get to walk together in loving and relationship with one another, navigating our way through the amazing highs and lows of life and everything in-between. And we get to be involved in the most amazing mission there has ever been... to continue the work of Jesus in the earth, asking for, and welcoming God's kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven. We – you and me – we get to be a part of God's redemptive work here on the earth.

Those are awesome things – things worth giving our whole lives for.

We have big dreams... dreams that can only happen as God shows up and empowers us. But that's exactly what I believe God wants to do. And that's what we want to ask for.