

A Easter 4 4.30.23

Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

Focus Statement: We do the work of God because we are loved by God.

I have to start by telling you about a funny irony that happened to me this week. So we had council on Tuesday night. One of the exciting things that happened at council was we met with a consultant who we just hired to help us think through the community center project that Jeff talked about at our annual meeting. You'll hear a lot about this in the coming months, but as a quick refresher, this is the idea to lean even further into the work that we're already doing with Co-op and really commit our building even more fully to being a space for the community to use for whatever it needs. There are a lot of legal and financial and governance pieces to this, so the Bishop introduced me to Robert Kamphuis, who is an organizational consultant, to help us out. You'll all get to meet Mr. Kamphuis, Bob, as we go forward, but the council met with him on Tuesday.

Long introduction to tell you that all this was going through my head Tuesday morning as I was getting my run in, since I wouldn't be able to run that evening, because council. And as I was running, as I usually do, I was listening to the sermon brainwave podcast talking about the texts for this coming Sunday. Matthew Skinner, one of the hosts, was going through the Acts text, and I'm just going to read this quote to you directly, so you get the full irony that hit me on the treadmill on Tuesday morning. So Dr. Skinner said: "I worry about churches that are so worried about reaching out that they haven't first taken care of their internal dynamics. And you invite people into a toxic community, they're not going to want to come back. And not just a toxic one, but one where people don't display this kind of self-giving love, which is hard. It's easier to hire a consultant."

It's easier to hire a consultant... Boom, straight to the heart. Because I was running Tuesday morning, instead of after work like I normally do, because I was meeting with the consultant we had just hired. And I suddenly had to ask myself, is hiring a consultant the right move? Or is this just a cop-out to distract from the hard work of the Gospel?

Now, I'm not going to bury the lead here, let me be clear. I think the answer to that question is no. Hiring Bob is not a cop-out. I feel really strongly that this community center move that we're trying to make here is the hard work of the Gospel, and that hiring someone to help us think through that is a good and faithful decision. But I do want to take you through my thought process around that, and the hard questions I found myself asking on Tuesday morning at the Y.

So let's start with the Acts text this morning and the work itself, then we'll get to the Gospel and the promise. Throughout the Easter season we read from Acts because Acts is the disciples doing exactly what we're doing, trying to figure out what it means to be followers of Jesus after the resurrection. The last two weeks we've heard Peter preaching to the crowds that gathered on Pentecost, a sermon that ended with the pronouncement, "So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added." Which, let me pause here and add, I have never had a sermon heard by three thousand people, let alone have three thousand people convert based on my words. Peter's experience should not be our expectation, or, at least, you need to look for a pastor way more charismatic than I am if that's the goal, but anyway. From there we go into

what the life of those new converts looked like. And that is certainly a model we should ascribe to, whatever our size. Our Acts reading for this morning started out, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.” Teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayers pretty much sums up what we’re supposed to do here as church. This is what the Christian life looks like. To quote Matthew Skinner again, after he called me out about consultants, he called this text a description of what a secure sheep pen looks like. We’re hiring a consultant so that we can figure out how to take off all the other random things we are doing so that we can make sure we have the time and energy and effort to devote to doing these things well, because these are the essential things, and the things the world so desperately needs from us. The world needs us devoted to the apostles’ teachings. These teachings are what fuel us, they are what calls us to be about loving the world that God so loved. We need to be about fellowship. Fellowship is at the core of everything we do, it is what makes the work of this place work. I can’t tell you how many times Co-op members have talked to me about how being in the building makes them feel centered and grounded, able to go out and face the world. That isn’t about this physical space, nice as it is. That is about the culture of this community, the ways that we relate to each other, the spirit of God’s power and presence in this place. Yes, the building needs a roof that doesn’t leak and functional heating and cooling, and doors that latch and all those sorts of things. But none of those things matter at all if the culture of love and grace and acceptance isn’t treasured and protected. That’s the part we’re good at, the part we need to keep at center.

We fuel the hard work of teaching and fellowship with the final two, with the breaking of bread and with prayers. At its heart the breaking of bread and prayers is worship, it is communing with God. In the breaking of the bread we receive. We receive Christ's body and blood, we receive forgiveness of sins, we receive Jesus, proclaiming his death until he comes again. And in prayers we give. We give ourselves to God fully, receiving God just as fully, we give praise, we give pleas for mercy and justice, we express trust and we listen for God's voice in our lives.

Dear people of God, we are hiring a consultant to help us figure out how to do the important other work well, so that we can focus on the things we are uniquely qualified for, the work the world most needs of us. This work, friends, and the changes we will have to make in focusing on this work, I'm not going to lie to you, it's going to be super hard. It's going to be hard and uncomfortable and scary. It's going to make us move and think and act in different ways. And that, dear people of God, is the story of what always happens to God's people when they get shaken out of their comfort zones and recommit themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. Acts is the story of God's people having the rug absolutely pulled out from under them over and over again, as they tried to figure out how to live well together, how to share all they had with each other and the world, as people of the risen Christ. These five verses from Acts make it sound pretty, the rest of the book reminds us it wasn't pretty. It was hard. It was hard but it was also powerful, and sacred, and so worth it, because here we stand two thousand years later as descendants of that hard and sacred work.

And, dear people of God, here's the good news, here's the promise. However this work turns out for us. Whether we devote ourselves to the apostles' teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer or not, for the times we nail it and the times we totally miss the mark, none of that matters because Jesus is the gate. And what do gates do? They let people in and they keep people safe. Think about it, that's the purpose of the gate. To let things go in and out, and to keep things safe once they are in. We sometimes want to use gates to decide who gets to come in and go out, but we're not the gate, Jesus is. Our job, our work, is live well inside the sheep pen. That's it. He calls us by name, us and all the other sheep, and through him we can come and go as we need. In to find rest and rejuvenation, out to share all he has given and to engage the world. In and out through the gate, trusting that the gate and the shepherd will hold and protect us, because Jesus is the gate, and in him is abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.