

Sunday 29 May 2016

Otumoetai Baptist Church

The Book of Acts

Acceptance, Belonging, Growth

(BLACK)

Will didn't really fit in with any people at school. He was a bit of a misfit. He felt like he didn't really have a place that he belonged. There were the cool kids, the sports enthusiasts, the jocks, the tech geeks, the Christian group, and the gamers.

(SLIDE 1)

But Will felt like an outsider.

So Will ended up leaving school and looking for a place to belong. He ended up connecting with people from different walks of life. He got involved in a gang. The gang promised him a good time, they would have his back, they were there for him they would tell him, they would give him missions to do. They, in essence, were family for him.

And Will finally felt like he had a place where he belonged.

Charlie is the kind of girl who can talk a mile a minute. She wants to have her say about everything, she wants people to like her,

and she doesn't want to come off as silly or slow.

(SLIDE 2)

Charlie, like Will, has also struggled with belonging and acceptance. She tried out for different groups, but again nothing seemed to fit. She was involved in some pretty significant relationships, but nothing of lasting value.

So Charlie left New Zealand for Australia. She went over by herself to find herself and a group where she could grow and belong. I think she's still looking ...

Come back now 2000 years and a man named Peter was born. Peter was a fisherman. He was a pro too. Peter was the kind of guy who would do anything for anyone, but he also got in trouble for some of the things that came out of his mouth.

He was certainly talk first, think later.

Peter had a little brother called Andrew. They did everything together.

(SLIDE 3)

In fact they were the first disciples that Jesus called to follow him. So they left their livelihoods and everything they had to be part of his crew.

And Peter was in the inner circle with Jesus, alongside two other blokes James and John.

You might know that there were 12 disciples that followed Jesus around wherever he went.

Peter was probably the most outspoken of the bunch. He said the best things – like when Jesus asked ‘Who do you say I am’, Peter said ‘You are the Messiah, the Christ.’ And he said the worst things too – like when Jesus told his disciples He was going to be put to death and be raised three days later, Peter said “That’s not going to happen to you Lord. Not while I’m on watch anyway!” And Jesus rebuked him strongly with the words, “Get behind me Satan, you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”

So Peter did have a bit of a topsy turvy ride with Jesus, but ultimately his heart was in the right place. And God used Peter in a mighty way in his plan for redeeming the world, as we will soon see.

Ultimately Peter found a place where he belonged, he was accepted, and he could grow, and could become part of God’s mission in the world.

(SLIDE 4)

If you’ve been here the past few weeks you’ll know that we’ve started a series looking at the book of Acts which we’ve called the Church on a Mission. Acts is a mission book. It’s all about God’s mission to redeem the world.

As Brian has showed us in the previous two weeks, the start of the early church was part of God’s Big Story to rescue His people from their sin and slavery.

Jesus, in his resurrected state, appeared to many different people and promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would come and they will receive His power to be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Basically to be witnesses to the whole world.

Jesus then says “I’ll be back” and the way he leaves, taken up into heaven, is the same way that He’ll return.

So the disciples wait. And they choose a guy named Matthias to replace Judas the betrayer.

And they wait. And then the Day of Pentecost comes. And the promise of Jesus’ words is fulfilled. The Holy Spirit comes. The disciples are filled with the Spirit.

And then they begin to witness to the people around them.

Good ol' Peter steps up and delivers a mighty sermon under the power, wisdom and direction of the Holy Spirit. Peter gives an altar call if you like at the end and tells the people to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. Which means turn away from the way you are living; stop living for yourselves and turn to the one true God instead. This Jesus, whom you crucified. After you do this, you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and you will become His witnesses as well.

And then people start responding. One, two, three, ten, fifty, one hundred, five hundred, one thousand, two thousand, three thousand.

Can you imagine that scene? That's incredible. And that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter was a willing mouthpiece for the words of God. And God did His thing.

So the early church has grown from about 120 to over 3000 people.

That's where we are up to now. So let's continue reading the story and see what happens next:

(SLIDE 5)

(Let's pray first)

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common.

(SLIDE 6)

⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

During my study at Carey Baptist College as pastors in training we were given different churches around the country to pastor for the summer period. They were our placements for twelve or so weeks. In my first year, the church they placed me in was Wellington Central Baptist Church. So Roxy, myself and Noah and Elijah packed up the car and headed on a road trip down to Wellington.

We didn't know a lot about the church or the place, but we were excited about what we might find there and how God might use us.

So we stayed in a student hostel building, which was like a communal living space, and we were given the top floor. It had like six bedrooms, which during the University year all the rooms were taken up and all the students lived together.

We had a great time in Wellington and really enjoyed being part of the church down there. Part of their church is a group called StillWaters.

(SLIDE 7)

StillWaters is a group of people from the church and community. They meet regularly and have a time together of eating a meal, singing some songs together, people can share what they like, there'd be some games or activity, and there would be some sort of communal message.

And that is the crux of this group – it is communal. Some of the people live in the building, some live on the streets, some live in places which require quite a bit of travel to get to the physical building. But it is a solid community.

They are from all different walks of life, but are of one accord.

They love each other, love doing life together, they are there for each other in some of the toughest of circumstances, and nobody is put into the 'too hard' basket. They accept each other, are not trying to change each other, and this is a place of belonging and growth.

I only got to be part of the community for my time while I was down there, but it was a great experience to see the gospel of love in action and people being and living together in community.

(SLIDE 8)

In the passage we just read through before the crux of it is in verse 44 where Luke writes: *"All the believers were together and had everything in common."*

In other words they were a group. A family. A community of belonging and acceptance. They were the StillWaters of the day back then.

Let's dig a bit deeper into the way this community worked and developed. And see what we can input into our personal lives, our family lives, our church family, and the community around us.

We start with the characteristics of the early Church.

In verse 42 we read:

(SLIDE 9)

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

Remember in the verse before this that three thousand people were added to the church. So this verse is now saying well how did the early church operate? What did these folks do?

And so we see four different activities if you like that characterised the early church:

First there was teaching, given by the apostles, those who knew Jesus and journeyed with him.

Secondly, there was fellowship, which means 'sharing' and here it likely refers to the notion of sharing a common meal with each other.

Thirdly, there was the breaking of bread, likely referring to the Lord's Supper, which we celebrate today too.

And finally there was prayer.

These four activities were at the heart of the early church. And if

we look at the life of Jesus we see that these were very evident in the way he went about his ministry and how he treated people.

Jesus was a fantastic teacher, and the way he brought about heavenly realities anchored in earthly stories was a real gift.

Jesus 'shared' his life with others in fellowship. He could often be found eating with others, and often with people whom society regarded as misfits or sinners.

Jesus's final supper before he died was with his disciples when he shared his body and his blood with them, which is why it's called the Lord's Supper.

And Jesus gave his followers a model in which to pray. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name"

So looking at the early church is like looking at the life of Jesus. The way he went about his daily life and engaging with the community around him is a picture of the early church and shows us how we as his church today two thousand years later need to go about our daily lives and engaging with the community around us.

As one of our vision statements says, 'Live like Jesus'. That's our goal. And we do this how? 'Love without measure'. Another of our vision statements.

So we've seen *what* characterised the early church, let's look at what happened as a result to the early church.

(SLIDE 10)

Let's move on to verses 43 – 45:

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Well, according to these verses plenty happened as a result!

First, we had people filled with awe at the many signs and wonders that accompanied the apostles' ministry. Secondly, everyone lived together and shared what they had. And thirdly, they worked hard at meeting the needs of the community.

It's a great picture of a healthy, growing, and giving church.

Community life is a vital component of the Christian life.

Community is about acceptance and belonging and contributing.

(SLIDE 11)

Let me ask you, how is your communal Christian life going?

Where are the places that you are encouraging others? Where are you together with others? How are you giving to the community around you?

If I can get personal for a little bit, I believe that OBC is a very generous church. I believe that we as a church are generous with our time, our finances and how we invest into relationships with each other and the community as well.

The church runs smoothly because of volunteers who give up their time to help run various ministry groups, serve in ministry or the workplace, get involved in the community, and help to meet the needs of the congregation and others.

I recently read an article about volunteering being a disappearing aspect of people's everyday life. Similar to hospitality being a disappearing aspect too, which we'll address next. And I think this loss of volunteering is mainly because of busyness. We are all busy people and we all lead busy lives. With family, work, sport and recreation, personal time and the like, it's often hard to give any of our time to church and community stuff.

But the reality of the Christian life and Jesus' message to his followers is one of service.

In Matthew 20 verse 28, Jesus sums this up when he said “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”

And I gotta say, I think we as a church are on the right track here. There are many people here who give of their time to the community. There are many who give of their time to the church. There are many who give financially as well to people in the church and different missionaries and mission organisations connected to OBC.

(SLIDE 12)

As we look at this part of the passage, it says that “all the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”

It was all for one and one for all. The early church was exceedingly generous in their gifts. And I think the key here is the final part of the verse – “to give to anyone who had need.”

In other words, and quite astoundingly, no-one went without. The needs of the entire community were met. 3000 plus people.

In today’s individualistic Western world it’s hard to grasp what this looks like. How do you meet the needs of so many people? How do you know what is urgent and what is not? Who decides

who to help and when to help?

These are big questions and there aren’t easy answers to them. I think the key is that when you live in community, you are there for one another. You get to know each other in a deeper way. You get to see the needs of others. You enter into doing life together.

That’s why small groups are so important. Small groups are crucial for people to come together, fellowship together, grow together, and then go or serve together. If you’re not involved in a small group, have a think about joining or starting one.

They are a place of acceptance, belonging, and growth.

So we’ve seen what characterised the early church, we’ve seen what happened as a result of them meeting together, let’s look now at the final part of the passage and focus on the reasons behind them meeting together:

(SLIDE 13)

Verses 46-47:

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

(SLIDE 14)

This is about hospitality and sincerity.

Karen Mains is a pastor's wife who shares the following story:

(SLIDE 15)

She begins, "True hospitality comes before pride. It has nothing to do with impressing people, but everything to do with making them feel welcome and wanted."

There were many church activities held in our home and for years it seemed as if I "did nothing but clean up after people." After each group left, I'd get the place looking spick and span for the next group. Sometimes I would delay cleaning up if there was no company expected, (I guess that's fair, she is human after all!)

Well on one such day, an unexpected visitor from the church turned up and the house was in a mess.

(Maybe you can relate to this scenario ...)

Karen continues, "Hospitality before pride ... I reminded myself dismally. Determined, I welcomed the woman with warmth,

invited her into the unsightly rooms and refused to embarrass her with apologies. I consciously let go of my pride.

(Her response amazed me)

"She said, 'I used to think you were perfect, but now I think we can be friends'."

A powerful story and reminder that the key to hospitality is not our performance or perfection as housekeepers or chefs, but an openhearted sincere friendship that makes people feel welcome and wanted.

Hospitality in our churches is so important. If you have the gift then use it. People need to feel welcome and wanted. Accepted and like they belong. If you don't have the gift, do what you can. Start small and invite someone over who you haven't already. Husbands, check with your wives first!! I've learnt it's best not to spring these things on my wife!

(SLIDE 16)

So the early church gathered together for hospitality and sincerity too. They shared meals together and ate with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

They were sincere in their love and worship of God, and their love and acceptance of others.

As a result of their hospitality and sincerity to God in worship and to others, God added new people to their community on a daily basis. That's awesome isn't it?? God was continually bringing people across their paths to increase their effectiveness and growth as His church.

How cool would it be to see his Church today growing in the same way? How amazing for people in church and community to partner together and live doing life together? How fantastic would it be for people to have a place and people to which they belong and are accepted?

I started today's message with the stories of three different people, Will, Charlie and Peter, searching for acceptance and belonging.

That's my story too. And I believe yours as well.

I think we've all got this God-shaped hole in our hearts and throughout life we seek to fill this with different things – material stuff, alcohol, drugs, pills, pornography, work, a relationship, sport. All sorts of different stuff.

It has been my experience that the only thing that can fill this hole completely is God Himself, Jesus Christ.

It doesn't mean that we still won't have struggles, and that we will experience pain and regret. But in Him we have a place where we are fully accepted and truly belong and can really grow.

(SLIDE 17)

Jesus gave everything for His church, the body of believers who follow Him.

I was thinking about this the past week that the birth of the church cost the death of Jesus.

(SLIDE 18)

The birth of the church cost the death of Jesus.

Jesus said that after He goes, after He dies, He would send the Helper. The Holy Spirit. And So Jesus gave of himself and died for the sake of others. He sent His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who came and initiated the early church.

As we conclude, this morning we've been looking at the early church and we've seen a few things. Firstly we've seen that the characteristics of the early church were teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper and prayer.

Secondly we've seen as a result of these things that people were filled with awe at the many signs and wonders, that everyone lived together and shared what they had and they worked hard at meeting the needs of the community.

And finally we've seen that the reasons behind meeting together were to do with hospitality and sincerity in worshipping God and finding favour with people.

Ultimately it was the Holy Spirit who birthed the early church and allowed it to flourish and grow. And the same Spirit is alive and with us today and building the same church two thousand years later.

(SLIDE 19)

God's church is a place where we are accepted, where we belong, and where we can grow.

Let's remember that.

Let's also remember what it cost. It cost Jesus everything.

He gave his all for the church. I wonder if we're meant to do the same.

Let's pray.

We're going to move into a time of worship and being the church now. Let's spend the time together with God in community. If you need some prayer ask people around you to pray or come to the front and someone here will pray for you. Encourage one another. Invite someone over for lunch. Let's be the church that we've heard about today.