



## The Call of the Church

Acts 2:1-47

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Over the past few years, I've been thinking more and more about the question, "What is the purpose of the church?" I've been asking this question not specifically about Washington Street UMC, but about the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church we proclaim to have been founded by God in the gifting of the Holy Spirit. Why does the church exist?

I've been asking this question a lot because I fear that, in our global existence, we've forgotten why we were created. It's as if, with such success growing the church from this 12-person small group based in Israel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, to a multi-million-person global conglomerate in the modern day, the church has forgotten why it was first created. There are many challenges that accompany growth for organizations, not the least of which are loss of identity and focus.

These challenges of identity and focus metastasize on the national and international level in the church. One need not look further than our own United Methodist Church's general and global body to know we are struggling to understand why we exist as a church. What's our purpose? What's our focus? What does it look like to live out our call as the body of Christ?

Reclaiming the purpose of the church is an important and necessary goal. However, in and of itself, the answer may not be sufficient to get us back to living out our call. It is not good enough to know *why* we exist without also asking, are we structured, organized, and capable of living into this purpose. Too many times great visions fail because of a lack of understanding what it takes to live out that vision. So, our task is twofold, first to ask, why do we exist, and then to ask, what must we do to make it possible to exist in this way? Of course, answering these questions means little if the answers do not materialize into action. It is not sufficient to know *why* we exist and *how* we must be structured to exist in this way; after answering these questions, we must go to work toward that end.

Over the next two months, these questions will guide our quest to transform the church to align with God's desired purpose for the church. While we may have little control over the global church, we can begin by working locally to reclaim and to reframe the church for the world today. This morning, we will look back to Pentecost to reclaim the purpose of the church; next week, in our 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration, we will take a brief look at our history and ask what that purpose looks like if lived out here in Alexandria today; and then for the next six weeks, we will take a look at how our ministry needs to be transformed – to be reorganized and restructured – that we might live into this call for the church. As part of this quest, you will be invited to consider your role in how we are to put into action this renewed sense of call for the church.

If you do a general inquiry as to the purpose of the church, whether online or even among many church leaders, you'll find most of the answers come from Paul's letters. You can read through Paul's letters to the early church and find different explanations, guidelines, and teachings as to the formation of the church. Paul's writings include instructions regarding the use of finances, leadership, and other expected practices within the church. His focus in these writings to the early faith communities – the newly formed churches in places such as Galatia, Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus – is to help them understand how they might best live out the purpose of the church in their own communities. In doing so, Paul is not trying to define the church's purpose, he's trying to help early faith communities understand what it means to live out the church's purpose in their own varied and differentiated contexts.

Even still today, we can learn from Paul's letters, and should not write off his letters as simply being applicable only to a specific community at a specific time. However, Paul's explanations for the witness of the church mean nothing if we don't understand the underlying and foundational purpose of the church. We cannot *only* rely on Paul's explanations to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Mediterranean churches and expect to have sufficient guidance for our work in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. Our societies are simply too different. We have to look beyond Paul's teachings to God's action to understand the purpose of the church, which should be guiding our work in the same way it led Paul's teachings.

Our text this morning in Acts 2 is usually read and studied at Pentecost, the day we celebrate the gifting of the Holy Spirit following Christ's ascension. Pentecost is considered the church's birthday; many churches celebrate Pentecost with cake and feasting as a celebration of the church's founding. A few minutes ago, Bob read a section of the text for us, but the full chapter is 47 verses long. In its entirety, I find this text in Acts to be the clearest witness of the church's purpose.

I find the text in Acts 2 to be the best witness of God's desire for the church because it is the rawest. What we see in Acts 2 is the purest form of God's desire for the church before the church began to regulate and control how it would live out this purpose. At this point in the story line, we are seeing the unrestricted movement of the Spirit in the formation of the church, and that provides an untainted understanding of God's desire for a people who are built upon a promise of new life in Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

As soon as they received the gift of the Spirit, what happened to the disciples? Before anyone had instructed them on *how to be the church*, what do we see taking place?

Verse 4 says, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." The first thing the church is empowered to do – gifted to do by the Spirit – is to speak in ways they had not previously been able to speak. They were given new understandings of language. We don't really know what the disciples were saying in these differentiated languages. Verse 11 indicates they were speaking about "God's

deeds of power,” though it seems not everyone understood what they had to say. Many in the crowd thought the disciples to be drunk.

If we keep reading, their differentiated languages are not used to go convince others to have faith in God or Christ – their differentiated languages are used by the Spirit to bring them into relationship with people who were outside their group. After they received this gifting of the Spirit to speak in varying languages, they find themselves engaged with others who are astonished they are speaking familiar words. Verse 7 says, “Amazed and astonished, [the crowd] asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’”

The crowd was shocked that the members of this newly birthed church movement were able to connect with them in ways they did not expect – they were speaking their native languages. What’s the first thing God does in this newly formed church community? God gifts the church with the ability to connect with others. “The Spirit creates joining. The followers of Jesus are now being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space.”<sup>i</sup> They are joined through the intimacy of communication – native communication.

I am convinced that one of the problems in the church today is that we’ve lost our sense of purpose to be *in* the community. I don’t know when this happened, but at some point in the history of the church, our focus went from following this Acts 2 model of using the gifts of the Spirit to connect with the community, to focusing solely on better educating ourselves. The church shifted its focus from using the gifts of the Spirit to be in relationship with those in the community around the church, to using the gifts of the Spirit to focus solely on educating and sustaining our own within the church.

It seems when looking at Acts 2 that the first desire of God for the church – the very first thing the Spirit did when empowering the church – was to drive the faithful within the church out into the community to connect and build relationships where they did not previously exist. That’s step one.

Step two is to offer a presence in these new relationships that teeters on the line of making people think you’re inebriated, but really you’re just overcome with the goodness of God. The Spirit doesn’t just drive them into the community to speak in other languages, the Spirit drives them out in such joyful hope and celebration of God’s deeds of power that while some people are asking, “What does this mean?” others are saying, “They’re filled with new wine.” We are not just empowered to be in the community, we’re not just sent into the community to build relationships with others, we’re sent out offering a vision and promise of hope and new life that the world isn’t providing otherwise. If the church’s promise is nothing more than a mimic of societal powers, that doesn’t invite people to wonder who we are, or what this means. Being an echo chamber for cultural normativity doesn’t invite wonder and interest. People shouldn’t look at us wonder how fast they can get away. The Spirit leads the church into the community to proclaim a promise of hope and new life that aren’t being offered anywhere else. That’s why the community inquired, “What’s this mean?” “How can this be?” And others though, “no,

they're crazy, this isn't possible, they must be drunk." The promise of God looks a bit irrational because it gives power to the powerless, and cares for the weak, and says the last shall be first. The message we have to proclaim is one that invites wonder and suspicion.

After the community inquired about what was happening, Peter stepped up and delivered what can only be called the first sermon in the church. John Wesley would have been proud because this sermon was not preached from a pulpit in a building, but out in the open space of a community gathering. The text makes clear that everyone who had come was Jewish, and as such, understood and had knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. So, Peter uses the Hebrew Scriptures to explain the connection between the ancient promises of God and Jesus. He uses stories and language that they would have already known to explain who Jesus is as the Lord and Messiah, and explains that the disciples are not inebriated, but instead empowered by the gifted Spirit of God.

Peter's goal is to link Jesus to all the scriptures in a way the people understood, and to offer that connection as the rationale for the actions of the disciples. "[Peter's] speech points beyond [himself] to the God who saves. It is the God who keeps promises that matters in this sermon, so that when the sermon ends no one is in doubt that there is a God who is busy in the world."<sup>ii</sup> So, first, the Spirit empowers the church to be in relationship with the community beyond the church ... in so doing, the church lives in such a way that invites curiosity from the community beyond the church ... and then, as the community beyond the church inquires about why they are so different, the church points the community to something greater than themselves – to a God who is busy in the world.

When Peter finished, people were so moved by the goodness of God as witnessed in Christ, as observed in the actions of the disciples, that they wanted to be a part of this new church movement. Thousands of people devoted themselves to the very work of God because of this community-centric focus that proclaimed God's goodness at work in the world.

Acts 2 keeps going, and it starts to offer what happened to the church as the number of participants grew. Verse 42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." And if we keep going, verse 44 says, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as they had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

These concluding verses gives us some understanding of how the church began to be structured. It speaks of how they lived as a community of faith with one another. But it's clear that the purpose of the church continued to be their call to be a presence of God's goodness in the community. Verse 43 says, "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles." The church was growing by the thousands and they needed to structure themselves in a way that facilitated their purpose amidst their growth – but their purpose had not changed. Their call as a people of faith, as a church in infancy, had not altered.

The purpose of the church, as empowered by God with the gift of the Spirit, was to be in the community forming relationships in ways that proclaimed God's active goodness in the world.

I don't think I need to go into great detail of how that purpose has been twisted and abused for self-gain and institutional glory in the world today. But I am convinced that churches that seek growth for the purpose of growth, and pastors who seek self-glorification, and Christians who think that they can bully others into having belief, and churches who become isolated from their communities, are not witnesses to the power of the Spirit as sent by God at Pentecost. It's not to say these churches don't have a purpose, but it's hard to say they are aligned with God's purpose.

The inbreaking of the Spirit leads us to a newfound understanding of loving thy neighbor. "This is love that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned, and once unleashed, it will drive the disciples into the world and drive a question into their lives: Where is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives?"<sup>iii</sup> It is clear from day one that the Spirit is the one empowering the movement of the church, and it's clear that the movement is outward, not inward. The purpose of the church is gifted in the power of the Spirit. "The same Spirit that was there from the beginning, hovering, brooding in the joy of creation of the universe and of each one of us, who knows us together and separately in our most intimate places, has announced the divine intention through the Son to reach into our lives and make each life a site of speaking glory. But this will require bodies that reach across massive and real boundaries, cultural, religious, and ethnic."<sup>iv</sup>

This is the call of God upon the church – to be the living witness and testimony to the goodness of God in the world. And we are blessed that we don't have to do this on our own, but that we are sent and gifted the Spirit to guide us, and to give us the ability to connect, to join, and to be in relationship with the community, as we proclaim the goodness of God that is, not once and done in the resurrection of Christ, but that is actively working to offer peace – shalom – wholeness – in and to the world. As we journey in this quest to transform the church, this is our call. This is the living witness of God's desire of the church, offered in the creation of the church at Pentecost. Everything we do, say, create, program, organize, and fund should be centered around this purpose – a purpose that we define at Washington Street with our mission statement: "We believe God is love, and we're making a place for everyone to know that love."

May the Spirit lead us as it did those disciples on day one, to leave the closed room in which we often find ourselves hiding, to connect and to join in community proclaiming and promising God's active and good work in the world today. For the glory of God, may we be so led by the Spirit.

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<sup>i</sup> Willie James Jennings. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Acts*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> William H. Willimon. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Jennings.

<sup>iv</sup> Jennings.