

May 7, 2017 – Fourth Sunday in Easter
Good Shepherd Sunday
“What Will They Say About Us?”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

It's hard to believe that is now nearly SIX years since we brought a large plastic container into this sanctuary, placed it on the floor in the chancel and deposited into it various articles relevant to our church at that particular time including a video of our worship service on a DVD, a current church pictorial directory, a copy of the Pilgrim Congregationalist, and a church bulletin, among other items. We did this to mark the 100th anniversary of our church and indicated outside – after the box was sealed – that it should not be re-opened until 2111 – at an appropriate date recognizing the 200th anniversary of our congregation.

That was an overwhelming moment for me – a profound experience of historical relevance and a cold smack in the face as I confronted the reality that I would *not* be present when this box was opened again. It's almost the same feeling of wonder that I have when I look at old photos of former pastors and parishioners of this church from 1911, or 15 or 20 – a sentiment, I imagine, will likely be on the minds of those who will look at our pictures when the box is re-opened and wonder – “What were they like? What was life like then? Who were they? What was important to them? What did they believe? How did they live their faith? How did the worship? What was the church like back then? And what the heck do we do with this little silver disc inscribed with the letters “DVD?”

We have been emphasizing a central theme for our life and ministry together throughout this year entitled “Be the Church.” The theme, as you know, has many sub-themes including: Protect the environment, Care for the Poor, Fight for the Powerless, Enjoy this Life, and Love God – themes that you see graphically depicted on banners throughout our sanctuary. But they all harken back to our central call simply to BE THE CHURCH.

Those two things: (1) the “time capsule” and (2) this important theme were rattling around in my mind as I re-read this passage from the second chapter of Acts – a passage that gives us a glimpse of what the original church looked like – a passage that prompts – without any invitation – to compare ourselves and what we are like today to what apparently was expected of those who originally gathered in Jesus' name.

It can be a bit daunting and intimidating if we try to make direct comparisons, especially if you include the verses that – for whatever reason – the lectionary left out this week.

The story begins with the miracle of Pentecost – a story we will encounter in a few weeks, but then it goes on to recount how Peter stood up in the midst of the gathered crowd and preached one heck of a sermon. First he told them about Jesus of Nazareth who was among them for a short time and taught them with signs, wonders, and deep

wisdom. He told them how Jesus came to fulfill prophesy and that he truly was the Son of God. That he was arrested, tried, crucified, and in three days rose from the dead. He chided them, warning them not to affiliate with the likes of this evil generation but to:

REPENT, BE BAPTIZED AND BE SAVED.

Many listened and did exactly what Peter called for – in fact, the scriptures tell us that about 3,000 people responded and joined the church that day.

We had an inquirers class last Sunday following worship and while it was healthy in number – but I can assure you, 3,000 did not show up.

And so I wonder, were things so different then? And, if so, why? Certainly it had the appeal of that which was brand new. And someone being raised from the dead is bound to get some attention. But, then, look at what they did. Are we so different?

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

I don’t think these were in any order of priority so let’s take a look at each one.

The other day I was meeting with my Confirmation class and the topic of the day was communion. After inquiring of them what they knew or thought they understood about communion, I did a short teaching about our beliefs as Protestants and its import as the sacrament that nurtures us on our journey.

Then I took them into the chapel where I had set up the bread and the cup and began to explain to them as I re-enacted what I normally say in the invitation and communion liturgy. When I broke the bread, I had another one of those profound moments – not unlike that moment with the time capsule. It dawned on me just then – as I was breaking bread – that believers had been doing that exact same ritual – likely the exact same way, for almost 2,000 years!

Oh, our theologies are different about what happens to the bread and wine when blessed and eaten, but just like the disciples on the Emmaus road that I talked about last week, when the bread is broken – our eyes are opened – and we recognize something profound in our participation in what we call “Holy Communion.”

I invited the kids into my moment of realization and I think they may have caught a glimpse of what I was experiencing. I know I did. [Pause]

The folks in Acts 2 broke bread and they also were educated in the apostles teaching. The educational ministry of our congregation has long been a hallmark of our faith. In fact, did you know that this church actually began – not as a worshipping community – but as a Sunday school? Before this church was officially chartered in 1911, a group of 4 men conducted Sunday school classes to educate lay people in the “apostles’ teachings,” an emphasis that remains a priority in this congregation to this very day.

And then there's fellowship. It goes without saying, this church – as well as every church I have ever been affiliated with – loves to meet and eat. While each one of us probably likes a certain amount of time to ourselves, we also crave community – the ability to be with and relate to one another as we share faith, life, highs and lows, joys and deep sorrows. We experience our fellowship – whether in the social hall following worship, at a 7-friends event, or at any one of a number of church activities, when involved in a service project, or at a one-on-one sharing a cup of coffee or lunch – fellowship is critical as we share our stories, our lives, and our longings for the future – our hopes, our dreams.

And let's not forget about the prayers. Prayer is the way we communicate with God. Whether we do that with eyes closed and hands folded, or walking along the beach, alone or together in a more sacred setting – prayer – being together with God is what makes our fellowship, our education, and our breaking of bread different from every other group we might participate in.

Finally, it says,

“They would sell their possessions and goods, and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

After all the aforementioned, breaking bread, teaching, prayer, and fellowship – they recognized their responsibility to take care of others. Imagine that – they even had a “Mission and Outreach” program. [Pause]

A lot has changed in the past 2,000 years. Indeed, a lot has changed on the corner of Ft. Stockton and Jackdaw Sts. in the past 100 years, but are we all that different than those that we read about who gathered in this second chapter of Acts? All of which, I believe, begs the question: **“What will they say about us,”** 100 years, 200 years, 2,000 years from now?

I'm optimistic enough to believe we just may survive the current administration, and that it is our responsibility to do everything we can to ensure that our planet, and the poor are cared for in the process. And while I continue to see a slow and steady erosion of all things sacred in our society, I am optimistic enough to believe that the spiritual life of humankind will always be valued and folks will always be seeking some sort of spiritual nurture. Churches like this one have and must continue to be places for that to happen in various ways as we break bread, teach, fellowship and pray – AND as we live simply so that others can simply live.

When they open that box in a hundred years – they may laugh at our haircuts and style of dress, they may wonder at the plastic and the paper and our apparent priorities – but what else will they say about us? Will they believe we that we succeeded in “Being the Church?”