

“Fed” - Stephanie Sorge, 5.3.20

This passage from Acts is one of particular importance for Trinity. A few of you remember those days.

Back when Don Allen was knocking on doors in the growing Sunset Heights neighborhood.

Back when when the first to meet here in this dilapidated old house still had to brush aside the broken glass and debris to set up metal folding chairs for gathering.

Back in the days at the height of Christendom in this country.

Back when the way we always did church was still working pretty well, a group of seekers was asking the crazy question, what does it mean to be the church?

There were formulas and procedures and plenty of guidelines for establishing a church, but the charter members at Trinity looked back to Scripture - and to this passage in particular - to answer that question. These six verses describe the idyllic prototype of Christian community, back before church got in the way. Back then what was church? It was the gathering of God's people for the purposes of teaching and learning together, praying and worshipping together, sharing fellowship and breaking bread, and making sure the needs of the whole community were being met. From this passage we derived our four marks of the church - worship, nurture, fellowship, and mission. Those were the good old days.

Of course, when Luke was writing this book, he was also writing about the good old days. Acts starts off with the birth of the church, but it's full of all kinds

of trouble. We know from Acts and the epistles that all was not always well in these early faith communities. These six verses are the bridge from the coming of the Holy Spirit to a small group of Jesus' disciples to the growing movement that would become the Christian church.

Were things ever this pure? Probably not. The fact that there were such differences in wealth to be distributed shows that there was already inequality within the religious community. The assertion that goods were held in common, and redistributed to any as they had need is repeated at the end of chapter 4, immediately followed by the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They were a wealthy couple who withheld some of the proceeds of a sale of land rather than giving it all to the common purse, and were both struck dead. Clearly, the system of collective ownership had its kinks.

Shared food and assistance quickly became an issue, too. The first deacons in the church were ordained for the purpose of settling an argument over food distribution. The Greeks were complaining against the Hebrews, because their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food. Even celebrating the rite of the Lord's Supper had gotten problematic. Paul writes extensively about these problems to the church in Corinth.

So we see from the very beginning that there were conflicts in the church, especially around issues of equality and justice. But the vision is there. The

command to share resources and to insure that no one remains in need is a clear expectation of life in a community of people seeking to follow Jesus Christ.

This is what the church has always strived to do: to come together in worship, to support each other in fellowship, and to study and grow together as followers of Jesus. Each of those things creates and nurtures a community of believers that is not just focused on itself, but one that reaches out in care and compassion to address the needs within and outside of the community. How all of that has been carried out, and how successful the church has been in those aims has varied, of course. But that's been the vision.

These days we're longing for good old days of recent memory. When we could gather together in person. When fellowship included sharing hugs, handshakes, food, and drink. The way we engage in nurture and mission has also changed. But now more than ever, we can proclaim that the church is not a building, and the work of the church is not confined within these walls.

The stories we tell of what we have been remind us of who we are. They also help cast a vision for who we can be. There is a key part of that vision that is easy to miss in the passage from Acts. With so much emphasis on what the early church was doing, we might gloss over the fact that it is God who, day by day, was adding to the number of people being saved. That's the formula: a generous and loving God who desires wholeness and salvation for all people, and those who worship that God responding to the love and grace they have received by living

faithfully and following the call of Jesus. Ultimately, though, it is God who saves, and our task is simply to be faithful in whatever times and circumstances we find ourselves.

Things might look very different than they did for the earliest Christians, and much has changed even since the days in the early 1960s when Trinity was founded. But God is still faithful, God is still at work adding to the number of those being saved. God is still the Shepherd feeding the flock, providing rest and assurance even in the most troubling times.

In some ways, our faithful response is even more simple than it was before. For many, it is staying home. Not easy, but simple. For some it is running errands for others, providing meals, sharing encouragement. There are more phone calls and more letters and more checking in on the welfare of others. And for others, it is precisely the call from the early church - to share what we have so that the needs of the community are met.

Right now pastors and churches across the country are starting to wade into conversations about when to re-open church. There might not be any one answer, or any right answer, but I am very sympathetic to our shared desire to get back to the normal. As I see a number of suggested guidelines from various sources, one question mark in particular stops me short. What do we do about singing? Singing can spread potentially infectious droplets much further than regular breathing, so

does an early return to worship together rule out singing together? I feel so much resonance with the hymn writer asking, “How can I keep from singing?”

Right now the Session at Trinity continues to work faithfully and safely through this crisis. We are paying attention to the guidance and science, aware that our intergenerational worship brings together - in very close proximity - the primary virus spreaders and the most vulnerable individuals. We don't have answers yet about when we will resume corporate worship, or what it will look like when we do. But I'm fairly confident that the new realities ahead will look very different than our realities were just a few short months ago.

We may long for the good old days, but what really characterized those days are still available to us today. As long as the church is the church, we will be formed in worship, nurture, fellowship, and mission. How each of those is lived out will evolve and change. It always has. There are plenty of churches who have been live-streaming worship for many decades - before the internet, by radio and television. There are entire congregations that are solely on-line churches. Everything is done virtually, recognizing that real connection can happen through virtual means.

We might long for the good old days, but thanks to the shift to online worship, fellowship, and nurture, even more people have been able to participate in the life of this particular congregation. Individuals who are immune-compromised, or who have other accessibility differences that make regular worship attendance

difficult, if not impossible, have faced the very challenges we are facing now, except without the broad awareness, support, and solidarity of the community. And those for whom 10am on Sunday morning simply doesn't work as a time to gather have also struggled to find regular worship and fellowship. Now they can come to the table, live at 10am eastern or through the recording anytime after that.

Did you know that in the past month, we've gathered in worship with people all over the world? Like the Beka family in Kosovo, Hannah in Vancouver, and Lucas in Brazil, who worshiped with us when he spent time in Harrisonburg a few years ago. We've gathered with members who have moved away from the area but are able to join us virtually - Laura Quass, David and Heidi Winters-Vogel, and Adrienne Pannell to name a few. We've been able to welcome new names and faces who have been joining us regularly, like Will Elliott, who moved to Harrisonburg just after our last in-person gathering back in March. We've been able to gather in worship with members who haven't been able to join us in person as frequently for different reasons, like Derek and Karen Brownsword, Diane Wilcox, and Mac and Ellen Beard, and others.

We've been joined by family and friends, those who we have not yet met, and some who we might never meet in person. We might be missing the good old days - and we surely are - but we are also experiencing the abundance of a bigger table. Together, we are sharing in worship, fellowship, nurture, and mission, just as those first followers of Jesus Christ, back in the original good old days.

This story from Acts reminds us of who we are, and Psalm 23 reminds us of whose we are - and of the God who claims us in love. Psalm 23 assures us that even in the most difficult of times, God is with us. It is God who feeds us, God who meets our needs, and God who brings us to that great banquet table where all are fed. All are fed because there is more than enough to feed us all, and all are fed because everyone is invited to this table. The invitation is there, the table is set, and God continues to lead us in these days.

One day, hopefully soon, we will look back on these days - we will! - and we will remember the signs of grace in the midst of the challenges. We will remember the ways we cared for each other and received care from others through the difficult sacrifice of physical distance. We will remember the ways in which the community came together, to share from abundance, to build relationships and check in on our most vulnerable members. We likely will not see these as the good old days, but I trust we will see them as days when we were continually led by the Lord, our Shepherd, when we continued to be fed by the grace of God made known to us in Jesus Christ, and when we continued to be the church - the Body of Christ - empowered by the Holy Spirit. May it be so! Amen.