

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Laetare Sunday
4th Sunday in Lent
Acts 2:41-47
March 14th, 2010

This Sunday in Lent is called "Laetare" or "Rejoicing" Sunday. We have mentioned before that it seems strange to have a day of rejoicing in such a somber season. It goes to show that the early church would "celebrate," so to speak, even during such a penitential time.

One of the reasons for this rejoicing might be because next week we start yet an even more intense journey to the cross called "Passion-tide." Perhaps the church would make this Sunday a "Mardi Gras" or "Fat Sunday" before focusing intensely on the Savior's suffering and death. Whatever the reason for this "Rejoicing Sunday" we can be confident - the church can celebrate - even during this time of the Church-Year.

The church has been a "rejoicing church" since the very beginning. But that's not all it was. I would like for you to turn to the back of the insert in your bulletin (look at the end of this sermon). You see an outline of the early church characteristics. This outline is based on what is given by our Lord in Acts chapter 2. This church was a rejoicing church that also had many other valuable attributes. Perhaps it would be advantageous to review those characteristics of the church and, at the same time, think about our own church as well.

First of all, take a look at #1: The early church was a learning church. The first Christians did not follow any other teaching than that of the apostles. Their teaching came from Christ. This is where the foundation of our church, your church, must stand. The doctrine of the church is not founded on man made principles. It's founded on Christ. Our church is Lutheran - but it does not belong to Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, from whom we get our name. If Luther taught from the Bible - then we teach from the Bible. If Luther and his teachings would stray from the Word - then that is where Christ Lutheran Church parts ways with Luther. The Word of God is central in learning Word - what it means for you is the rock of the early church - and the church today.

Second of all, the early church was a church of fellowship. As they devoted themselves to Christ's teaching it brought them together. They believed in the same thing. They had their faith in common. This is a quality which causes us to rejoice today. As one army commander once said, "I had the joy to command a band of brothers." The church is only a real church when it is a band of brothers. That is what we are - brothers and sisters in Christ. We support each other and love each other. I pray this mark of the early church is our mark today. I pray we keep this in mind.

Thirdly, the early church was a praying church. It says in your outline, "These early Christians knew that they could not meet life in their own strength and that they did not need to do so. They always spoke to God before they spoke with men; they always went in to God before they went out to the world; they could meet the problems of life because they had first met God." During this time of Lent perhaps we can relate to prayer more than any other time. A time of distress comes on among us as Holy Week approaches. We are not strangers to this feeling. The sufferings and discouragements of this life echo a need to talk to the God we know through the Word. Strength for our day does not come by our own

accord. We need help – and this is where the church – where you and I – look to God and listen to Him speak.

Fourth, the early church was a reverent church. So it is with our church. As you know we take particular care to stand or kneel before our Lord at appropriate times. If there is any place in this world where “reverence” is to be shown – should it not be in here? Our world knows of reverence, for many desire it from us. We are to “respect” the earth. We are to care for the land. We are to cut back on our emissions so as to make a smaller footprint – we are told. All of these things are good ideas – they are acts of reverence and respect to God’s good creation. However, I wish those same people who wish us to be “reverent” to earth would also be reverent to the Lord and honor His Word. Sometimes the world becomes god to some and God Himself just falls out of favor. The early church knew to whom all reverence and respect should go.

Fifth, the early Church was a church where things happened. In faith God’s people did not sit only to receive but got up in order to give. Faith is active and so is the church. A stagnant church is not what the church was intended to be. Often times I think we need to stop and look at ourselves and see if we are a “happening” church – if you know what I mean. We have things going on – you can look at the church-calendar to see that. But are we a “happening” church? You know, for the sake of our neighbor – for the edification of our family? I pray this church never stops looking at how we can continue to be “active” in our community and in this life that faith has given to us.

Sixth, and much to do with the previous point, the early church was a sharing church. The outline shows verses 44 and 45 in their entirety. Please read together with me, *“And all who believe were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”* God’s people who are in true need come first for the active, happening and sharing church. Again, does this describe our church – Christ Church – CHRIST’S CHURCH?

The seventh point is important. The early church was a worshipping church. God’s people gathered regularly. They still gathered at the Temple – though this was a huge risk for them. They gathered in the believer’s homes as well – to eat meals and to partake in Holy Communion. It’s vital to realize that the church that comes together in all its teaching, reverence, sharing praying, and fellowship (that we previously talked about) is what the church happens to be. When the church finds itself segmented or divided – not coming together – the church will struggle and not look anything like our Lord intended it to be. Great things happen when the church gathers. We are edified and encouraged. We are strengthened and we show each other support that comes from Christ. This is the church and this is why we worship.

Finally, the early church was happy. A church united is a happy church. A church divided is a sad church. God intended a happy church, though at times, we don’t always agree and individually we aren’t always happy. Division is the enemy to the church. At times we are the church’s worst enemy. Our pride, our laziness or our selfishness makes working together for the sake of the church impossible. There are a lot of things that go into a church. There are a lot of things that can make it all go wrong. Some of them we control – others we do not.

But this is “Rejoicing Sunday.” Rejoicing in the middle of Lent because the church is where our Savior builds this firm foundation of life and forgiveness. Here is where it happens, folks, and that is why where you are is so important. The church is affectionately

called “the bride of Christ.” Christ and the church are one in this way and we are a part of Christ. That means being a part of the church means being a part of His life and His death. “Being” the church means standing before Pilate ourselves. It means taking the beatings when standing for the truth. Being the Church means carrying a heavy cross and making our way to a hill where we will be nailed to that cross. That’s what Christ makes us to be – Himself. Rejoice! Your sufferings and death will result in the same thing it did for our Lord – Resurrection and Life!

This picture of the early church is fundamental for what our church today should be. And while these are essential characteristics, the church does not exist without Christ. Do look at these characteristics from time to time and ask yourself – is this what my church is doing? Does my church teach and learn? Does my church have fellowship, pray, share and worship? Is my church a place where things happen? Is my church a church Christ Himself would be proud of? Does my church preach the Gospel that Jesus died for the sinners within? This is Christ’s church. We are Christ’s church. Rejoice because that means you belong to the Lord. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The Characteristics of the Church – Acts 2:42-47

1. **It was a *learning Church*.** v. 42 – “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (doctrine)...” The word *doctrine* is not passive; it is active. The phrase means that they persisted in listening to the apostles as they taught.
2. **It was a *Church of fellowship*.** It had what someone has called the great quality of *togetherness*.
3. **It was a *praying Church*.** These early Christians knew that they could not meet life in their own strength and that they did not need to do so. They always spoke to God before they spoke with men; they always went in to God before they went out to the world; they could meet the problems of life because they had first met God.
4. **It was a *reverent Church*.** v. 43 – “And awe came upon every soul...” Awe is associated with “reverence.”
5. **It was a *Church where things happened*.** v. 43 – “...and many signs and wonders were being done.” In faith the “active” church in Christ will accomplish many things... marvelous things!
6. **It was a *sharing Church*** vv. 44-45 “And all who believe were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” These early Christians had an intense feeling of responsibility for each other.
7. **It was a *worshipping Church*** v. 46 “...attending temple together and breaking bread in their homes...” They never forgot to visit God’s house. We must remember that “God knows nothing of solitary religion.”

It was a *happy Church* v. 46 - “...with glad and generous hearts.” Gladness was there. A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms.

Outline based on William Barkely's commentary on The Acts of the Apostles, pp 25-27, Westminster Press, 1955