

Pastor T.C. Arnold
4th Sunday in Lent
Acts 2:41-47
March 27th, 2022

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.

But whatever “the mood” in the church-year – somber, serene, serious, celebratory – the very early church, the church of the apostles whose teaching came from Christ the Lord Himself, forms what we as a church believes and does today. There is no new formula to that. In this world that tells us that we must change or get left behind, that we must evolve or we will die, the church is the one thing that remains steadfast, that does not change because God’s Word does not change. Its truth is the same yesterday, today and forever because Jesus is same.

This morning, I would like to show you how the church has not changed in a world constantly in flux. There are characteristics that the very early church and the church today still have in common. Let’s look at some of those foundational characteristics.

First of all, the early church was a learning church. The church today is 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. That means they had one faith – THE only faith because true faith is in Christ alone. When we went to San Diego, CA for Benjamin’s graduation from Marine Corps boot camp, we heard time and time again the notion of standing together, honor and courage together, a brotherhood and a sisterhood that would never cease. Once a Marine always a Marine.

That is what we are – brothers and sisters in Christ. Not Marines, but rather we support each other and love each other with a common faith that brings us unity. Our fellowship is in the right teaching of the Word of God... the one faith in Christ.

Thirdly, the early church was a praying church. William Barclay, a British theologian once said, “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 God’s creation. Unfortunately, many

in our world today desire to be more “reverent” toward God’s creation than toward the creator Himself. Stewardship of God’s creation is very important. But does not come at the expense of our honor and worship of the one true God who gave us our families, our community, our planet, and our very lives and then sent His son to redeem us from eternal death.

Fifth, the early church was a sharing church. The text for today says this, *“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 are of utmost importance to the sharing church. The church, by its very nature, is a sharing church. Whether that be the promise of life and salvation won by Jesus Christ, or food for a member of the community, the church has this natural flow of grace that comes first from this place out into the lives of its members and the community.

The sixth 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 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, and this sounds a bit shallow, 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 think about 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 church that puts Christ Jesus first? Does my church preach the Gospel that Jesus died for the sinners? 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.