

Acts 2: 14a, 36-42
Psalm 116: 1-3, 10-17
I Peter 1: 17-23
St. Luke 24: 13-35

Third Sunday of Easter Season 2023.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”
Acts 2: 42

Here is a question which might not be easy to answer: What makes someone a member of the Church?... What makes someone a member of the Church?...

This question became particularly acute for a United Church Presbytery in east Toronto, Ontario, a few years ago, when the ordained minister of a pastoral charge, the Rev. Gretta Vosper, announced that she was an atheist: She no longer believed in the existence of God – although she wanted to continue to work for the congregation. Most congregational members seemed inclined to let her continue in her leadership role. The Rev. Gretta added that she believes in “Christian values” – that is, she agrees that justice, love, and forgiveness are all important virtues... My impression as an outsider is that her colleagues didn’t know quite what to say about her. Eventually, there was a Church agreement that she could continue to work in the local church; it also asserted that people need to believe in God the Holy Trinity to work in the United Church of Canada...

So, what makes one a member of the Church?... It isn’t just showing up on a Sunday morning, because a member of another religion, or an atheist, could show up, but they would likely say they aren’t a Church member. Nor is our membership determined by good works – people of all religions, or no religion, can do good things – and some Christians – or at least, people who say they’re Christians -- have not always been models of virtue...

What makes one a member of the Church? To answer this question, let’s look at the first reading for today, which tells what happens when the community of the Church was first formed... We remember that God the Holy Spirit had powerfully come upon the first disciples of Jesus, and the apostles were wonderfully transformed in their spirits: They began to praise God, and to do Christian ministry. St. Peter preaches a barnburner of a sermon, and a group of Christians gather for Christian fellowship... What were the qualities of this first Christian fellowship?...

St. Peter’s first instruction to this new Christian community is that people are to “Repent.” That is, they need to acknowledge how they have been disobedient to God, choose to leave behind their sinful ways, and turn to the Lord... They were to become a new community, living within the wider world, and yet choosing to believe and to live very differently from others around them... This repentance is not just for the first-generation Church. All of us, without exception, are called to recognize where in our lives we have been disobedient or reckless, and to re-orient ourselves toward the Living God...

Second, the early Christians are called to have faith in Jesus Christ – that is, to confess that Jesus is the long-awaited Christ. He is the Son of God, both crucified and raised again. The gospel passage for today can be taken as a summary of the core of faith in Jesus Christ:

[Cleopas] replied, ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.[...]

Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.

The risen Jesus says in reply,

‘Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

Luke continues to record what happens next:

When [the risen Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?...’ ‘The Lord has risen indeed’

“Believing” means taking the promises of God, and daring to believe them – to respond, even if all our questions are not yet answered, to the astonishing work of God among the people of the world – we who are so often very near-sighted, and quite deaf to God’s amazing work. It cannot be stated enough: To belong to the Church is to be responding to what we have learned about Jesus Christ...

So, we have repentance, and faith. A third element of the Christian community is that people are baptized. Verse 38: “Peter said [to his listeners], “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.” In the sacrament of Baptism, we are incorporated into the Church, the Body of Christ. That’s one of the reasons why, in most Anglican parishes, the baptismal font is near the entrance. It’s a way of symbolizing or showing that the way into the Church is through Baptism...

Today’s first reading concludes with 4 elements of the Christian community. Verse 42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

The community devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching – that is, the core body of teaching of the universal Church. They were committed to fellowship – that is, they made the effort, to choose to come together... (The sacrament of Holy Communion took a little while to work out in the first-century Church. We read in First Corinthians 11: 21 that, in the congregation in Corinth, the sharing of the sacramental meal was unequal; St. Paul had to correct that.) Although there was some development in the practice, the eucharistic meal was core to Church membership from the very beginning. Lastly, Luke records that the apostolic Church prayed together. They prayed together...

Let's hear Acts 2: 42 again: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

These 4 core values are reflected in the B.A.S. Baptismal service. We say together the Apostles Creed. Then comes the question:

Celebrant: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

People: I will, with God's help.

All our liturgy, all our ordered prayers, emerge from scripture. This Baptism promise about the Church comes from Acts 2: 42.

So, what are all these core elements of Church membership? Repentance. Faith. Baptism. The apostles' teaching and fellowship. Praying. And the eucharistic meal. These are core elements of our identity – what it means to belong together in Jesus Christ. This is true for the whole Church through the ages, right to now. It's being part of the adopted Church family, right to today...

Now, some Christians would like to add other parts which are vital to the Church's identity. For example, I can't imagine Anglicans getting rid of bishops, or to abandon our Prayer Book heritage altogether. But these elements in our first reading are core, foundational, for belonging...

There are some things we can't do by ourselves: We can't get married by ourselves. A single man or woman cannot produce a child alone. A tanker ship's captain cannot pilot the ship without the support of his crew and the harbour workers... And we can't be a Christian by ourselves. Our relationship with Christ has to include belonging – to this wondrous Body of Christ. God knows, we need one another, to become all that we are called to be. First Corinthians 12: 27: "Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it..."

May God the Holy Spirit continue to work in us, individually and corporately, for our benefit, and for God's greater glory. Amen.