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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church • Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA  
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*Acts 2:42-47*  
*Psalm 23*  
*1 Peter 2:19-25*  
*John 10:1-10*

So many things of Christianity are the same as they have been for centuries. Today's scripture readings include texts that many Christians' hearts come "home" to. In times of grief or trial, we turn to *Psalm 23*: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want..." We remember God, and picture our shepherd, and the love and grace shared with us as individuals, and as a people. We remember the good news of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord Jesus. This is our God of the gospel, who draws us here, that sustains us and strengthens us. This is our God who loves us and cares for us.



We hear of another kind of image in our first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*. It's not one of God, but of the community of people gathered around God, in the name of Jesus. Throughout the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – we hear tale after tale of the disciples who followed Christ. They all centered on Jesus' interactions with individuals or groups. The gospels are all about who Jesus is, what Jesus did, and how Jesus taught.

Today's passage from *Acts* denotes a new era of discipleship. It was no longer just individual disciples gathered around Jesus, centered on him as teacher and Lord. *Acts* reveals to us a new image of faithfulness to the good news of the gospel – still grounded in Jesus, but with a different focus.



After giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, the baptized faithful were enthusiastic agents of the gospel. They continued to gather, learning from the apostles, praying and living their faith. Our passage notes that “[they] devoted themselves to... the breaking of bread,” which we would name as Holy Communion now. (*Acts 2:42*) Studying scripture, hearing tales of Jesus' actions and teachings, worship, and praying were clearly the foundation of their life together. These practices reflect important things that mark all Lutheran churches to some degree.

Perhaps the most startling thing for us as 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians are the descriptions that come next. The relationships among baptized Christians were... well, different. “[They] had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods, and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (*Acts 2:44-45*) The words stretch us beyond our expectations.

They were in real relationships together, which are worth celebrating whenever that happens. But these relationships crossed boundaries that many of us even keep with our family members. They shared generously,

including the things that we often guard from one another: our most cherished things and money that might need ourselves. We all do this to some degree, don't we? It's clear from this description which God that these disciples worshiped – and it was not materialism or wealth at all. Christ ruled their worship and learning, their relationships and belongings. After baptism into this community of faith, the people truly lived as the body of Christ in the world.

The author of *Acts* holds up a picture of devotion to Christ, which would serve as a goal for church communities that followed. In it, readers of every generation are invited to submit their whole lives to be transformed by God's Word. Transformed, that we may become conduits of sharing God's grace with others. This is a vision that should stretch us all in some way, calling us all to offer our lives more fully in Jesus' name.



We hear this text today, knowing that our congregation is at a major transition point. This is a time when the *Acts* image and goal can be really helpful to ground us as we look ahead to the future.

For the last year, we have been prayerfully considering Emanuel's financial situation, and seeking God's healing in it. Beneath our discussions have been questions about who we are as a church – what is most important about being Christians at Emanuel's – and how we can do both those things more faithfully. Similarly, our *Acts* passage seems to be

asking, and answering, questions about what the early church was. It can help us name what's most important about the church today.

There are many things that it does not say. In observing the character of the early church, the apostles, plural, are mentioned. Nothing is said about a key leader like a particular apostle or shepherd. There is no mention of any official organization – or their buildings.

Instead *Acts* focuses on the basis for their community, which was their shared faith in Jesus and the teachings of the apostles. It notes the character of the relationships that flow from that faith, filled with care, generosity, joy, thanksgiving, and prayer. The actual structure isn't addressed at all. There have been, and continue to be, many different kinds of Christian gatherings over the years.



I'm aware that our conversations have led many members to consider where else they might worship, if it were not here. Ultimately, these same questions are adapted to your choices as households, too. Right now, are you in a church family that helps you to hear and know about God's love and grace? Are you in caring relationships with others, marked by shared prayer, joy, and peace? Hopefully your answers are yes, even if there are ways that we fall short, as we humans always do.

If you are hearing the word, being blessed by others, and serving as a blessing in relationships, then you are in a church family, marked by the faith of Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit. Wonderful! Remain with us

and listen for God’s call. Help us to find God’s path of hope and life. Contribute to our family of faith, as only you can.



Seven months ago, we started discussing general options for our congregation to consider, in hope that our family could discern God’s call to something that would be life-giving for our ministry. Our council leaders have led us to intentionally explore relationships with two other congregations that we hoped might bear gospel fruit. Now, months later, the landscape has changed. In our congregational meeting, Susan will talk about the new set of choices before us now. Some of those are new options that became possibilities only after my resignation.

Our passage from *Acts* helps our congregation to be centered on what is most essential as we listen for God’s clear call. It focuses us on the faith we receive in Jesus and the quality of the relationships that flow from that faith. It calls us to turn to our church family, amid the anxiety and uncertainty that we feel about its future. Our good shepherd has given us this community – For communion with God and one another. As a means of receiving and sharing God’s love in our lives. Our good shepherd shares love and protection and generosity with us through the church, even in difficult times. “Though [we] walk through the valley of the shadow of death, [we] shall fear no evil; for you are with [us]; your rod and your staff, they comfort [us].” (*Ps. 23:4*) Christian community is a wonderful way that God offers us this companionship, care, and comfort.

Gracious God, be among us this day in the Word we hear, in the fellowship we enjoy, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. Bind us together, day by day. Open our eyes to your hopes for us. Grant us the strength and wisdom to live as your people. In Jesus' name, Amen.