

“Wonders and Signs”  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
Based on Acts 2: 42-47  
Longview Presbyterian Church  
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“Come over here. I want to tell you a story,” Pastor Dorisanne Cooper recalls, “my Aunt Thelma beckoned to me as I walked in her kitchen. ‘I need you know where you come from,’ she said. Thelma was the last surviving family member of my maternal grandmother’s generation and could keep me entertained for hours telling me stories about all my relatives. Through Thelma I became acquainted with all kinds of family members that had lived before me. In many ways, she was my one connection to those people and places and events that I otherwise wouldn’t have known about and somehow over time her stories became my memories too.

“But Thelma’s stories weren’t important to me just for relaying events. Hers were stories that taught me not just what my family did, but what they *valued*, how they treated one another and those around them. They also taught me what was expected of me, what I’m capable of as a part of my family. Naturally they included a few pitfalls to avoid, but ultimately what I learned—especially from the most inspiring stories—was what *is* possible in life, something for me to remember in difficult times.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bible is one giant “Thelma story” for us. The story of where we come from, as Christians. Nowhere is that more evident than the book of Acts, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, The Acts of the Apostles, tells the story of the newborn Christian church. So new, the adherents didn’t even call themselves “Christians,” but “Followers of the Way.” So new, they were Jews, following Jewish custom, worshipping in the temple daily. Today’s passage gives us invaluable information about the early Christians, about where we come from. Not only what our ancestors in faith did, but what they valued, how they treated others and what is possible for us.

Today’s passage begins, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” We discover in this text, a set of practices and priorities followed by the early church. These seemed to be the primary focus of the early church which compelled them to the secondary response of sharing their goods in common caring for one another and those in need and drew the attention of outsiders who then also wanted to join in. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Following the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. “Breaking of bread” probably refers both to the sacrament and to fellowship of common meals. These were the primary habits of the early church. Initially, there was no stewardship committee. No personnel and administration committee. Certainly no building and grounds. Not even a mission or evangelism committee. (Ok, obviously, there were no “committees” at all, but

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<sup>1</sup> “Fourth Sunday of Easter,” Dorisanne Cooper, *The Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual*, Series 2, Year A, compiled and edited by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 131

you get the point.) The mission and evangelism were the organic responses from the movement of the Holy Spirit through the teachings, fellowship and worship and prayers.

The result of all this teaching, fellowship, worship and prayer: awe and wonder. “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” The text isn’t explicit regarding what exactly the “wonders and signs” are that the apostles were doing. But from a modern point-of-view, this concept of people selling all of their possessions to distribute to those in need and share all things in common, seems at least as miraculous as any healing or exorcism ever could be.

It’s rare to find a Bible commentary on this passage that does not mention that the author seems to be idealizing the early church in this passage. In other words, it didn’t *really* happen that way. They didn’t *really* sell all their possessions and share all things in common according to each one’s need. They didn’t *really* love being around each other at the temple and in their homes all the time every day having the goodwill of *all* the people. Commentaries are quick to point out that you only have to keep reading in Acts to see just how much controversy and arguing and difficulty there was in the early church.

But to assert that this image of the early church is “simply idealized” leads to easy dismissal of the story and letting ourselves off the hook. Just because troubles and conflicts arose later is not proof that this part of the story is false or dismissible. In a way, the fact that the author does not shy away from telling those stories is evidence in favor of the probability that he is not sugar-coating the story. Would it be more believable if Acts were filled with only stories like this one? We know human nature too well to believe that everything was hunky-dory all the time. But would it be more believable if Acts were filled with only stories of conflict? It would be difficult to imagine the church attracting new people if the leaders were constantly in conflict. Or is it more believable to have a balance of the two kinds of stories? Is it more believable that things *did* go well at first but as time wore on and the group grew larger, personalities began to clash and conflicts arose?

On the other hand, what if it *is* an idealized version of a more troubled reality? Does that mean we have nothing to learn from it? Does that mean we don’t need to pay any attention or take it seriously? After all, aren’t many of Jesus’ teachings the ideal versions of how we should be, what we should do, how we should treat one another? Aren’t we called to strive for the ideal though time and time again we fall short?

What if we *did* have to take this seriously? What if, rather than think of this story as an unobtainable and easily forgotten ideal, what if we let it inspire us? What if we let this story inspire us to see how we can embody that feeling of valuing God and other people more than money or things, delighting in God and in each other, rather than in what we own? What if we let God’s love fill us with awe and wonder, and in response,

let our love of God overflow to one another, loving, caring for and feeling a sense of responsibility for one another?

There's a lot of anxiety in the church about lack of growth. Not just lack of growth but negative growth, loss of members. As you know, this is not just our church, not just our denomination but mainline denominations throughout the nation. There's a sense that we have to "do evangelism" better to keep the church from dying. But we see in today's text that the followers of The Way, the early church, weren't wringing their hands about numbers, about stewardship or evangelism. As one commentator notes, "The amazing growth of the young church is seen by Luke not as an end in itself, but as a result of the combined energies of God's Spirit and of the affection of the members of the young church for one another and for those outside their fellowship.... But as the text makes quite clear, this successful evangelistic effort was a by-product of their energies. An important by-product, to be sure, but not the primary focus of the early Christians' concern. They did not 'devote' themselves to evangelism, but to teaching and fellowship, to worship and acts of caring."<sup>2</sup>

They did not 'devote' themselves to evangelism, but to teaching and fellowship, to worship and acts of caring. Now this is not to say that evangelism is not an important part of discipleship, of course it is. But the key is to focus first on the teaching, the fellowship, the worship the prayer and meeting the needs of others and the evangelism will be the by-product, flowing out.

Now, these are things this church is pretty good at. We have an excellent record when it comes to meeting the needs of others. Mission is probably what we do best. Fellowship? We're there. Worship, prayer and learning not bad. So why aren't we growing day by day like the early church did? If the early followers weren't focusing on evangelism, how did they grow?

There is one more aspect that is important to note. Remember, they were in the temple together every day. Later, after the temple was destroyed, they would meet in house churches but at this stage, they were meeting at the temple. They were visible in the community, people saw them, people saw their great joy and the way they cared for one another and those in need and people moved by the Holy Spirit to be added to their number. And this visibility is something that the leaders of the church are working on. It's something we all can be helping with. When I first came to this church a little over two years ago, I kept hearing that LPC is one of the best kept secrets in Longview. Well, we don't want it to be a secret, do we? So let's get the secret out. Let's all work to make this church more visible. Let's talk about it. And let us be inspired by where we come from, by the awe and wonder our ancestors in faith had in God's love. Let us devote ourselves to teaching and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 284