

Joy around the Table

Acts 2:37-47

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Praise the Lord our God. It's good to be back in Washington, DC. It's good to worship here at National Presbyterian Church. Today I want to talk about the nature of the church as clearly described to us in the second chapter of Acts. It's a contrast to the kind of church that exists in many places, even during the time of the Apostle Paul and up to today. It is the exploration of the kind of church that we at National desire to become. So turn to Acts, chapter 2. We will begin with verse 37 and go to the end of the chapter. Now listen to the word of God.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart – that is the preaching of Peter about Jesus, his death and resurrection – and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and in that day about 3,000 persons were added.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because of 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. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

This is the Word of the Lord.

On my vacation I worshiped in other Presbyterian churches, and I can tell you that there is joy around the tables of other churches in California. I discovered, however, not only do they drive extraordinarily fast now in California, they sing their hymns about the same speed. I've never seen or heard hymns sung so fast as they were being sung in these churches. I thought, “Life is changing, moving more rapidly”. But there is still joy at the tables of Jesus at the church. And why is that? Because we see in this text that the Holy Spirit gives the gift of *koinonia*, or community, when the people of God gather.

Day by day they spent much time together in the temple, the place of worship and prayer. They broke bread at home, the place of *koinonia* and meals. They ate their food with gladness and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Let us pray.

We come, Lord, with joy to meet you, forgiven, loved and free in your presence, in awe and wonder, to recall your life laid down for us. We come, with Christians around us near and far, to find—as all are fed—that the new community of love, particularly as they participate in your communion bread, will give us nourishment today and in the life we lead out of these doors. Now may you speak to us in the power of your Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

In the Bible, meals are spiritual disciplines. Eating is not just about the food. Eating is about the community of God's people. And if that community is functioning well, there is joy and gladness. There is a spirit of generosity around the table. It is not so much about the kind of food we have. It is about the

kind of people we are and how we practice our relationships at the table. It is a daily practice of discipline, of engaging people around the table in relationships to create a kind of church that the Holy Spirit gives as a gift because we practice the discipline.

A father told me the story that, after six years of raising babies and toddlers, he and his wife finally got out to a wonderful black-tie banquet. For six years they had not really been out to such a wonderful event. They had been at home at the table with their children and their babies, and the meals sometimes were kind of chaotic. He was a little nervous about being at this special event. At this elegant dinner gourmet food, refined company, formal etiquette, and all the best social behavior were being practiced. The husband and wife got into the meal and began to enjoy the company of the people at the table; laughter began to roll and conversation began to be easy. A rather sophisticated woman was seated next to the man, and, in the middle of one of his conversations, she exclaimed very suddenly, "What are you doing?" At that moment he discovered that he'd been cutting into small pieces her meat, her potatoes and vegetables!

There are disciplines at the table that are hard to break. And there are disciplines at the table that bring us together and give us a sense of our history, and our unity in Christ. There is joy at the table according to Acts, chapter 2; there are two words that describe this moment of joy. When the people get together there is 'gladness' and 'generosity' in their spirit, in their hearts. There is a sense of exultation because they are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. They have seen Jesus come back to life. They are no longer seeing Jesus as the one who is dead and gone, but Jesus as the one who is present all the time, in the power of the Spirit. There is another word that describes this community and it's interpreted in the New Revised Standard Version as 'generosity.' But it is a little more complex than that. It literally means two things – that this is a community without stones. It is also a community without cloak and cover. It's a community where they take care of the rockiness... or the ruggedness... or the raggedness between their relationships. When they have friction they deal with it. When they have irritations they confront it. And they smooth the way for the community to practice a loving gracious interrelationship style. It is transparent, open, clear and leveling. This community is full of joy and smoothness.

Now the Apostle Paul talks about a community in First Corinthians 11 that is not full of joy and smoothness around the table—because, most often, church communities and families struggle with their relationships. And that struggle is often seen when we eat together. In First Corinthians 11 the Apostle Paul calls attention to the struggle of the Corinthian people. When it is time for them to eat, each of them tends to look out for their own agenda rather than the sensitivity to the others at the table with them. They actually are showing contempt for one another. They humiliate the poor. They don't wait for each other. The Apostle Paul takes what they are doing and begins to draw them back to a discipline around the table of Jesus and the Last Supper. He uses the table of the Lord's Supper to call them to an understanding of what the table of being together really means—that they should, in fact, find a kind of life together that is reflective of the life together that Jesus gave the disciples on that last night before he was crucified—before he died, and before he was buried. It is the kind of life where Jesus gives himself to the people at the table, "This is my body given for you. This is my blood poured out for you." Jesus models that he is not here at the table for himself; he is here at the table for the others. Now that's in contrast to the people who are at the table with him—who are preoccupied with their own sense of betrayal... or wondering about their denial... or their thinking about the possibility of deserting him because he is being confronted with suffering at the hands of leaders in Jerusalem. And so there's a conflict that happens; and it is that conflict that is met here at the table of Jesus Christ.

Now today we have two tables. We have the table of our Lord where we will share in worship service. And we have the picnic tables that we will go out to later on. This table is about dealing with our pain; it is about dealing with our differences and our conflicts. It is about bringing us together around Jesus so that when we go out to the picnic, we will have a banquet that is full of gladness and smoothness.

As you know, not every table is a table of joy. There are tables that are full of complaints. On my vacation I spent some time in the upper room of a café that had wireless access point for computers. I would go up there to try to get in touch with my e-mails. Several days while I was working on my e-mails in an open space, there was a group of women who were gathered in that room; and they had their small group meeting. I got to the point where I could not stay in the room with the women because all of their

conversation was about complaints. It was about their frustration with life, their frustration with Washington, DC...and the government...FEMA. You name it; they complained about it. It was a table of disturbance and irritation; and I thought: how ironic that this upper room is a place of frustration. Even though they are getting together, there is no sense of working out the pain.

We have a decision to make in this church as well as other churches; and that is: Which household do we want to belong to? Do we want to belong to a household where the table brings us into gladness and joy? Or do we want to belong to a household where we are caught up in frustrations, anxieties, dissonance, and difficulties? Jesus invites us to the table so that we confront the darkest parts of who we are and leave them here. It's an act of accepting Jesus, repenting and going out with joy and gladness. Which household do you want to belong to?

When I was growing up I remember two friends with two different households that I visited; and they were like day and night. I went to the household of my friend, Jeff, It was a brand new house that was just being built and finished. But as I walked in, I could feel the pain. His mother had an angry look on her face; and her relationship with her son, Jeff, was always one of criticism and attack. I thought to myself, "I can't go home fast enough." But then I went to this other home where David, my friend, lived, it was the opposite impact. When I walked in the door, there was a sense of calm and peace; there was a welcoming engagement. There was an awareness of the individuality of each of us, and it was good to be there. That is one of the reasons why the church in the time of the apostles was so attractive—because people could sense the spirit of the people as they ate together and as they worked together in community. They said, "We want to be a part of this church." And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

We have a striking opportunity in Washington, DC at The National Presbyterian Church; because Washington, DC—as the California women were pointing out critically—is a place of frustration that's communicated in criticism of flaws...advocacy...and leverage. The church needs to be a place where we don't impose those agendas. Now that doesn't mean we don't have conflict. It means that conflict is dealt with in a smooth, clear, open, and transparent way. That's the kind of community that created the joy and the gladness, and the generosity of the Holy Spirit in the apostles' time. It is one of the reasons why the church grew and flourished. It is one reason (the main reason today), why the churches will grow and flourish. As Doug Learned has said: in our Strategic Plan, we have a commitment to *cultivate growing, committed disciples* who follow Jesus. We expect people to come to worship, and to engage in household discipleship or in groups where they can be nurtured and grow in their faith. And then they are empowered to be able to go out and serve—not only in the church, but in the world.

We have also committed into our long-range plan to *build healthy leaders*. The reason why we used the word "healthy" in that text was because we knew that it takes a healthy leader to build a healthy community, to be a partner with the Holy Spirit. Emotionally healthy leadership... leaders with good boundaries...with strong senses of self identity... and have a clear purpose and ability to draw people in and help them feel cared for and loved. And out of that—to become a *healing and reconciling church*, not only within ourselves but in the city, and in the nation, and in the world. When that authentic community is clearly shown in discipleship and leadership through healing and reconciliation, we believe that we will draw all the generations to this church, particularly the younger generations who want authentic community, who enter into service.

I received this e-mail recently from somebody who had been visiting the church over the summer. This is what he says:

Hi. My name is William Berry, and I've been working as an intern for the DC Superior Court this summer. Since NPC was only a block away from my dorm at American University Tenley campus, I decided to try the service there on the first Sunday. I grew up in the Bible Belt (I'm from Mobile, Alabama) and I go to school at the Presbyterian College in South Carolina, where being a Christian sort of was the 'in thing' to do. I never realized how much I took my faith for granted, because it was never tested. That was not the case here in DC. I found myself a stark minority amongst my fellow students, who were very vocal in their confusion with the way that I am. Church now existed not as a continuance of the social situation surrounding my life, but as a refuge from it. Long story short, the services here at

NPC are one of the highlights of the summer for me. I can truly say I've never felt such a close relationship with Christ as I do now. I believe nothing can truly be accepted until it has been tested. DC provided that testing for me, and the NPC worship services helped me realize the importance of my faith. So, with deeply heartfelt honesty, I thank you for these experiences. I will miss NPC and hope it continues to shine brightly to the world around.

That is impact. He will not be the same person, and it is because this church is a striking contrast to his experience in the secular culture of Washington, DC.

We want this congregation to be a place of hospitality and invitation. We are forming a new kind of hospitality team where people will be more carefully trained to be a welcoming presence in relationship. We will do a better job of integrating information and relationships when people come and visit. This is a church where we intend for this table to be the place where we take care of our differences, our ambivalences and our frustrations; so that when we go out and participate in other tables, they will be places of gladness and smoothness.

Do not forget that, on that night when Jesus was betrayed, Judas was at the table with him. Peter was there denying that he would deny Jesus. The disciples were wrestling with whether they will stay with him or desert him; and they did desert him. They were all struggling with who was the greatest. They were all in it for themselves. If you've come today and are struggling with the pain of your own life... or the pain of the church's life... or the pain of relationships...or your work life...this is the time to bring it to the table and to let it go in the presence of Jesus. Because there is a table of joy that is waiting for you; and that table of joy will be released by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we repent and turn from that negative pattern of life, and receive the gift of community where Jesus gives us joy and generosity. At the Communion table today, then, let us meet the suffering Jesus who died for us. Let us receive his body and his blood. Let us confess our sin and let it go. Let us repent of what divides us. Let us admit the things that confuse us. Let us go from the table of grief to the table of joy.

A young person was telling me just recently that he and his girlfriend decided to take a side trip to Anacostia on a Sunday afternoon. They had never been there, and they didn't know what it was like. They found themselves at the park by the river in Anacostia and discovered that there were hundreds of African American families in the park having picnics, and they were the only white people around. They suddenly became a little uneasy and began to have looks of "Why are you here?" They decided that they would sit down and play with the children who were having fun together; and they began to have some fun with the kids. When the parents saw how they played with their children, how they had joy in that moment with the kids, the parents invited them to come and sit with them at the picnic table – a sign of how the joy of Jesus Christ will go with us from here and take us in the places of service. For we enter into the joy of the banquet of God wherever God takes us.

Let us pray, Lord Jesus Christ, may you now lead us to go to those places to represent you, because we have met you at this table today. We ask that you would be the joy of our hearts; that we would taste you as the Living Bread; that we would feast upon you at this moment; that we would drink fully of you because our souls are thirsty for you; that you would create among us a new community in the power of the Holy Spirit— a community of grace, love and joy. It is in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit that we pray. Amen.