

It is an uprising—this movement known as The Way, this embryonic beginnings of what would become the Christian religion. We've talked about the beginnings of the uprising with the resurrection of Jesus; the uprising of fellowship, as the disciples gathered; the uprising of discipleship, as the disciples and followers persisted in their faith and in their work for the kingdom. Today we turn to the uprising of worship. Seems appropriate to pray:

We continue our post resurrection story and pick up about a year from where we left off last week, about a year after the resurrection. The disciples, along with the many who found faith after the resurrection, gathered together regularly. Most recognized that it was their time to be busy, sharing their faith, sharing Jesus. While some were waiting for Jesus to reappear, others were "convinced that what matters is not for Christ to appear *to us*, but for Christ to appear *in us*, and *through us*." These early Christians knew that Jesus called them "to be his hands, his feet, his face, his smile, his voice . . . his embodiment on Earth."

And they gathered together to live out this calling. They called their gatherings *ecclesia*, a Roman word that referred to a gathering much like town hall meeting, or perhaps even a council meeting, gathering to discuss the affairs of the empire. But within the early church, these gatherings related to God's empire, or more commonly called, God's kingdom.

When the Roman *ecclesia* met, those meetings included worship of the emperor and the Roman gods, the early Christian *ecclesia* also gathered to worship—to worship God. And they gathered anywhere—in the temple for temple worship and study. In homes, where they gathered for meals and worship, outdoors or in public buildings—almost anywhere was a perfect place to gather and to worship. Eventually those early followers, the beginnings of organized Christianity, would settle on Sunday as the day of worship—in honor of the day Jesus was resurrected—initially they met virtually any day, and some perhaps even every day as some of them even took to living together in common.

In confirmation class, our young people learned about worship last week, about the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, about the parts of our worship service and they are going to get to plan the worship service in which they will be confirmed and other new members will be accepted into the church. While there are patterns that can be and often are followed, there are few hard and fast rules about how worship is organized, in large part because worship is the work of the Spirit.

But there are generally common elements, and that began even in the earliest days of the church when the disciples and other followers would meet in *ecclesia*.

In addition to sharing in worship through song, which people have done since the beginning of time, there were four main elements of that early worship—of the worship for the church in Acts:

1. Teaching—hearing the scriptures read and explained.
2. Sharing—sharing stories of God at work in their lives, sharing concerns, and sharing gifts.
3. Communion—breaking bread together and remembering just as Jesus taught them to do.
4. Prayer—lifting voices and thought to God, praying together as community.

Those main elements should not seem strange to us, after all our worship even today contains those same elements, even if the specifics look a little different.

Teaching for example: That is what I'm doing right now, of course, teaching about the scripture and how it applies in our lives today. In our reading today from Colossians, we heard: <sup>16</sup>“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.” The word of Christ dwells in us as we study the scripture and how it applies to us, even today.

There were two primary ways the early church did that. They would receive the word from the disciples, at this point known as apostles. The apostles would take the scripture, which, of course, is what we would call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible today, the New Testament having not yet been written, and much as Jesus did on the road to Emmaus, they would explain how the ancient scriptures prepared them for Jesus to come, and how God had been working for their salvation all along. They would teach from the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—and also from the prophets, with their message of justice and caring for widows, orphans and all in need.

Even in those days, the preachers and those who led the church would move on, traveling from community to community as they were led by God and the Spirit so that the needs of the entire church, not just one particular community, could be met. When there was no one to teach in person, letters would be read. Some of those letters survive in our scriptures, and are what we call the epistles, which means letter. They including Colossians, which we read today.

In addition to hearing from the apostles or those with the gift and calling to preach, those early Christians gathered to hear from each other. To share their concerns, to share their stories of the amazing things God was doing.

Today we call that witnessing. They would build each other up and build up their ministry by sharing stories of their own experiences and the good work God was doing in their lives. We do that too, sharing our prayer concern and our prayers answered, and in mission moments. Like when Alice Moran shared with

us the good thing God is doing through her, and I would even say with and to her, as she helps children learn to read.

Her work at our partner school, Keller Elementary, touches the lives of the children, reaches out to the people in our neighborhood and in that work, God is also touching Alice's life. That is something we celebrate! Something we can celebrate together!

The early church also shared their gifts and their resources. Acts speaks of how the early Christians would sell their belongings and share the proceeds so that no one was left in need. What is certainly true today, was true then. There are, within any congregation, sufficient resources to meet the needs of the ministry and the people the congregation minister to—if only we trust God and give those resources to God for the ministry. And that is what the early church did, taking seriously Jesus' admonition to lay up treasure in heaven, not on earth, and that holding on to wealth, making wealth your focus made it harder, indeed almost impossible to enter the kingdom of heaven.

And so they shared what they had with each other, and they were able to meet all their needs.

There is an old pastor's joke: I have good news and bad news. The good news is we have more than enough money for our ministry, ample money to do all that God is calling us to do. The bad news is that it's still in your pockets.

And so the early church met the needs of ministry, and each other, by sharing what they had and collecting an offering to support the work of Jesus.

Of course, the focus of their worship was not just sharing themselves and their gifts, but sharing Jesus in the breaking of bread, the Lord's Table.

They would celebrate communion when they gathered, breaking bread and remembering Jesus, just as he told them to do.

If we look at communion the way they did, the way early Christians did, we would see something different. We in the United Methodist Church are used to hearing that this is an open table, the Jesus welcomes everyone here. For many it seems perfectly normal and natural to us. But that was not true for the people who gathered in those early days of Christianity.

Divisions were normal, being separated by class and ethnicity was normal. But Holy Communion, sharing a table together, that was a radical change.

Everywhere in their society they experienced divisions, divisions between rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Greek, city-born and country-born, and so on. But at the Lord's Table, when they gathered as a community, as ecclesia, and worshipped, just as it was when Jesus shared a table with sinners and outcasts, they were one, all loved, all welcome as equals.

They would greet each other, even a high-born person would greet a slave as equals, sharing a holy kiss. There they learned new ways of honoring and relating to each other as equals in God's eyes, no matter how society saw them. And they would remember.

Remember how Jesus gave himself up, "for us" and "for our sins," words of great meaning and importance. They would remember how Jesus forgave, even those who crucified him, and how Jesus called on them to be known by their love of each other and by their unity.

After the wonder of Pentecost, when thousands were added to the numbers of those who believed, the true miracle was that their numbers continued to grow, as their uprising, this uprising of peace and of fellowship and discipleship, flourished in worship.

"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. 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." (Acts 2:43-47)

Brian McLaren writes this, from the perspective of one of those early Christians: "when we gather, the Holy Spirit gives each of us different gifts to be used for the common good. Someone may be gifted to teach or to lead. Some may be moved to write and sing a song. Someone may be given an inspired word of comfort or encouragement or warning for our ecclesia. . . . The same Spirit who gives the gifts is teaching us to be guided by love in all we say and do, for love matters most for us. It is even greater than faith and hope!

". . . In the face of Christ we have come to see the glory of God, the love of God, the wisdom of God, the goodness of God, the power of God, the kindness of God . . . the fullness of God. In light of that vision of God in Christ, how can we not worship?"<sup>1</sup>

Just as that early church gathered to worship, so we gather. And just as that early church sought and following the lead of the Holy Spirit, with the apostles and teachers moving from ecclesia to ecclesia as there was need for their knowledge or their particular gifts, so that for a time Paul was with Corinth, but he would, at some point move on to Ephesus and eventually to Rome, so we in The United Methodist Church, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and through the work of our Bishop and the Cabinet, we trust that there comes a time when

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<sup>1</sup> McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 185.

a new pastor, a new leader, will bring different gifts and graces and help each ecclesia, each congregation, in the mission God has placed before it.