

Keeping the church on course.
(Numbers 11.16-17, 28-29; Acts 2.42-47; Mark 10.35-45)

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What makes a church a church? Is it a building with a cross? Is it a group of people gathered together on a Sunday morning? Is it preaching and hymns? Is it Eucharist? Is it coffee after the service? Is it two wardens under the Bishop's authority? All of the above are things that we do, but do they make us who we are?

In Acts 2.42, Luke tells us that there are four things that made the early community of followers of Jesus who they were, something unique that would eventually come to be called a "church". He tells us that those four things are adherence to (1) the apostles' teaching, (2) commonality, (3) breaking of bread, and (4) prayer. I would suggest to you furthermore that these are not just the four characteristics of the community that Luke was writing about but that they are the four cardinal points of the compass for the community of Christ that we call "church" throughout the world and throughout all generations. These are the four coordinates that help those with leadership to keep the church on course. What better point of reflection, then, for a service of induction of a shepherd of the people of these parish than the words of Luke in Acts 2.42 ("And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.").

Now, I could flesh these four compass points out in pretty well any way that I wanted, so broad are they. Think of the possibilities: what does "commonality" mean, or "breaking of bread"? What about "prayer"? What about "apostles' teaching"? Surely all of us have pretty clear ideas about what each of these means according to our experiences and our learning. But, fortunately, we don't have to flesh them out ourselves: Luke does it for us in the very next verses of his text: 2.43-47. So, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, I would like to look with you at what each of these compass points signifies.

Let's start with the SECOND cardinal point, East on our compass: commonality (Acts 2.44-45: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need."). Commonality means sharing (the Greek word is *koinonia*). Now, at some points in history, readers of Acts have thought that what Luke was describing in the early church was "primitive communism". But, we have come to think that that is not so. Rather, what it appears that Luke is doing is describing how the early community of followers of Jesus was like a family. In the first century, sharing all things in common, having everything in common with no claim to something for one's self, lending without expecting any repayment, only happened in a family. Everyone else was treated as a threat or someone from whom something could be gained. Only family members were treated as equals, and one shared freely. It was, in fact, what every family in Israel knew. Furthermore, it was what Israel, as an ethnically constituted tribe, claimed to be: the family of Jacob, also called Israel.

What happened with Jesus, and Luke tells us it extended to the early church, was that Jesus began to call those around him his family. He began to consider all of those who were his followers his "brothers" and his "sisters", even his "mother"! This must have been striking. But, what was even more striking were the people that Jesus included in his family: the sick (he calls the woman with the hemorrhage "daughter!"), tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, as well as the odd "good person". What a family!

It is this family that gathers in the upper room before Pentecost and then, at Pentecost, is driven out into the streets. It is this family that is driven out into Judaea and Samaria, and eventually to the ends of the earth, inviting others to join them at the family table.

Ah, but here there begins to be a problem. It is one thing for these early outcast, misfit Jews to gather together and call themselves a family, because, after all, they are still family, the family of Jacob, also known as Israel. They are just family members that have strayed, that's all, like the prodigal son. They can come back, and in Jesus, they do. But, what happens when those who hitherto have not been family members want to enter and take their place at the family table: Samaritans! Gentiles! As we know from the later texts of the New Testament, it is precisely here that the church has to make a decision about the course that it will follow: will it include those who want to be part of the family of Jesus, or will it exclude them and cling to fleshly, familial identities of the past?

Is it not what has happened when British Christians have sought to sit at table in Irish churches, and vice versa? When Kosovar Christians have sought to sit at table in Serb churches? When Hutu Christians have sought to become part of the family in a Tutsi church? When Tamil Christians have sought to be part of the family in an Indian church, Black Christians in a white church, or, French Christians in anglophone churches? How much will we freely share as one family, one household, in Jesus? Or will we ask them to pay for the right to become part of our community... oh, perhaps not in monetary exchange, but in accountability, in owning up to the past, in revenge, etc. etc.

No, according to Luke, one of the cardinal points of the church is to be its ability to allow all to claim this place as their home, for everyone in the family, to have a place at the family table to all who call on the Lord Jesus, no matter how different they are from us in their earthly, familial identities. In Christ, there is but one family, and that family sits at table together, not apart.

And that brings us to our THIRD, cardinal point, south: the church is characterized by breaking bread. Now, we might have an idea as to what that means. But, Luke tells us: it means simply people who eat together (Acts 2.46: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts."). The early church was on course when the members of the family ate together in their homes.

Where a family is most characteristically a family is at the meal table. It is the place where family stories are told, where the day's activities are gone over. It is also the place where, if there are problems, they surface as family members sit around the table, looking at each other, having to be in each other's presence.

Anyone who is part of a family knows that this is the case. If my kids or my wife or I have been having a good day, we share, we talk, we laugh, we eat with glad hearts. If we have been having a bad day, we can hide out in our corner of the house until supper time. Then, forced to sit down together, it all comes out. And if anyone at table has something against another at table, that, too, will come out. I once lived in a house with 15 other Christian men. Meal times were the times of greatest joy and of greatest trial. Parties were great. But, if there was tension, meal times were the worst. In fact, in some cases, people were so upset with each other that they would simply eat out so as not to have sit down and face the other across the table. I'm sure that that happens in all of our families: meal times are the times when you really know how things are going in our families.

Often we don't have that problem in churches. That may lead us to conclude that our families are doing pretty well. But, that is not necessarily so, for our "Christian meal times" have become so perfunctory, so institutional, so ritualized, that there's no way to gauge how things are going. They are simply not meals but gatherings. There's no chance to look anyone in the eye, either to rejoice or to complain.

Think of our Eucharists: they are supposed to be one bread, one cup, one body, together. The perfect picture of a family. We even insist in our BAS service that there is a place at the family table for those who have erred and strayed. But, our Eucharist can hardly be described as a family meal together. That means that we have neither the joys nor the trials of family meals.

And that's too bad. For, if the church is a family, and if we do share in a common meal together, then we need more than a picture of what a family is supposed to be, a picture of a family meal in the form of the Eucharist. We need the real thing, that toward which the picture points. What we need to be able to do is to sit down together as a family, share our daily joys together, work through problems that arise -- sometimes over the table --, knowing that there is always a place at the table for any family member. And, we must know that it takes time, lots of time, many meals together, if there are problems.

That is probably not going to take place in a location that we have now come to set aside for other purposes than family gatherings, the church building. It is probably going to happen in homes, for that is where we "get real" with each other. It is true for us, and it was true for Luke. For Luke, the apocalyptic inbreaking of the Kingdom that many were waiting to happen WAS happening. It was happening around the table, in homes all around the Mediterranean basin. And today it continues to happen. In Nigeria and Rwanda, in East Timor and Sri Lanka, in Britain and Ireland, in Westmount and Point St. Charles, the presence of God, which is what the Kingdom of God is, happens as people sit down at table together and eat together in Jesus' name. The church is on course when people who call Christ Lord meet together as a family, sharing what they have as a family, including the meal around the table in homes all around the parish.

The FOURTH compass point, West, as a characteristic of what the church is is that it is a people who pray. Now, you and I probably have a pretty good idea of what prayer is. Normally, you and I probably think of prayer as what it often is in our Anglican "prayers of the people": intercession. We pour forth names and situations of people in need. We are getting better at it

from when I first remember it being allowed. But, strikingly, when it comes time to give thanks to God for the blessings of this life, or to praise God, there is a deafening silence. Usually at that point the one leading the prayers rushes out so as not to make the silence too uncomfortable. It is as if prayer stopped at that point and we were into something else.

Apparently, the early church of Luke's day saw that what made the church what it was was that its prayer was characterized by what we leave silent. For Luke fleshes out the fourth cardinal point of the church's compass in this way: 2.46-47: And day by day, ...praising God and having favor with all the people." For Luke, prayer IS praise first of all, not petition. For us, it appears to be just the opposite.

What is the reason for this reversal? Well, perhaps we are too modest to mention that new job that just got, the marriage, the new car. Perhaps that smacks too much of materialism and capitalism or we just don't want to boast. Or perhaps we think that these are not blessings of God, but things that we have bought with our salary, or our inheritance, or our good fortune in finding just the right partner, or the right situation, or the right stock market tip. Or again, perhaps we are unaware of the blessings of God. Do we really know what God is doing in the lives of others, the healings, the reconciliations... What about in other countries? Do we really know what God is doing to create peace among peoples, to bind up wounds, to heal epidemics? Or, finally, perhaps God hasn't acted at all. Perhaps there are no blessings or reasons to praise God. Perhaps it's all up to us. Perhaps we don't praise God because we really don't believe that there is a God, though, in case of need, we are ready to recur to that old belief that God might be there to get us or someone we know out of a jam. Whatever the case, praise is noticeably lacking in our prayer.

Not so for the community that Luke describes. True, throughout Acts, there are some occasions of petition, but what characterizes the church is praise: when Peter recounts God's gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentile Cornelius and his family, when the Samaritans receive the word, even when Peter and John are flogged for their faith. Praise is the constant refrain of the church in Acts because it is the constant refrain of a family that is rejoicing -- in spite of the difficulties -- to be together and to grow as a family by including others, the different.

I wonder if praise is missing in our churches because we have become those who exclude not only new family members but even those who were once with us? I wonder if praise isn't listed last in the list of the church's characteristics not because it's the least of them all but because it is the end result of all the above: sharing family life together, Jew and Gentile, free and slave, male and female. When that happens, is it possible that prayer as praise will simply be natural? And, where it doesn't happen, where homogeneity takes over and our mission spirit flags, is it possible that praise recedes and we begin to sound more like beggars than like praisers?

But, there is one direction on our compass that is still missing from this list, the FIRST, true North, the one that makes the others make sense. It is the most obvious one of all: what characterizes the church as church is "apostolic teaching".

Ah, you say, this I grasp: what makes the church is that it follows the teaching of the apostles. But, what really is that? At the point in time at which Luke is writing, there are no creeds. There are no bishops. There are no professors of theology. There is not even a New Testament at the time that Luke is writing. So, what is the apostolic teaching that characterizes the early church?

To make an answer even MORE difficult we should note that Luke fleshes out this cardinal point of the church's characteristics, along with the other 3, in the subsequent verses. But, what he says there has left commentators so puzzled as to miss what he says. For, he tells us, if we follow the pattern we have discerned in these verses, what apostolic teaching is: "signs and wonders" done by those who are witnesses to Jesus, that is, by the apostles (2.43: "many wonders and signs were done through the apostles").

Now, you and I usually think of teaching as "head-knowledge", oral communication addressed to our brains. That, at least, is what teaching has come to mean, and often in the church it is so: the sermon is often one head speaking to other heads. But, apostolic teaching, while it is communicated orally, is not simply "head-knowledge" about Jesus. It is unmistakable, unimpeachable evidence that comes with the unrivaled power of the Holy Spirit that cannot be refuted. What Luke thinks of as apostolic teaching is miracles, such as healing, deliverance from prison, miraculous events on roads, that provide irrefutable evidence of power, and that gives the faithful witness an opportunity to speak about where the power comes from, namely, Jesus, Lord and Saviour. It is a powerful, irrefutable witness to Jesus.

What goes today by the term teaching in our churches, even apostolic teaching, is a very weak substitute indeed. It is often at best helpful moral instruction or theological speculation. More often, however, it is at its worst unhelpful opinions of those who cannot see beyond the horizon of their own world and, not knowing better, cannot keep their mouths shut. What today goes by the term apostolic teaching is often Christianized platitudes that arise from a ruling class, be it bourgeoisie or proletariat, and which is simply a Christian veneer over political dictates that have not been first brought under the Lordship of God. It is this teaching that has led to so many of our young people leaving the church and saying: "what you are offering me is no different from what the world is saying. Why should I spend a valuable free Sunday hearing you say what I already know the world is saying?" What our young people are crying out for is true, apostolic teaching, a teaching with a difference, teaching not as the scribes do, but with authority, the authority of Jesus.

This is the true north of the church. This is what keeps the church on course. This is what keeps a gathering family from simply becoming a group of friends who share everything, who eat together, who praise. This is what keeps that family focused on Jesus.

All four, cardinal points need to be kept in play. And, where the distinguishing marks of the Church are evident, where they are the compass points by which the church orients itself, there the church will experience what Luke concludes by noting is the fruit of its labours. For where there is oneness in Christ that shows us to be and to function like a family, in good and in bad times, where there is a willingness to bring all our good and bad times to the meal table and over time (and a good wine) to work them through, where the family is characterized not by faint hope clauses and begging but by the sure and confident praise of God on our lips all the time, and where the family is grounded on the unimpeachable evidence that points us and others to the power of Jesus' name, there the church will experience the Lord adding to their number daily those who are being saved (Acts 2.47). May that be the experience of this church, gathered here in Westmount, in the name of Jesus.