

Sunday Morning Meditation

May 3, 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

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How are we a People when we Cannot Gather?

Scripture Passage – [Acts 2: 42-47](#)

My grandma Dey was an amazing woman. She had a very keen mind and a witty sense of humor. She spent the first 40 years of her life as a missionary in Lebanon, and returned home only after she broke her back. She adopted my father and his siblings, after they became orphaned. She had saved all her money from serving as a missionary, and bought 2000 acres of prime mountain real estate. She could not not be involved in ministry, and since the church would not let her pastor, she decided to open a camp for inner city children living in Denver, CO.

After purchasing the land, she then hired a contractor and built three cabins; one a dormitory for young girls, one a dormitory for young boys, and one was where she would live and meals would be prepared and served. As part of the main cabin she built an amphitheater where she would teach about Jesus' love to the campers.

Every summer my family would spend July at Grandma's cabins. Every day she would have a long list of chores for my siblings and me. Once we finished to her satisfaction, we were free to either explore the mountains or join the campers in their activities. Gregory and I usually joined the campers, our older siblings went horseback riding or exploring. My grandmother always said she had two loves: ministry and reading.

One summer when I was in middle school, we went to Grandma's for July. It was just Gregory and I (my older siblings had aged out of the "summer labor program") and there were no campers that year. Grandma was retiring. The state of Colorado had raised her taxes through the roof and she could no longer afford to operate the camp. She was turning the land over to the Federal Government as a "Public Land Trust". The spring

before we arrived, Grandma had undergone eye surgery! Grandma had not been able to read for almost three months. She had audio books on the old cassette tape, but it was not the same she said as reading the pages with her eyes, feeling the pages in her fingers, and smelling paper. But now, she could read with her own eyes and that was pretty much all she wanted to do. When she spoke to Gregory and me, it was all about how much she had missed reading and how much she was now enjoying reading. She sat in her favorite chair and just poured herself into a stack of books that sat next to her. As for Gregory and me, well we were quite pleased with this arrangement. No chore lists, no campers to clean up after, just a month of exploring the mountains, fishing, and horseback riding. It was a great summer!

Acts 2:42-47 is one of my favorite passages. Whether we should interpret this passage from an idealist perspective or not is irrelevant to me. This passage gives an absolutely incredible image of the early church as a people who shared in an intentional, rich, robust community. They devoted themselves to the study of the scriptures, they gathered together in one another's homes daily, they broke bread and prayed together. They sold possessions and land to support one another. The depth of their love for one another was so deep and broad, that it is hard for any church since to not pale in comparison to their practices!

But my interest this morning is not to compare and contrast the quality of our community with the quality of community they experienced back in the day. My intention is not to analyze their practices over and against our practices. Rather, to just simply wonder, "How are we a people when we cannot gather?"

When you take even a surface level look at their fellowship practices, they were able to gather. They were able to sit together in a room and worship, study the apostles' teaching, pray, and break bread together. They were able to be in the direct, physical, immediate presence of one another. They were able to congregate together, which is where the word congregation comes from. A congregation is a coming together of people. Regardless of whether or not our worship, our fellowship, our mission, our disciplines are as deep as their practices, we cannot gather or congregate with one another, and that feels so wrong to me.

Now we have been able to gather in a virtual manner. And let me just say, I am so thankful for our Zoom gatherings. They have been far more meaningful than I ever could have imagined. I am so thankful for Mackenzie and Don who do so much to make these gatherings a reality. But just as diabetic chocolate is not the same as real chocolate, our Zoom gatherings are not the same as being in one another's presence for worship. And just as diabetic chocolate would only increase my desire for real chocolate, Zoom has satisfied some longings for fellowship and worship to be sure, but has also increased my desire for something other than virtual fellowship and worship.

Perhaps how Zoom has increased my desire for "real" fellowship and worship, is one of the hidden benefits of our virtual worship and fellowship. Perhaps, just as audio books increased my grandma's desire for reading with her own eyes, Zoom is serving the purpose of both keeping us connected, while also increasing our desire for something much richer than a virtual meeting.

I long to worship and sing together (and that is saying something considering I can't even sing). I long to have the worship leader invite us to stand and greet one another, and then dare to bring us back to order in a timely manner! I long to share in a fellowship meal at church, to go kayaking or hiking with an activity group, to sit at Don and Laurie's and talk about a chapter in some book. I long to gather at the river or anywhere for that matter! I long for a worship or fellowship experience that has less to do with technology and a computer screen, and more to do with direct, physical presence.

And so, for now, we do what we can do. We support one another in the only way that we can; by rightly respecting physical distancing. We can continue to virtually gather for worship on Zoom, we can continue write and read daily reflections from our own brothers and sisters (what a great example of studying the apostles' teachings this has been), we can continue to send encouraging emails to one another and the occasional playful text, we can continue to tell stories of our faith and life... all of these things, and many others, we can continue to do while respecting the need for physical distancing. And while we are doing all those things, we do build community, while also, strangely, developing a greater and more intense desire to gather again in a non-virtual manner.

So perhaps distance does make the heart grow fonder. So join me in looking forward to the time when like the early church, we can gather together and break bread, study the apostles' teaching, pray, and simply enjoy one another's presence.