

## SHARING IN GOD'S FAMILY

*Acts 2:41-47*

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I grew up with several siblings. If you did also, then you know about the experience of opening presents. Sometimes you receive a gift, and, suddenly, all eyes are on you. My brother is several years older than I am. His birthday is in December, mine in July. Like most little brothers, I looked to him to even know what I should want. We enjoyed most of the same things, but the reality is that he suddenly had the chance to get presents twice a year!

It can be a challenge for kids, especially siblings, to watch others receive gifts. My children experience the same problem. That's why we were quick to adopt a rule we borrowed from a friend. So far, it's working for us. In our house, it's "yours for the first day." Any gift you're given from someone (birthdays, Christmas, something you bring home from school, etc.), is *yours for the first day*. No one can demand you share it, take it, or need a turn. All day. You get to decide what happens with it.

After that, after the first day, we share. Our family expects you to share. It has served us well so far. It addresses the wanting eyes of siblings the second one gets something new, and it lets us move on to sharing sooner rather than later.

The New Testament is replete with metaphors for the church: a building, a house, a temple, a marriage, a bride, a body. The church we meet in Acts 2 has begun to live within the most pervasive and powerful image for the church in Scripture: ***a family***.

When you are a Christian, of course, you are part of a family: God's family. All of us, regardless of how we arrived to faith in Christ, are "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household," as Paul says in Ephesians 2:19. You and I have been adopted into God's family and have become God's children (Romans 8:16). Jesus had established his new group as a family, a surrogate kinship that gets the primary allegiance from all who follow him. "Whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35).

***It turns out that sharing is a part of being in God's family, too.***

Our text this morning from Acts 2 comes as a first glimpse, a summary look, at the interior life of the early church. Luke is conveying to his friend Theophilus, and generations of future readers, the true character of the early church when it was at its best. These summaries happen a few times in Acts. They serve as links or bridges between different sections of the narrative, breaks in the action to tell us about what's happening among the new characters in the God's story. These give us incredible insight into the world of the first followers of Jesus.

The chapter begins with the new generation being baptized in the Holy Spirit early in the morning. The Spirit moves into their hearts and energizes them in worship and witness. The church of Jesus Christ is taking its place in history.

Here, Peter's monumental sermon has come to a close. It was a call for repentance, faith, and baptism. The book of Acts has been one miracle after another, and the powerful story just keeps moving. The Spirit-empowered movement of God results in the response of 3,000 that day, growing the number among them from 120 to 3,120. That in itself is an impressive feat; it would be miraculous on its own. In the witness of these apostles, Jesus acquires more followers in one day than in the whole of his public ministry. It's no wonder that John records Jesus telling these disciples that, as a result of returning to the Father, they would perform greater works than they had ever seen him do (John 14:12).<sup>i</sup>

However, the real miracle of the church isn't in the number. The real miracle is in what happens next. Luke paints the picture of a newly formed family that begins to embody the gospel in ways they'd never known before. One of the first things that happened as the Church was born that first Pentecost is that they started *sharing* everything they had. They shared what they knew in their hearts. They shared what they held in their hands, and they shared what they had in their homes.

We can learn so much about the calling and character of the Church through these verses. They give us some guidelines and parameters about what it meant to be a part of God's family, and, while other miracles like tongues or numbers catch the eye, there may be no greater miracle and no more challenging word for us than this one miracle of God's family: *they shared*.<sup>ii</sup>

*"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles."* Acts 2:42-43

### **IN GOD'S FAMILY, WE SHARE WHAT'S IN OUR HEARTS.**

These people had attached themselves to what the apostles had to say about the prophets and the psalms and how they pointed to Jesus. They had devoted themselves to this core teaching. It was the proclamation of the eyewitness accounts of what would become our gospels. Like them, we are a family devoted to the teaching given to us from God by way of those who saw the Lord Jesus Christ. The apostles' teaching remains at the center of our faith and our understanding of what it means to be a part of God's people.

Beyond the teaching, we're also told they adhered to a fellowship in the form of breaking of bread and prayer. One of the ways that the New Testament church experienced its newly-formed family was in an emotional attachment, a sense of closeness and familiarity that the Holy Spirit weaves into the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ who share time together, life together, and ministry together.

Paul apparently felt especially close to those in his Macedonian congregations. He would write to them in letters like Philippians 4, saying, *“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.”* He writes with a deep spiritual connection that is more than just an emotional affinity. He cares deeply for the spiritual wellbeing of his brothers and sisters.

In our congregation, the best way to become attached/devoted to teaching and fellowship is to connect with a weekly Bible study group. That’s why the hour between our worship services is devoted to Bible study in the context of community, and many of you serve in some way to make that possible for others. There are also other places and times to connect, like our midweek programs and other gatherings. We believe that we all need good teaching, but church is not ultimately a place to go to receive good content. It is a community of believers gathered in Jesus’ name who were created to share what’s in our hearts.

*D. L. Moody was visiting a prominent Chicago citizen when the idea of church membership and involvement came up. “I believe I can be just as good a Christian outside the church as I can be inside it,” the man said. Moody said nothing. Instead, he moved to the fireplace, blazing against the winter outside, removed one burning coal, and placed it on the hearth. The two men sat together and watched the ember die out. “I see,” the other man said.<sup>iii</sup>*

Church is not just a place to get good teaching or content. It is not merely a stop for a therapeutic help or felt needs to be met. It is a burning flame of the movement of God in the world that sustains the life of God’s people. When the two reflected on their encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus they said, *“Were not our hearts burning within us?”*

Some are struggling to find your way in God’s family because you have yet to join others with an open heart. Our church joins Christ in calling you to know and live the gospel here in the community it creates by sharing what’s in your heart. That alone would be powerful, but we share more than just our hearts.

### **IN GOD’S FAMILY, WE SHARE WHAT’S IN OUR HANDS.**

*“And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.” Acts 2:44-45*

Put simple, we share our “stuff.” In a world of closed fists, we carry the blessings of God with open hands. The context for this basic Christian value, the sharing of material resources, extends far beyond Acts 2. In describing the life of sacrifice, 1 John says, *“And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?”* (1 John 3:16-17)

The true test of our faith is how it is expressed in love and compassion to the most beat up and broken people in this world. It's not that our works earn our salvation, but we're told they certainly demonstrate our salvation. While this kind of generosity cannot be forced and cannot be legislated, the first followers of Jesus remind us that it *can* be provoked by *love*.

It happens every day in this church. Men and women give to ensure that needs are met in ways no one will ever see. It happens by intentional planning so that ministry can happen all around the world. It happens in less formal ways, too. Faithful people learn of a need around them and ask to meet that need before anyone can even ask.

There is a radical generosity that is born from a love for Christ and a gratitude for his grace that surpasses what our world knows. That's what happened in the early church. They had a new vision of family. They no longer had "rich" and "poor" but only "brother" and "sister."

Author and activist Shane Claiborne tells the story of learning this from a homeless kid in India: *"Every week we would throw a party for the street kids, kids 8-10 years old who were homeless, begging all day to survive. Each Tuesday we would get about 100 of them together and throw a party, play games, eat a big meal. One week, one of the kids I had grown close to told me it was his birthday, so I got him an ice cream.*

*He was so excited he stared at it mesmerized. I have no idea how long it had been since he had eaten ice cream. But what he did next was brilliant. He yelled at all the other kids and told them to come over. He lined them up and gave them all a lick. His instinct was: this is so good I can't keep it for myself. In the end, that's what this whole idea of generosity is all about. Not guilt. It's about the joy of sharing. It's about realizing the good things in life - like ice cream - are too good to keep for ourselves."*<sup>iv</sup>

That's why, in God's family, we share what's in our heart and what's in our hands. We also share what's in our homes.

*"Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."* Acts 2:46-47

## **IN GOD'S FAMILY, WE SHARE WHAT'S IN OUR HOMES.**

For most cultures in history, "family" has included more than just a nuclear family living together in the same residence. Our American generations are unique in this way. Most have had a much broader sense of connection and greater economic need to care for a network of people. This was certainly true of the families mentioned in Acts 2.

What we believe is that the community of Christ is called and connected together by the presence of God's Spirit in our lives. It is creating in us a new family, a people of God equipped to serve and share with one another. Together, we live out God's life for the world in ways that we would otherwise be unable to do. In God's good design for the church, we receive the gift of a family larger than our own.

Nobody values your household more than this church. From birth to death, this church family goes to great lengths to call and equip you to love and nurture faith in Christ from within your home. Our families are so blessed to be a part of that together. However, your family is not your church. In submitting ourselves to the lordship of Jesus we open our lives up to one another and receive from God the blessing of larger family. We share the burdens and blessings of life that one family, in isolation, was never meant to bear alone.

When we open our homes to Christ, we open our lives to serving and caring for needs that far exceed our own little properties or relatives. When we begin to share the gift of what God has given us in our homes as if it belongs to Him and not to ourselves, there is no end to the transforming work he can do. The early church found themselves so moved by the life of the Spirit in their midst that homes were opened, needs were met, and lives were transformed. This new surrogate family had suddenly grown to do things in Jesus' name that, separately, were impossible.

We believe the same is still true today. Even now, our church is preparing to serve and share homes in new ways. For years, our church's Fostering Hope ministry has been embodying this truth. Today, we believe that we can do even more. Already this year, adults are preparing to be trained in supportive care to better surround parents in our church who might consider foster care.

We have plans to host on our campus the needed trainings that will help you get certified to welcome children into your own home. We believe that, in a congregation this size, we can do more to meet the foster care needs of children in our community because, in God's family, we share what's in our homes.

Jason Johnson is a Christian speaker and writer who found out firsthand how powerful it can be to open a home to the possibilities of God. The Johnsons had three biological daughters. In the midst of opening their home to the realities of foster care, the Johnsons had initially been concerned about the effects this would have on their girls. They quickly learned that when we open our lives to the power and love of God, some amazing fruit can grow as well.

Jason tells the story of how there would be times when they'd walk in and find all the baby dolls and the paraphernalia pulled out into the living room and ask the girls, "What are you doing?" They would answer, saying, "We're taking care of babies that don't have mommies and daddies."

Not long after that, the family was in the process of building a home. The moment had come to fill in the driveway cement, and their daughters, three biological and one adopted, were all there. Foster care had become normal to them. It was one of those chances to set prints down in the wet cement, leaving a mark that you look to as a family for years to come. But one of his little girls got really concerned.

“When the cement dries, how are we going to get any new future-sisters’ handprints?”<sup>v</sup>

She had learned that in, God’s family, we share what’s in our hearts. We share what’s in our hands. And we share what’s in our homes.

The truth is, none of it is yours, not even for the first day.

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<sup>i</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (New International Commentary on the New Testament), 72-73.

<sup>ii</sup> Shane Claiborne, “On Scripture: A Radical Ethic on Love (Acts 2:42-37),” *day1.org* (1 May 2017)

<sup>iii</sup> Mark Mitchell, “Don’t Go To Church,” *Preaching Today*

<sup>iv</sup> Claiborne, 1.

<sup>v</sup> Jason Johnson, “Foster Care: How Everyone Can Help,” *Focus on the Family* (10 May 2021)