

Full

a sermon
by Dan Griswold
Trinity Reformed Church
May 7, 2017

Acts 2:42–47

It happens once in a while.
Well, maybe too often.
Sometimes I'm full. And it isn't always a good thing.

Full can be uncomfortable.
Full can be unwanted.
When "full" is really "*too* full," then full is no fun.
When I eat too much, I am full, uncomfortably so.
When my calendar is full, I usually feel stressed.
When my sinuses are full, ... well, you get the idea.

But full isn't always bad. Actually, it's usually good.
When it's the opposite of empty, full is a very good thing.

A full tank.
A full plate.
A full house.
A full heart.
A full life,
 full of love,
 and joy,
 and friends.

Who doesn't want to be full, in those ways? I do. Don't you?
Are you full? Are *we* full?



The Bible passage I just read, it's an important one for me. I just love it. It pulls at my heart and causes my imagination to bubble. Because I see in it, feel in it, such fullness:

of energy,
of enthusiasm,
of passion,
of life,
of love.

This was the church

in those days after the resurrection of Jesus,
in those days after the ascension of Jesus,
in those days after the Holy Spirit had come down upon them
and blessed them
and filled them,
and made them full.

Yes, this was the church. And yet it is a church that, in many ways, looks quite different from the church as we know it: established, institutional, political, cultural, with buildings, and history, and structures, ... and conflict.

We look around us, and here in this church perhaps we see a *lack* of fullness.

Empty seats.
Declining energy.
Regret.
Disappointment.

We yearn for fullness that we used to know, the vital energy we remember from years gone by.

We want to be full.

How were *they* full? How were those early-days Christians full?

This passage is so full: of meaning, of implications, of importance, of depth. Each time I go back to it I see more in it, more that is really there, obscured — perhaps — by differences in language, culture, and perspective.

Sadly, our translation (some of you have heard me complain about it before) doesn't really work here. It's as if the translators (who, I know, are very smart) had forgotten what they were doing midway through, ending up with something that gives us hardly a clue as to how full this passage really is.

Here's what I think is going on in these verses:

After the Apostle Peter had proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ to the astonished people of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, many came to have faith in Jesus and were baptized. About 3,000 people were added to the community of believers that one day, and each day more and more were added, making their number more and more full.

In that amazing time, the activity of these new Christians was focused on four closely related activities, two pairs of them. These were, on the one hand, the teaching of the apostles and fellowship with them, and on the other, communion and prayer.

The apostles really were at the center of it all. For good reason. They had been the ones closest to Jesus, knowing him and his teaching the best. They had been the ones with whom the risen Lord Jesus spent most of his time, from when he came out of the tomb until the point when he departed from them and returned to his Father in heaven. They, more than anyone else, would understand and could tell who Jesus really was ... and is, what Jesus really meant ... and means.

There were others who would try to play that role,

who would try to pass themselves off as authorities about Jesus,
who would pretend to have the true and final word about his being and
meaning,
who would try to convince others that they and they alone could provide
the full story of Jesus.

But it was the *apostles* who from the beginning were the source of the full message of Jesus. No one else could be this but them. And it was decisively formative for the church that they were. Accordingly, those earliest Christian believers, the 3,000, were occupied with the teaching of the apostles and with being in fellowship with them. “They devoted themselves,” we’re told, “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship.”

That’s the first pair of activities.

The other two our passage calls “the breaking of bread and the prayers” ... which doesn’t really convey the fullness of what’s going on here. Because, for many people, “breaking bread” is just another way of talking about eating together. They may mean, and often do, those meals in which not only the body but also the soul is nourished, because the food is the occasion for personal contact to be made and deepened. It’s a great meal, made great because of the nurture of relationships that happens. Even so, what they mean by “breaking bread” is a meal with no particularly religious significance.

But that is not what “breaking bread” means in any other chapter of Acts, nor in the Gospel of Luke, which, as you may know, was written by the same person. Everywhere else in Luke and Acts, the breaking of bread is either

the last supper of Jesus,
or the supper he then commanded us to celebrate until he comes again,
or, in the case of the meal he shared after his resurrection with the two
disciples on the way to Emmaus,
a clear repetition of this holy supper.

It is *always* somehow about communion, and *never* just about chowing down together.

I’ll go even farther, and say that everywhere in the New Testament where this phrase occurs (“breaking bread”), it is *never* about a simple act of eating together, but is either specifically about communion or is meant to remind us about communion.

And so it must be in these verses. These early-days Christians, the 3,000, were occupied with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. And just as much, they were occupied with, devoted to, the practice of prayer. Or, as it says in verse 42, “the prayers.”

Now, that’s kind of a strange phrase. “The prayers.”

Or maybe not strange at all.

The early Christians devoted themselves not just to “prayers” in general, but to *“the* prayers.” This wasn’t “just praying.” They were engaged in something more than haphazard, now-and-then prayers by individual Christians. Instead, these were the *shared* supplications of the gathered faithful, especially in the prayer taught to the apostles by Jesus himself, “the Lord’s Prayer.”

In any event, it’s pretty clear that the 3,000 believers after Pentecost were — frequently, regularly, intentionally — praying together. They *devoted* themselves to *the* prayers. This, along with communion, they did regularly, as a matter of practice and devotion.

Now, of course there were no churches in those days, no houses of worship specifically for the purpose of Christian worship, nothing like what we are blessed with here at 909 Landing Road North. All they had was the temple, and peoples' homes. The activity around the apostles could, and did, take place in the temple, regularly. But those specifically Christian activities of worship, communion, and prayers of and to Jesus: these couldn't very well be conducted in the temple, could they? So it was in the homes of believers that they took place, likewise regularly, as those things to which they devoted themselves.

Now here's the uncomfortable question:

How regularly?

Well, we're told in verse 46 that it is "day by day" they would do these things. That's right. *Daily*, they would do all those things to which they had "devoted" themselves. They would devote themselves:

daily, to the teaching of the Apostles;
daily, to being in fellowship with them;
daily, to joyfully praying the prayers, especially the prayer Jesus had taught them;
and, yes, *daily*, to a joyful celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Yikes! Sounds horrible, doesn't it? *Every day????*

Well, I think that says more about us than about them.

Joking aside, all of this activity, including the celebration of the Lord's Supper, was an expression of their joy, and a manifestation of their unity.

In it they experienced the blessing of the risen Lord Jesus, and felt the fullness of God.

In it they learned of Jesus, and learned how to love each other.

In it they knew and expressed compassion for one another.

Around the good news of Jesus and his holy meal, they overcame their divisions: of wealth, health, gender, ethnicity, and national origin.

Around the good news of Jesus and his holy meal, they lived mercifully toward each other.

Around the good news of Jesus and his holy meal, they learned how to be disciples of Jesus, and how to disciple each other.

Around the good news of Jesus and his holy meal, they saw themselves for who they really were:

the forgiven sinner,
the pardoned rebel,
the settled refugee,
the adopted child of God.

Around the good news of Jesus and his holy meal, they were formed, in attitude and disposition, to be those who

welcomed the stranger,
and loved the enemy,
and lifted up the lowly,
and challenged the mighty.

Around the good news of Jesus and his holy meal, they bore witness to Jesus, and showed the world a different way than the ways of violence, abuse, coercion, and hate.
Around the good news of Jesus and his holy meal, they were made full.
And so are we.



My friends, it is never too soon, nor too late, to be fed and made full.
It is never too soon, nor too late, to sit at the feet of the apostles and learn from their testimony in the Scriptures about the risen and reigning Lord Jesus.
It is never too soon, nor too late, to be formed (and re-formed!) in the ways of following Jesus, and, with his full blessing,

to love the enemy,
and welcome the stranger,
and guide the lost,
and lift up the lowly,
and challenge the powerful.

It is never too soon, nor too late, to display before the world a different way, the way of Jesus,

rejecting violence,
abuse,
coercion,
and hate;

and in these ways to experience, and show to all, that Jesus has made us full.