



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087
408.739.1892 • www.svpc.us • info@svpc.us

From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ Glad and Generous Hearts

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ October 16, 2011

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 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.

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

In our passage we're given a picture of a community of faith that is different from what a lot of people today think of when they hear the word "church". Try a free association with your friends or coworkers and ask them what they think of when they hear the word "church". Some answers will be architectural: church is a big white building with a tall steeple and a cross on top. Some answers will be doctrinal: Churches think they have a lock on truth and that only they are right and everybody else is wrong. And still other answers will be institutional: church is a religious bureaucracy bogged down by committees and only concerned with its own survival. And let's be honest: there's truth in all of those answers.

But the picture of the church that we're given in our New Testament passage today isn't any of these; it isn't architectural because cathedrals did not yet exist and would not be built for generations to come. Nor is this group bogged down in doctrine. Although the fellowship began with the most basic of Christian confessions – Jesus is Lord – it will be centuries yet before any of the great and lasting creeds of the Church would be written. And clearly at this point in

history the church is not yet institutional, though by chapter 6 they do organize a bit to facilitate ministry with the call and ordination of deacons.

No, more than architectural or doctrinal or institutional the early church described in the book of Acts is first and foremost... relational. They only come into being because of a new relationship with God through the risen Christ. And the fellowship grows and thrives on a vital and compassionate relationship with one another. This is what is exciting, engaging and enticing about this fellowship – this is why "day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved": because this is a group of people touched by God and transforming one another's lives. I mean this whole fellowship begins because of the response to Peter's preaching right after Pentecost. And on that day 3000 people responded to Peter's invitation and became members of the church. 3000 people! I thought our class of 36 was big – imagine the parking problems they must've had!

Suddenly a disparate previously unrelated people have become a vital and vigorous church; but... this is a decidedly un-religious church. Religion is way different than a vital relationship with God and a compassionate relationship with others. And even though we're part of what was at least once called a "main-line denomination" Sunnyvale Presbyterian is not a religious church. In fact, we don't believe in religion here. Religion can be dry and lifeless; a burdensome set of do's and don'ts -- an outdated institution that too often exists for itself and excludes others. Religion stifles the spirit rather than sets it free; so, it's not religion that motivates our church but a relationship with Jesus Christ: risen from the dead and alive today.

See, religion doesn't need a relationship with God; it has rituals and rules and for a lot of people that's the extent of their spirituality: rituals, rules and an occasional reflection on the divine. But we're not interested in religion; we're interested in a relationship with the living Christ because that's what makes a church alive. If Jesus never rose from the grave we could still teach creeds and learn dogma. If Jesus was not alive today we could still form committees and hold meetings. If Jesus were still in the tomb we could still go out and do good things in the community to help people. But... knowing the risen Christ changes everything. It means that relationship not religion is key. And once we have that relationship with God, a real and genuine relationship with others becomes possible.

On this day of dedication and celebration – dedication of our selves and resources to God and celebration of the new members joining our church – on this day all of us are invited to come home to the heart of God. Not so we can become religious, but to experience a relationship of love that is offered us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The unnerving truth of this passage is that it was not the Pastor nor the Program nor the best laid Plans of the church that made God real for them; it was not the Slogans nor the Session nor the beauty of the Sanctuary that brought others to faith—it was the character of each individual life and the generosity of their giving that made this a vital and exciting church. It was the joy of their faith and the quality of their care for each other; it was the undeniable presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives and the reality of the risen Christ in their hearts that changed the world.

I love what our Scripture says about what happens to people who get connected to the living God and are community to one another: they are people of glad and generous hearts. They are glad because they discovered God's redeeming love that's not dependent upon performance or perfection but solely upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And they are generous because they understand that everything is first God's and they want to return some of those blessings as a response of thanksgiving and praise.

Friends, there are plenty of reasons not to give. An economy in crisis, the uncertainty of employment, concerns about the future, demands of the present, debts from the past... there are a ton of good reasons to not give. But we are a people of glad and generous hearts. And so contrary to our culture – contrary to conventional wisdom... we give!

It's a beautiful phrase don't you think: glad and generous hearts? We're glad to have a strong community to be a part of so that our gifts can combine to become a significant force for good in our world. Together through our outreach groups, we nurture and mentor children, giving them their foundations for learning, and teaching them the fundamentals of music. Through our children's ministry we teach children about God's love and the Bible in a creative and engaging way. In our youth ministry we are providing positive alternatives to the peer pressure that would bring students down. We're teaching them what it means to be disciples of Christ; to be young people who give back to make a difference in the world.

And we don't stop when we become adults: we're seeking to be rooted in Christ; we're studying the Bible together and meeting in small groups and supporting one another. And we're reaching out in love: this year we have given to the famine in Somalia, to community development in Tajikistan, to the settlement of refugees and the feeding of the hungry and we're in the process of beginning a new venture in concert with other neighborhood churches to help the homeless transition to a new place of stability and self-care. We've got a class of 36 new members, 25 youth in confirmation and a young adult ministry that is active at a time when so many churches have no one in the congregation between 20 and 30. We offer 3 different worship services, parenting classes and a marriage workshop. We have a wilderness adventure ministry, a parents-night out, and host many community groups partnering with them to support their work.

We have glad and generous hearts because we get to be a part of God's great work in this place and as we dedicate ourselves and our commitments to the year ahead we're saying to one another, to God – and to our community and the greater world out there – that our relationship with God is real, that it transforms who we are, and it makes us into a community of care and compassion!

Today as we come to this time of dedication we hold in our hands pledge cards -- an estimate of what we hope to give towards next year's mission and ministry. And we bring them not grudgingly, not out of guilt, not reluctantly or guardedly but with great joy. We open the hands that have received so much and give back to God as a commitment of our faith, our lives... our love. And we do so together, as a community of care and compassion. Let us now receive our morning tithes and offerings and with them our financial commitments for the year to come. And let us give them with glad and generous hearts knowing that God loves a cheerful giver!