

## ACTS 2:41-47 "WHAT MIGHT IT BE LIKE?"

What Life In The Spirit Looks Like At Ground Level

**ESSENTIALS** I' 2:21-47 THE NEW COMMUNITY THE HOLY SPIRIT CREATED. \_\_\_\_\_ 1<sup>st</sup> Summary, 1:12-14  
Evangelism + New Community = Foundation Story

### Preaching (1)

Evangelism (2) A. v.41 Church Growth Described: A Great Influx. \_\_\_\_\_ Cultural Aspirations Fulfilled, Utopia Realized

### Baptism (3)

41 An those who received his (i.e. Peter's) word were baptized, *Logos, Large Temple Mikveh (Baths) + Other Pools*  
and there were **added** that day about three thousand souls. *Pentecost Leads To Evangelistic Harvest*

### Teaching (4)

B. v.42 Three Marks Of The Community: Internal Perspective. \_\_\_\_\_ *Koinonia = possessions*

### Fellowship (5)

*Formal And Informal Together, Ideal Community*

42 1) And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, *4:2, 18, 1:1-11; 6:1-6, Solidarity*

### Communion (6)

2) to the breaking of bread, *20:7, Lk. 24:35 (Emmaus), The Eucharist/ Lord's Supper*

### Prayers (7)

3) and *the* prayers. *Jewish Temple/ Daily Prayers*

*Teaching + Practices = Church*

### C. v.43 The Miracle Of God's Power.

43 And fear (awe) came upon every soul; *Demonstrate Prophetic Spirit (2:19, 22)*  
Fear (8) and many signs and wonders were done through the apostles. *2:19b,1:1 began to do //3:1-11*

### Miracles (9)

C' vv.44-45 The Miracle Of Their Generosity. \_\_\_\_\_ *Topos Of Friendship*

*Aristotle, Nic. Eth. 9.8.2*

44 And all who believed were together and had "all things in common;" *//3:6, Proverb*

### Generosity (10)

and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.

*Lk. 6:30-36*

### B' vv.46-47a Three Marks Of The Community: External Perspective.

### Worship (11)

46 3') And day by day attending the temple together, *//3:1-2, Jewish Temple Prayers*

### Small Groups (12)

2') and breaking bread in their homes, *The Eucharist/ Lord's Supper*

they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, *Joy In Lord's Presence*

### Praise/Favor (13)

1') praising God and having favor with all the people. *Worship And Witness*

A' v.47b Church Growth Described: A Steady Flow. \_\_\_\_\_ *Added by the Lord = Fitted/Joined*

### New Believers (14)

*The Quality Of Their Common Life Drew People*

47 And the Lord **added** to their number day by day those who were being saved.

*Acts 2:21, 40*

## The United Methodist Vows Of Church Membership (Hymnal: 34, 38)

( *Italicized* phrases added at the 2008 General Conference: Less institutional, more external witness)

### 1 Vow Of Christian Loyalty, Growth, Witness, & Service In The World

According to the grace given to you, *The Immense Resources Of A Healed Relationship With God*

a will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church *Vitally Connected Where You Are*

b and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? **I will.** *Your External Role As A Public Ambassador*

### 2 Vows Of Denominational /Local Church Loyalty And Participation

As members of Christ's universal church, *The Larger Christian Family*

a will you be loyal *to Christ through* The United Methodist Church, *Our Limited Historical Form Of The Church*

b and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries? **I will.** *Work For Its Faithfulness And Thriving*

As members of this congregation,

a will you faithfully participate in its ministries *Local And Specific: Main Street UMC*

1 by your prayers (1), *Find A Place To Serve And Work*

2 your presence (2), *Sunday, During The Week, Daily*

3 your gifts (3), *Showing Up*

4 your service (4), *Money, Time, Skills, Gifts Of The Holy Spirit*

5 *and your witness* (5)? **I will.** *A Servant's Heart And Posture*

*Will You Speak Of Your Faith In Christ And Your Love Of His Church?*

## WHAT MIGHT IT BE LIKE?

“... praising God and having favor with all the people.”

When the vertical and the horizontal are joined, God’s reign goes local!

A C T S 2 : 4 6 b

**H**ave you noticed? Have you noticed how live music is never as polished as a CD where all the missed cues have been edited out by the producer? Have you noticed how the vacation is never quite as exotic as the travel brochure portrays it? Nothing about stinging insects, rude waiters or virus outbreaks on cruise ships. I’ve met several models in my tenure as a pastor, and pretty as they are up close, they never quite measure up to the air-brushed quality of fashion magazine perfection.

There are magic moments when the ideal and the real come together, but these are rare, short-lived, and leave us frustrated and longing for more. We dream of perfection, of life as it might be *if only*, but the gap between the *real* and the *ideal*, the daily grind and the occasional moment, is always there, an ache, a deep longing for life to be more than it is most Mondays. That we can all imagine an ideal world is a common human witness to a dream lost in the past and of a new world yet to appear, not the broken one we currently inhabit. Such intuitions appear in the myths of all cultures as the common memory of Even’s originating paradise, a beautiful garden where everything was provided, where an innocent man and his innocent bride lived in bliss and complementary partnership, where God the garden-maker came for a visit and a stroll every afternoon to catch up on the day’s adventures. But the bubble was pricked by a lie and ruptured by mistrust, and so we now live- as they say- *in the real world*. Not ideal but real and unyielding and never stopping and full of a frustrating mix of agony and ecstasy ending in death.

And so it is with the people who belong to Jesus Christ as we make our way down history’s winding path toward a final collision with the kingdom of God which will swallow us and all creation in a flash of transformation. There is the *ideal* as Luke presents it in the brief passage before us. It was the days just after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was first poured out on the church. And with great skill Luke

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pauses and weaves together the characteristics of the church at its very best. The risen Jesus being proclaimed by Peter with power, growing with the baptism of new converts, passionate prayer, a sense of holy fear at the divine presence and all the miracles, one of which was radical generosity; there was fellowship over meals in their homes, a keen sense of God’s immediate presence, public favor and daily growth. I’d like to see some of this here in Greenwood, right here at Main Street. It was the kingdom of God on display at ground level, but it did not last as long as they wished. It was, as we say, *a honeymoon period*, an ideal to imprint on mind and heart what God was capable of when people were following Jesus together and soggy with his Holy Spirit. For a short time the world had a window into God’s politics and to what Messianic social healing looked like.

But then, soon enough, the real pressed in and the ideal faltered. Not crumbled, but faltered. It wasn’t deliberate, just inevitable because the church lives in the same world as everyone else; the pressures took their toll. They were a window into a new world but still living in the middle of the untransformed world as it is. Squabbles broke out along ethnic lines, enemies pressed in, leaders were killed and the church scattered. But they remembered what was and what might be again should God give a fresh realization. They’d seen the ideal; they’d glimpsed God’s dream for a short time- maybe even several years, and for the rest of their lives lived amidst the limits of the real with a sense of destiny and hope. They planted local churches around the Mediterranean in cities and villages, setting up outposts of a world yet to come.

This, frankly, is a very troublesome passage of Scripture for me as a pastor. In privacy I find myself complaining to God, “If *then*, why not now? If *there*, why not here? If *them*, why not us? Do you not see how we are struggling? Is your Spirit not with us? What do you want us to do? Why is the gap so great between the ancient ideal and the contemporary real? Have we neglected something? Are you angry with us? Is our current desert experience a long exile to be endured, or only an dry period before a fresh downpour of the Holy Spirit with all his mighty powers?” I spend time each week writing solid biblical prayers for us to use on Sundays as part of my job, but when I’m alone with God things sometimes get ugly. I scream. I beg. I plead. I make promises I can’t keep. I don’t hold back, in other words not the kinds of prayers you want to hear in church. I want more.

We all want our church to do more than survive. We want it to thrive and grow in all things good, not by going back to some ideal past but walking with God into a new future. I know I do. I’ve got a lot of skin in this game, and I do not want to end

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as a loser. So this is what I think about the ideal and the real and the painful gap between them. I'm grateful Luke preserved this report of the church at its shining best. It reminds us of what once happened in Jerusalem, and may again appear because of God's desire to give the world a glimpse of what his love looks like when fleshed out in community of Jesus followers. And for it I pray and work and weep.

As I reflected on these matters the Sunday before we make our financial commitments for next year, I came to what feels like an insight. And it is this: with the really important matters in life we don't just make promises but take upon ourselves weighty vows, which are public promises made to God for our good and the good of realities bigger than ourselves. Baptismal vows to follow Jesus and resist evil, marriage vows to be faithful to one, church membership vows to be loyal when its inconvenient, ordination vows to teach the historic Christian faith and lead by example, vows to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. When the stakes are high, whether in church or state, simple promises by fickle people are not enough; binding public vows are invoked. Freely taken, carefully considered, genuinely binding, morally serious, life-shaping vows, backed by whatever integrity you can muster at the moment or acquire along the way. Life is shaped by the vows we take and the vows we keep, especially when the keeping is costly. With all believers I share baptismal vows; with most I share marriage vows; with a smaller group I share ordination vows. I often laugh and say to myself, "God has tied me down so tightly with solemn promises because he knows I couldn't survive any other way. There's very little wiggle room in my life; everywhere I turn I face solemn obligations." And that it good for my soul.

As United Methodists we teach, and I think rightly, that baptism is not into a particular denomination but into the one church of Jesus Christ across the ages and around the world, the deep church underneath all the surface variety of churches, the one to which the Nicene Creed refers to as *the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church*. Nary a word here about being Protestant or Methodist in our baptismal promises because here we all stand together. It's generic in the highest sense.

But then, when the core commitments to God as Trinity and to following Jesus as found in Scripture are nailed down, there's a shift away from the universal and towards the local and the particular, and the three last vows I now comment on all begin with a gift before they turn to our response. Notice the leading phrases, "According to the grace given you..." "As members of Christ's universal church..." and finally, "As members of this congregation." Before we line out your privileges



and duties we are reminded that God has given himself to us and placed us in a multi-layered reality called church. It is God’s wisdom and goodness that grafts us into a new, living, social reality. We simply can’t be Christians in isolation; it’s a team sport. No bench warmers, no spectators, no fans.

Within the fellowship of the church God’s give us divine strength or enablement to do two related things, the first of which is simply to stay connected, or in the words of the vow “to remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church.” Grace is glue, and when received it makes us *sticky* so we don’t drift away. God gives this thing called grace through new friends and shared study and mission, from us being there for and with one another in good and bad times. God’s grace, if we yield, has power to super-glue us to himself and one another, so the question is, “Are you sticky?” But it doesn’t stop there. Having a home base and deep sense of belonging and investment in a local church is for the sake of your mission outside the walls, as the next phrase makes clear, “and serve as Christ’s representatives *in the world?*” You have a home base, and you have a mission as an authorized ambassador, and if you don’t have the first to keep you strong, the second will fail. You will miss the deeper purposes of your life, your mission. Just as your heart gathers blood to pump it out through the lungs full of oxygen, so we gather together to be re-oxygenated for our witness in all the places of our calling. In and out, gather and scatter, worship and work, refreshed and re-sent. And when the church is weak, as we are now, the world suffers because so many of our ambassadors are not at their workstations.

The shift in the next vow is even more dramatic, from the fellowship of all disciples across all the ages down to this recent, particular body of Christians springing out of an 18<sup>th</sup> century revival movement in The Church of England and known today as United Methodists, from the large family down to one of the smaller tribes. And here the call is not just to support the institution but to recognize it as one of the structures through which we are loyal to Christ and where we work to strengthen its life. Folks, get over a simplistic idea; there’s no such thing as a non-institutional or non-organized church; it simply doesn’t exist and can’t. We are naive if we think a non-organized social movement can survive in this world; it’s romantic nonsense. The frail structures carry the great treasure, however imperfectly. So, will you follow Jesus in this denominational body and work to keep it faithful and strong, both of which are under great pressure in our day? The most visible symbols of this vow are our cross and flame logo and the one hundred thousand dollars a year we pay in apportionments to support our church’s service and mission beyond our borders.

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But it is in the very last vow that we get down to five specific behaviors, things you can check and evaluate your performance. As members of Christ’s universal church-the largest circle, and as members of this particular Methodist body- the next inward circle, and as a member of Main Street UMC- the innermost part, will you faithfully participate in our ministries in the following five ways:

1. By *praying*, not only in private but when we gather for worship, and where possible, in special meetings called for prayer as this very evening. If you are not praying for your church, its leaders and its life, you are not keeping your vows. You are failing.
2. By your *presence*, by being here except when prevented by illness or travel and by carving out Sunday mornings as sacred space on your calendar. Lots of folk are failing here, either because they’ve let hurt feelings drive them away or because of simple sloth or discouragement. They are withering branches cut off from the life of the vine.
3. By your *gifts*, and here it means money in the form of tithes and offerings as well as the spiritual gifts given you by the Holy Spirit. What you have is a gift, and who you are is a gift. Put both to use, and watch your soul and church begin to flourish and bear fruit.
4. By your *service*, by carving out time to find a place to make a difference.
5. Finally, and this phrase was added in 2008 to make sure the final vow was not aimed only at activities inside the church but also outside, “and your *witness*.” Your light is to shine in a shadowed world because you are now a different person, one in whom Christ dwells. You must learn to speak of Jesus and of his church often and well. Good deeds and a life of integrity are important, but unless you speak of Christ and his people with love they will give you the credit as just another nice person, and that’s the wrong place to put it.

How are you doing with keeping your vows, your solemn promises to God? The life and future of this church is in our hands. God wants our heartfelt loyalty.

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