

APRIL 7
9AM | 11AM

a transformative
community
is formed

TRANSFORMATIVE
COMMUNITY
SERMON SERIES

Sunday, April 7, 2024 | *Transformative Community*
“A Transformative Community is Formed”
Acts 2:37-47 | Jess Scholten

Are we doing what God wants us to do? How can we grow in faith? How can we grow as a church?

These are the kind of questions we think about in congregations.... And of course, the ever present:

Are we relevant?

There are all sorts of ways congregations can think about these things – consultants, mission studies, in leadership teams and staff meetings. I realize... I don't know all the ways you've asked these questions at Covenant: “Hi – my name is Jess – I'm kinda new here.” But I do know some of them.

I know you did a mission study with your interim pastor before Pastor Charlie arrived in 2012, and in it, you confirmed your 2007 Mission Statement: “Claimed and humbled by God's grace, we are disciples journeying in covenant with God and one another. [Anybody know this by heart? It's not a short one but worth our review.] Our disciple-forming community is called to worship and pray together; to cultivate deep and nurturing reciprocal relationships; to minister faithfully in our daily lives; and to warmly welcome all into our fellowship as we seek a Christ-centered life. We cannot journey alone; we need one another. Together, with hearts, minds, and arms wide open, we reach out to others in love. (Adopted by Session August 2007) You've thought deeply about what it means to be the church.

There was also the SWOT report, S W O T, not like swatting a fly: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. That one might sound a little more familiar as you completed it in the fall of 2022. And lately, in Session we've been taking a closer look at what it means to be the church and what's next. Covenant is a thriving

congregation, but we also know we need to keep focused and continue deepening our fellowship and spiritual practices so that we can keep being a thriving congregation.

Today, we begin a new chapter at Covenant. We're going to delve headfirst into the ACTS report. Before you get too worried, you're going to have to fill out survey or have to read a book from the latest and greatest 21st century church expert, the ACTS report, as you've already figured out, is the Acts of the Apostles. The beauty of this new study is that we don't need a consultant – because studying the early church reveals to us the model of ***what it means to be a church***. You'll hear echoes of the mission statement I just read, because you wrote it based on some parts of today's Scripture passage in Acts.

After Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem, Jesus told them to stay in the city, and ***there*** they would experience the power of the Holy Spirit. And experience it, they did! With a giant whoosh of wind, tongues of fire rest on each of them; and they suddenly could speak in multiple languages. They each tell of God's deeds of power in this newfound tongue. And the crowd outside hears them, each in their own language.

It's the story of Pentecost which we hear each year. Today, we pick up Acts with the birth of the church on that very day. Peter preaches that powerful sermon revealing more fully God's plan in sending Jesus as the Messiah – this new way God is at work in the world. Here's what happens next in Acts 2:37-47:

³⁷Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' ³⁸Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (next slide) ³⁹For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'⁴⁰And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in

common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (next slide) ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

This word, thanks be to God, is the vision we are given of the early church, no consultant needed. Like the early church, we too are called to devote ourselves – to give our lives to: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.

Devote yourselves to the apostles’ teaching. The apostles’ teaching was the Word of God revealed in Scripture. Their rabbi was Jesus, and Jesus was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. Their teaching was also their witness of Jesus Christ: what he taught, the stories he told, the healings, the miracles, the grace, and most importantly his place as God’s Son in the world, who died because of us but was raised again from the dead. We have a record of these teachings and healings now written down in what we call the New Testament.

So the apostles’ teaching was, at its core, the Bible – what was given in the Hebrew Scriptures, which we call the Old Testament – all the things Jesus has very carefully taught them; and the story of Jesus and how we are called to live out our faith in community in what we now call the New Testament.

We are called to devote ourselves to Scripture.

Devotion is the giving of your life to something, the giving of your time and energy. Over Lent, there were a number of things we were invited to devote ourselves to – practices like praying and simplifying our lives, unplugging and practicing humility – all practices that lead us to the Easter practice Pastor Charlie preached about last week – practicing resurrection – practicing finding new life and joy. Even though Good Friday lingers around far more often than we would like, Good Friday does not have the last word.

A Christian walk of faith with any vitality at all involves devoting ourselves to the heart knowledge of Scripture. A few years ago, a study was published with some rather sobering statistics. If I’m to believe it, less than a third of you read any Scripture at all on a regular basis.

Frankly, I don't believe it. First, we're all reading scripture every day right now with the Book of Acts – one chapter every day. At this point, hopefully you're at chapter 7. We've read about Pentecost and healings and arrests and that crazy story with Ananias and Sapphira – the invitation for the offering will come up after the sermon, so maybe don't hold back this week. Yesterday, we read about how the early deacons were called to serve – a position in the church people still hold, caring for the congregation and providing fellowship. Today is the story of Stephen – the first person recorded beyond Jesus who died because of his faith.

Reading through whole books of the Bible as a congregation, equipped with YouVerse, pray as you go, and daily prayer apps; the whole Bible right in our pockets – I can't imagine we fall in line with statistics of only 30% of us reading Scripture each day. (<https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/07/02/few-protestant-churchgoers-read-the-bible-daily/>).

After all, how can we know God if we do not know the very Word God has given to us? One of the key ingredients to a growing and faithful church is right here in Acts: devoting ourselves to the teaching of the apostles' – to the Scriptures, to the witness of Jesus, and to the reminders in God's word of how to live as a community of faith.

We are trying to make it easy for you – a chapter a day over the course of a month means you don't even have to think beyond the date to know what to read. We also have some small groups and discussion guides – this is your last chance to jump in before those begin this week – where we can discuss in an Acts-like setting some of the ways we are living out being a transformative community – a place where we pay attention to resurrection, new life, and the presence of Jesus wherever we are. If you haven't signed up for a small group, there are several spots left – during the day, various evenings, on zoom, in person – you'll see a table outside the sanctuary with various sign ups.

Admittedly, we've been sold a bill of goods on reading Scripture, that it has to be this laborious thing we do every day like it's a homework assignment. It took me years of slogging through devotionals like it was one more check off the to-do list. And those years involved long periods of drought where having one more thing on the list was just too much. But recently in her weekly reflection, Ruth Haley Barton, founder of the Transformation Center near Chicago, articulated beautifully the invitation we are given to Scripture, to engage the Bible for spiritual transformation – not just as something we read through with our eyes, but with opening our curiosity and imaginations –

opening ourselves to “a deeper level of understanding and insight that grows out of and leads us deeper into our personal relationship with the One behind the text. And it is in the context of relational intimacy that real change takes place.”

She reflects: “Our approach is driven by the longing of a lover. We read slowly so that we can savor each word and let its meaning sink in. Rather than rushing on to the next chapter so that we can complete a reading or study assignment, we stay in the place where God is speaking to us, contemplating its meaning for our life and for our relationship.”

Now that’s an invitation – not to add a homework assignment to your to-do list but to create space for a deeper relationship with our Creator, savoring Scripture, not for what we can get out of it, but for greater depth and love.

In addition to this devotion to Scripture and the teachings of the apostles, the earliest church devoted itself to *koinonia*. In case you’re not familiar with this word, *Koinonia* is the Greek word which we translate fellowship – community, participation, sharing. The early believers devoted themselves to building community. This is beyond simply hanging out; it’s the kind of hanging out where you’re working together for some sort of purpose – maybe service, maybe in a small group discussion about Acts, but also maybe just creating deeper knowledge and support of one another and welcoming others to join in.

Fellowship happens when friends pray for one another, when people serve a meal together at Triangle or Pres House, when the Children and Youth Committee works together to figure out how best to share the stories with the kiddos, when we worship together in Bradfield Hall on Wednesday evenings in a more casual setting over dinner and intergenerational activities, when small groups share a meal and some reflections on faith. Any time we gather as Christians with more purpose, we are deepening our fellowship. I see already in just a few short months the ways *this congregation* is that kind of community – one that has a deep sense of friendship, mutual care, and hospitality woven throughout our life together.

We also have devotion number three woven into us: the breaking of bread. Each first Sunday of the month, we gather here for something deeply theological and a little bit mysterious... mystical. Dare I say magical?

One of my favorite stories to tell confirmation and new member classes is the story of

how Hocus Pocus came about. For hundreds of years, the Catholic Mass was said in Latin, regardless of the congregation's main language. And during part of the communion, where the priest would declare over the bread, "this is my body," there is an understanding in the Catholic church that the actual bread or wafer **becomes** the Body of Christ – the big theological term is called transubstantiation – that one substance transfers into an entirely different substance. The words are: hoc est corpus meum. It was this magical moment in the liturgy where the priest said the words and removed the cloth and voila – instead of bread is the actual body of Christ. Hoc est corpus meum. You know, the hocus pocus. I googled it to see if this story from seminary has any truth to it – it does, sort of. Hocus pocus.

Without getting into all the theology of it, whatever we believe happens in communion, here is God's powerful presence. Breaking bread, being reminded that we are the body of Christ, or simply sharing a meal together is beyond ordinary – it bonds us, it builds joy and support in us. Every time we gather around a table, community is formed more deeply. That is pretty magical.

In 2017, the #EatTogether movement began, a campaign to get people to set aside their cell phones and share a meal together, neighbors with neighbors. The ad is still available on YouTube: [youtube.com/watch?v=yLsSy64xILI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLsSy64xILI).

I don't really remember the whole campaign – what I remember is the campaign video: roommates setting a table in the hallway of their apartment building and sitting down to dinner with salad and pasta, inviting everyone who walked through the hallway to come join them. A family of three sits down, another couple brings out a card table and another tablecloth, someone else passes around the takeout he just picked up, a child crawls under the table and coaxes an elderly man out of his apartment but he goes back in the door – and then comes down the hallway with a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread. Laughter is shared and neighbors become friends. The tagline: "Nothing brings us together like eating together."

The early church knew this. They had it modeled to them in hundreds of ways through Jesus himself gathering for meals and sitting down with others in community and breaking bread. We're living this out as a community as well – through fellowship time, our Wednesday dinners in Lent, first Wednesday potlucks, small groups, and after-church lunches. Here at Covenant, the invitation is always open – join in. You are welcome.

Finally, the early church devoted themselves to prayer. Prayer is one of the core ways we give space for God to be at work in us. Our best example of how to pray is in Jesus himself. He poured himself out for the people around him – healing, listening, teaching. And then, he slips away to spend time with God, praying in gardens and on mountains and away from the crowds. Quiet time with God is restorative – it refreshes our dry and dusty spirits, and it renews us when we’re spent. This is why it’s such a gift that Pastor Charlie is on sabbatical for the next 5 weeks – that important time with God restores. Prayer is also a time to pour out gratitude and thanks when we’re reminded of how blessed we are.

We know how prayer supports others, because we know what it’s like to be prayed for – to know there is a community of people who are interceding for you. A pastor friend of mine is going through cancer treatments with her partner – she reflects: “I think I have said this in every worship service for all these years—people feel surrounded by love when we pray for them. It is certainly true for us.” Prayer is a powerful reminder of our support for one another in community. I know I have gotten through some challenging times only because others have been there praying for and with me.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book on what it means to be the church: *Life Together*, wrote: “A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a [person] for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble [they] cause me. Their face, that [before] may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the [face] of a [sibling] for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner.” — **Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community**

*Prayer **transforms** us as a faith community.*

Scripture, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. Churches don’t need consultants to give them a fancy formula for a long-winded strategic plan to help them be the church God is calling them to be. It’s right here in Acts.

Those last few verses demonstrate the fruit that is born of this devotion: “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.” Committing ourselves to knowing the word of God deeply, to creating community, to breaking bread here at this table and others, and to pray... bears the

fruit of gratitude, generosity, praise, goodwill of others, and growth.

This is the new direction, born of the Spirit and God's continued and new movement in the world. May we devote ourselves in this same way to Scripture, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. May we bear the fruit of gratitude, generosity, praise, and growth of ourselves and of the church.

Amen.