

SERMON: **“Making Room in Our Hearts for our Neighbours.”** (Matt 25:31-46; Acts 2:42-47)

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross, Sunday, January 15, 2012. St. James Presbyterian Church.

Today we continue our Epiphany series entitled ***“Making Room in our Hearts”*** in which we are looking at how, as people of faith – as Christians – we are compelled to show our love for God by loving our neighbours, by loving one another: and how we are called to do this by living in community. Epiphany marks the coming to earth of Jesus – it observes how the light of God’s love was made manifest in human form; and what better way to celebrate the God who came to be-with us than by turning our focus on the life-shaping, life-giving, and life-transforming body known as the Church. Last week we heard how God made us in His image (the Trinity) to live in community, and about how Jesus commissioned us to become God’s community – the Church (the Body of Christ) – and how through the Holy Spirit we are transformed by being in community: when God wanted to restore His relationship with us, it stands to reason that He would do it within the context of a community – especially a community of faith. This week we are going to focus on what made the community known as the Acts 2 Church so special.

From the start of Jesus’ ministry on earth He was thinking about how to extend His movement beyond His own physical life on earth: what did He do? We all know the answer, but it seems so simple that we often overlook it. He didn’t stage a revolution or start a country; He didn’t form an army; He didn’t create a university, or an institution, or a corporation: He started a small group – a small group with a simple mandate: He called twelve people to be His disciples so that they could be-with Him. That’s it – the plan was that they would “Be-with” Him together. Why of all things did He do that? Why did He create His own small group? Because He understood that it is in community where characters get shaped; that that’s where lives are changed. To be clear, right from the very beginning, the “Jesus Movement” was a “small group” movement that practiced the “Be-with” in which Jesus would be-with them.

And as the Gospels show us, that’s what Jesus did (WWJD?); He came to be-with us. Jesus was with them when they tried to serve God, when they failed. He’d “Be-with” them when they were sick, when they were discouraged, when they were confused... He would “Be-with” them to help them, to celebrate when they had got something right, and “Be-with” them when they needed Him most. The Gospels tell us that they walked through life together, that they lived life together, studied together, prayed together, argued together, forgave together: they came to know God – and each other – together. And that was the whole point of the “Be-with” plan. As they lived life together Jesus was teaching them how to “Be-with” each other so that when the time came for them to become “Christ” to the world they would know what to do – and why.

Right from the start Jesus taught His disciples how to love people who are as normal and messed up and sinful and struggling as I am and you are. In all that He said and did Jesus modelled how we are to love God by loving our neighbours: He showed the disciples who He wanted them to “Be-with.” The disciples experienced His love – His

acceptance – and after three years, having been shaped by that love, they began to let that love shape other lives through them. Then, after His death, and Pentecost, this original “small group” were emboldened to take up their commission to change the world by making room in their hearts for the poor, the hungry, and the stranger; our neighbours. (Matt. 25:31-46) The Acts 2 Church put their faith into action by re-enacting the “Be-with” plan that called for them to “be-with” God by “being-with” each other: They devoted themselves to putting into practice what they knew; that in community lives can be saved; saved through love, saved because of love.

We’re told in the Acts reading that the first Church – the early Christians – “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship,*” (Acts 2:42) but this isn’t describing “*fellowship*” as we know it! The word, “*fellowship,*” describes a rich, deep, significant relationship – a state of “being-with” someone as one dictionary defined it. The fellowship that they devoted – another word indicates the depth of the commitment, affection, and love that they had/shared for/with one another – themselves to was one in which they did life together: they shared all things together, they served one another, they gave of what they had to those in need and received what they needed from their neighbours. But that’s not all. As we heard, “*Day by day, as they spent much time together ..., they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God,*” (Acts 2:46) indicating that they met often; and intimately.

What this reveals is the essential nature of the “Be-with” plan: that the early Church was not one homogeneous congregation but was instead made up of many smaller groupings. If you read through the Book of Acts, you see that when the Church is mentioned it is described as little communities/groups – small clusters of believers – who met together in homes. We hear about the house of a man named Jason, and about Philip’s house, Lydia’s house, and the house of Mary the Mother of John. Why? Because this is where people met. When the New Testament letter writers sent greeting to believers, they greeted believers “*at the house of*” Priscilla and Aquila, or believers “*at the house of*” Narcissus (that was for a group of recovering ego-maniacs). In the New Testament, the Church didn’t have small groups as an option that you could opt out of; the small/home groups were the Church! The “Be-with” plan is the DNA of the Church – it was the cause of its formation and its expansion: and the plan hasn’t changed.

As I mentioned last week, we will be using the season of Epiphany to launch a new initiative that will greatly enrich the quality of our community as we seek to know God together. Just as the Acts 2 Church devoted themselves to their love for God by living out their love for one another – so are we! The love they had known from Jesus transformed their lives; the love they showed to their neighbours changed the world: it’s time for our love to do the same. Look at the cover image of the Acts 2 Church, this is what this Church will look like when we make room in our hearts for our neighbours.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to make room in our hearts for our neighbours – to love God by loving others. Amen