

## “Community, The Great Coincidence”

Acts 2:31-47

[www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+2:31-47](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+2:31-47)

April 11, 2010

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### Acts 2:31-47 (Today's New International Version) ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+2:31-47](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=acts+2:31-47))

*Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,*

*"The Lord said to my Lord:  
"Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet." "*

*"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"*

*Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."*

*With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

### *The Fellowship of the Believers*

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

I have designed this sermon to be interactive, so at several points I will ask you to share briefly at a microphone, in particular around three things: Baptism, Communion and being part of a community. I may even ask you to call out comments from where you sit. For those of you who don't get to a mic to share, please be thinking about who in your life you might share about your own experience. Sharing is truly powerful. In fact, it is sharing that has sustained the church. I am convinced that if we stopped sharing, the church would cease to exist.

We live in a society that is defined by the world outside the faith community. This was also the case with the early church. Pastor David's sermons through this year have been focused on transformative living. This gets at how we engage life in a different way from how we lived prior to being part of a church community. To transform is to be altered in such a way that we are unrecognizable from how we were before. It is about living a life that is distinctly different from what the world around us says life should be. It is a life of living against the grain. But how do we perpetually live a transformed life in the middle of a society that does not support that kind of lifestyle? In the scripture in Acts that was just read, Peter is imploring the people of Judea saying "save yourselves from this corrupt culture." It was into the middle of an oppressive situation that Peter was offering a transformed way to live with hope.

We have the open window here at Chilson Hills each week reminding us to allow the Holy Spirit to blow into and through our community, inspiring us, moving us to action that we might not have thought of before, calling us to be people unlike we have been. We lean on the various practices that have been passed down through the generations in the church from Jesus himself. Baptism and Communion (or The Lord's Supper) were the two practices that we read about in the Bible that Jesus specifically gave to his followers. As we will see, Jesus and the early church also gave us an example of how we might live powerfully as a transformed community. As we continue to come back to these practices, they shape and form who we are as a community. They become foundational to our transformed identity.

### **Baptism**

Baptism was and still is the typical way that people are brought into a Christian faith community. We see it in the Acts passage read earlier. The first thing that the people did in response to Peter's message was they were baptized. It was their demonstration to make a clear and defining line between who they were and who they were choosing to be as followers of Jesus.

In the book of Matthew we see how Jesus instructed his disciples to baptize.

**Matthew 28:18-20 (The Message)** ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+28:18-20](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+28:18-20))

*Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."*

*(Pour water from pitcher into bowl at the Communion table)*

Ask for congregation's responses: "What is water good for?"

The symbol of water in baptism is key and has represented many different things for different people through time. Commonly water is understood to be cleansing, nourishing, and fluid like the Spirit. There is the symbolism of going under the water, being buried and then arising to new life. Baptism is a symbol of being adopted into God's family, of forgiveness, starting afresh, a demonstration of a choice to chart a new course in life. People have personal stories around water that add to the meaning of baptism. None of this is incorrect, and all of it can make the experience more meaningful.

\*\*\* Sharing: Who has had an experience of Baptism that they would like to share at a mic?

### **Communion**

This table represents the center piece of the Christian faith. It all rests here. The table is a symbol of life and all that is good - even the construction of wood is intentional as wood is a living material. Upon it we have living flame, sometimes living flowers. I actually like the fact that the brass plates and cross are smudged up with finger prints because it shows that it is involved in life.

In I Corinthians we read how Paul passes along instruction from Jesus.

**1 Corinthians 11:23-25 (The Message)** ([www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+11:23-25](http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+11:23-25))

*Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord's Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you. The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said,*

*This is my body, broken for you.*

*Do this to remember me.*

*After supper, he did the same thing with the cup:*

*This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you.*

*Each time you drink this cup, remember me.*

When Jesus said to "**remember me**" he was in essence saying: It is a given that you will be celebrating this Passover meal as you and your family has been for generations, but from now on remember what I am and will be doing on your behalf to bring you into relationship with God. All that we do in worship together and in our life as a community of people following Jesus is tied together in remembering Jesus' story, which is really our story. Jesus is our history, our present, and our future.

\*\*\* Sharing. Who has had an experience participating in the Lord's Supper that you can share at a mic?

Here is a direct quote from Buzz Aldrin, as posted [here](#) by Bosco Peters:

*"In the radio blackout, I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and the wine. I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully came up the side of the cup. Then I read the Scripture, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit.' I had intended to read my communion passage back to earth, but at the last minute Deke Slayton had requested that I not do this. NASA was already embroiled in a legal battle with Madelyn Murray O'Hare, the celebrated opponent of religion, over the Apollo 8 crew reading from Genesis while orbiting the moon at Christmas. I agreed reluctantly...Eagle's metal body creaked. I ate the tiny Host and swallowed the wine. I gave thanks for the intelligence and spirit that had brought two young pilots to the Sea of Tranquility. It was interesting for me to think: the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the very first food eaten there, were the communion elements."*

*NASA kept this secret for two decades. The memoirs of Buzz Aldrin and the Tom Hanks's Emmy- winning HBO mini-series, From the Earth to the Moon (1998), made people aware of this act of Christian worship 235,000 miles from Earth.*

**Bread and juice**, at Chilson Hills are present in each of our Sunday services. Recently, my understanding of our practice of Communion was expanded. I learned that when Jesus had this "Last Supper" meal with his disciples it was a Jewish Passover meal that they were participating in that night. Passover was when God protected the people by the life-giving blood of a sacrificial lamb that was spread over the doors of their homes. Are you seeing the power of this meal coming in Jesus' life when it did? It was a complete meal with a number of courses that were each blessed as they arrived at the table. The ritual around this meal was quite familiar to Jesus' disciples, however what Jesus did during that Last Supper was different from anything that had ever been done to that point. Jesus gave this meal a brand new meaning. You might say that Jesus fulfilled the higher intention of the Passover meal. He explained that he himself was the perfect Passover Lamb, sacrificing himself for the forgiveness of sins and the restoring of all people with God. He said the wine was his blood - a symbol of the vital essence of life. He asked us to drink it, taking into ourselves a life that nothing can destroy -- digesting that life within us so that it is seamless with who we are. This is a picture of transformation. He took the bread and declared that he himself would be the ultimate sacrifice, once for all of humanity, the only perfect body that could be broken for the forgiveness of our sins and to reconcile us with God.

## Community

We are designed and knit together by God as community, however, in our American way of thinking, we assume that we are individuals. This distortion is something we got from the Modern or Enlightenment Age. Individualism tells us that we were born with personal rights to financial and material prosperity, and it is our right to keep whatever we can. What we read about in scripture is a very different picture and it is probably a challenge for us to even consider the assumptions we have inherited in our culture.

\*\*\* Who has had an experience in the Christian community that they would like to share at a mic? This may be through a lifegroup, during a worship service or in any way related to being in and part of a Christian community.

Consider for a minute that perhaps there is another way to think about who you are - beyond yourself as an individual. We literally depend on other people and other life in our environment for our very existence. There is no such thing as an isolated, independent individual.

The more we move toward an individualist, isolated mindset, the further we are from what sustains us as vibrant, alive human beings. As I was thinking on these things, it occurred to me that we are actually blessed by our current economic crisis, as it is challenging our assumptions about individualism. What I mean by this is that people are not as secure financially as they once were and so people all over the world are seeking support and strength from community. This is a move away from the rugged individualism that has plagued our culture and moving us toward community, toward what we read about in Acts, toward living as God created us.

As a community we are all interdependent as part of God's community. This leads us to the title of this sermon "Community, the Great Coincidence."

Now, we think of coincidence as something happens that is uncanny, unpredictable, unplanned and unexpected -- but then all of a sudden, almost by chance something happens that fits, and we smile. We scratch our head when this happens as we contemplate the randomness that fell together. We say it is a coincidence if two people see each other at a restaurant when they didn't talk to arrange plans. A child may say it is a coincidence that their socks are on the floor, because they always put them in the hamper. It is a haphazard event.

However, coincidence is derived from the Latin *co-* ("in", "with", "together") and *incidere* ("to fall on"). In fact, the original root of the word implies the opposite of how we talk about it. Coincidence implies that one or more things are in alignment with each other, and synergistic -- that they are distinct parts moving together with the same intent -- that they are indeed part of the same essence or purpose.

We practice Baptism and Communion to reinforce our community identity with Jesus, not unlike a family. Families are full of people who love one another, but they are also full of people who fight and sometimes flat out don't like each other. But there is something that holds them together -- the Great Coincidence. They are related by blood. They cannot escape the fact that there is a greater interdependence than anything that may come between them. In the same way, our practice of Communion is a reminder that we as Jesus' community are related by Jesus' life-giving blood. Jesus said to take the cup representing his blood and drink it. He is asking us to take into ourselves the true life that God offers. And it is not just for us individually, but for us as community.

*(Walk to the entrance doors of the sanctuary)*

Dating back to the early church and echoed by the earliest Baptists was this sense of being in the world with our faith, not stuck in a building somewhere. Roger Williams, the first American Baptist pastor, was known to hold worship services in an apple orchard, because he said "God cannot be contained in a building." I'd say he was right about that. In fact, if we are really taking on what it means to be a faithful community, we will not be focusing our time inside this building so much as out there beyond these doors, living the love that Jesus called us to with those we meet every day at work, at school, in the grocery store and auto shop, the florist, at our family reunions, in teacher conferences, with the mortgage broker and banker as well as the debt collector who calls to interrupt our dinner. When we do this we are not focused on ourselves but on service to meeting the needs of people in the community. This was Jesus' example.

## **Concluding challenge**

We are starting to get a picture from Acts how the people in the first century after Jesus got creative to meet the needs of people in their community. They dedicated themselves to live with each other in a community, meeting together daily to eat and pray, selling their possessions to care for each other, etc. Let's play for a minute with what we can take from the example of the early church model of community. How might this apply to today in southeastern Michigan? I was thinking about the Dave Ramsey class in which more than 50 people in this community have participated. It is centered in how families can take responsibility for their finances to live free from debt and then be able to give to others, spreading the resources. What if a community of people in southeastern Michigan took that on, not as individual families, but as a community. What if they started thinking not about themselves as islands, but of everyone as one big family like that early church community in Acts. What if the people pooled their financial resources together and in one month one family could be rescued from debt. Then, the compounding resources could release another family from debt the next month, then another the next month, and so on. Maybe at some point multiple families could be saved from debt. What would it be like for that community to emerge debt free at some point, and then be able to take all those financial resources that had been paying interest charges to banks and debt collectors, and dedicate it to feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, and serving the larger community -- doing the things that Jesus called his people to do. I realize that there are many factors in that scenario I haven't mentioned, and I am simplifying it, but what if... Do you think it is possible? What stands in the way of that actually happening? Do you know that there are communities that have done and are doing very similar things in faith-centered communities as close as Detroit? There is no question in my mind that it is possible when we pool our creative minds together and look to God for guidance.

I will leave you with a question to consider. Since the community that we live within is dynamic and organic, co-created by God and us, we actually do have a say in what it looks like when we get our creative minds and hearts together in alignment.

**What might a transformed, alive and vibrant Jesus-centered, coincidental community that meets all the needs of its members look like in Livingston County in 2010?**