

# **“Plugging into the Abundant Life”**

#1 in the “Here we GROW” series

**Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill**

**Text: Acts 2:42**

**Community Christian Church – Kansas City, Missouri**

**October 17, 2010**

**8:30 a.m. (Chapel) & 10:45 a.m. (Sanctuary)**

On the face of every first-grader you can see it. In the fidgety-feet of every dancer on the brink of a recital you can sense it. In the scrunched brow of every mathematician calculating an equation you can behold it.

What is this “it”?

“It” is the drive for understanding, the movement toward meaning, the rush for fulfillment.

It is every parent’s hope and every child’s dream. It is the reason for the composer’s new song and the poet’s new poem. It is what motivates us out of mediocrity toward something worthy and then pushes us to something more.

For some people it is tragically squelched in their spirits early on in their lives. They walk around in a rut, forgetting that something grand and glorious was ever possible. They bury their hopes for anything good, they entomb their yearnings for anything better than what they already have.

For others it is snuffed out by overbearing parents suffering from their own unresolved woundings.

During a recession it can seem improbable. In the throes of cancer it can seem impossible.

What is this “it?”

It is what Jesus proclaimed and Peter witnessed and Paul evangelized about. It was what Jesus focused on in all of his preaching to the poor and to the rich, to the weak and to the powerful.

What is this “it?”

Let us call it what Christ called it. Jesus said: *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10)

“The abundant life” is really what each of us comes here for this morning. Nothing less will do. Nothing less should suffice.

The kind of abundance proclaimed by Jesus, of course, doesn’t mean materialistic prosperity. It’s more important than that.

The kind of abundance proclaimed by Jesus isn't equatable with money or physical possessions or political power or social status.

The kind of abundance proclaimed by Jesus is the overflowing of goodness, the waterfall of spiritual well-being, the rushing up of grace in everything you say, do, feel, or sense.

Our new sermon series, "Here We Grow" is all about how we can move our personal lives more and more toward this abundance. This morning's sermon launches the series by focusing specifically on "The Abundant Life" and how we plug into it, as individuals and as a congregation.

An ancient philosopher once said that in the quest to do something significant with their lives, people yearn for information for their heads, inspiration for their hearts, and inciting of their wills toward action. This new series and this morning's sermon are focused on just such information, inspiration, and inciting.

To plug into the abundant life, we take our cue from a key moment in the life of the early church. Now this is not to say that the early church was a perfect ideal. John Fry used to call the church "*The Great Apostolic Blunder Machine.*" And given the church's egregious history of errors and misdeeds, he might have been on very target with that description.

Nor is this to say that we have a lot of specific descriptions of what the leaders of the early church did. Alexander Maclaren has suggested that the Biblical record which we call "The Acts of the Apostles" is misnamed. He rightly notes only a few of the original disciples are actually described as actually "acting" in the book of Acts.

No, the early church is not an idyllic community. Nor is the Church's actual development crystal clear. But they were on to something. Every generation of Christians since Peter preached his redeeming sermon at Pentecost – when the little band of Jesus followers began in the morning with a total membership of 120 and then added more than 3,000 to their membership rolls by sundown – has grounding and direction in Acts 2:42.

## **I. *The Apostles' Teaching***

Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, says the first Christians "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers.*" Now some might call this "apostles' teaching" a "*blue print*" for how the church should function. Or we could say it is "*The Genome Mapping of the Christian Faith.*" Or we might describe it as "*the ultimate GPS – Godly Providence System – for the individual soul.*" And we can also understand the "apostles' teaching" as "*the ultimate recipe for religious relevancy offered up by the chief church chefs.*"

By whatever description we use, we still need to ask "What exactly was 'the apostles' teaching'?"

It couldn't have been great Biblical commentary, not in the holistic sense that we have today. And remember on the Day of Pentecost, and in the timeframe of the book of Acts, there was no Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

Nor was it rigorous exposition of dense theological themes. Other than Peter, James and John, we have little evidence that the other apostles wrote any theology.

It wasn't any teaching by Paul since he still bore his old name Saul, had yet to be struck down blind and mute on the Damascus Road, and had yet to become the Church's greatest evangelist.

We cannot say for sure but we can make an informal proposal about what "the apostles' teaching" was. Let's put it this way: "the apostles' teaching" was, as it is now, *instruction and reflection and conversation by the leaders of the church about the persistent concerns of Christianity. What does life mean? What are we to do? How will we know when we are at our best? How and in what ways are we to act so that life will get better for ourselves and for others?*

I'm glad to note that Community is steadily focused on this task of "keeping ourselves clear about what we are to be about."<sup>1</sup>

- Sunday School Classes for children and youth
- Sunday School Classes - The Mixers & New Life - for adults
- AA, Al Anon, Narcotics Anonymous
- Weight Watchers
- MORE2 forums on health care, education
- The Young Adult Book study group
- The forthcoming study of Rebecca Skloot's book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*
- And so much more!

By no means are we perfect. No church ever is. Nor are we as full of learning opportunities as we can and will be. But let us be glad that we can offer so many occasions for learning about what life means and what we are to do and how and in what ways we can act so life gets better for ourselves and for all others.

## II. Fellowship

The early church called the second item in Acts 2:42 *κοινωνία* (koinonia). Traditionally, we call it "fellowship." We could also use the terms "togetherness," "sharing," and "community."

What this meant immediately after the church's birth is, flatly, hard to pin down. But it surely meant for them what it means for us now. In fact, we have a pretty

wonderful definition of fellowship in our Mission Statement: *“to minister – through sharing and caring – to others in their human predicament.”*

Or, in the words of Charles Jeffrey, “we [share] each others’ gladness/and [weep] each others’ tears.”<sup>2</sup>

This means, in practical terms, simply spending time together, telling our stories, laughing a lot, coming to know each other, having a sense of belonging to a collective journey larger than any of our individual paths. It finally means the experiences of joy. Not the fleeting effervescence of happiness, but the deep encounter with the sheer joy at being alive. Teilhard de Chardin puts it this way: *“Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”* The early church had it, and so do we. Fellowship. Koinonia. Community.

### ***III. The Breaking of Bread***

We would quickly say that this phrase obviously refers to the Lord’s Supper and the sharing of communion together. The movement that became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) took hold of this phrase so strongly that we have communion every time we worship.

But it could also have meant for the early Christians table fellowship at any time. Some of the most daring and holy acts Jesus ever lived out in his earthly ministry happened when he was “at table.”

“How?” I’m glad you asked that question! Whenever Jesus was at table, it was a time of sharing, revelation, and controversy.<sup>3</sup>

The sharing was obvious: food and conversation.

The revelation: who he was and who his followers were to become.

The controversy: all the old barriers and divisions were broken down.

“Being at table” and “the breaking of bread” have two profound implications for us:

- 1) There is an absolute sacramental character in our sharing communion together when we worship *and* in those occasions when we offer food at our Food Pantry and in the Artists Helping the Homeless program in the Mill Creek Park and in our Micah Ministry efforts.

- 2) Each time we come together to share a meal is an occasion for the communing of our spirits, our lives, and the breaking down of barriers and divisions, barriers and divisions among us and within us.

As we share at the Lord’s Table in the sanctuary and the chapel, at the counter of the Food Pantry, under the spreading branches of a tree in Mill Creek Park, and on the

second Monday of every month at Micah Ministry, we are fulfilling what Jesus commanded: *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

#### IV. *The Prayers*

We don't know exactly which prayers the early church prayed, but it's more than a good guess their prayers came from their Jewish experience. Three times a day, for sure, and possibly five times a day. And there were all kinds of prayers, as many kinds of prayer as there are psalms in the Hebrew Bible:

- Petitionary prayers
- Intercessory prayers
- Meditative prayers
- Contemplative prayers

And prayers expressing “Thanks,” “Help!,” “Why?,” and “Wow!”

Like Christ had done, so the early church, and so us: Before any meeting, before any major initiative, before we do anything, we pray.

It seems the prayers of the early church were infused, as so many of our prayers are, with reckless love and untethered spirits. When we look at the rest of the book of Acts and the letters Paul wrote to the churches of his day, the picture we get of the first Christians is delightfully disturbing –

- great confusion and heartfelt community;
- occasional disorder and persistent dedication;
- great heartache at setbacks and tremendous joy at victories.

There were no magical, superstition-soaked formulas to follow, simply prayers. Sometimes not much decorum, but always deep connection with the One who is the Creator of the world, the Author of life.

Like the early Christians, we pray because we may *and* because we must. We pray because sometimes it is only God who can show us what we need to do and how we are to act.

#### V. *Always a Question of Devotion*

But how do we ultimately enact this four-fold outline of plugging into the abundant life?

We plug into the inspiring power of God's gift of the abundant life through simple commitments of devotion.

Acts 2:42 says it rather plainly: *“And they devoted themselves ....”* They devoted themselves. They devoted themselves. They committed devotion.

Some people are blessed (and burdened) to commit words to memory.

Too many politicians commit certain pieces of legislation to eternal oblivion.

Many of us commit our time and talents to favorite noble causes and worthy endeavors.

Some people, tragically, commit crimes.

Christians, members of the faith community that follows after the redeeming example of Jesus, commit devotions. We commit devotion by offering who we are and what we have to the One who will elicit the best from us for the growth of love and peace and hope in the world. Though our acts of devotion might seem to be abjectly humble – the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers – God can use them to accomplish great and glorious purposes.

To be devoted is to live with extreme trust and abiding loyalty regarding what God can do. Not what we must do, but what God can fulfill in and through us. Plugging into the abundant life is a matter of entrusting to God our often bent and occasionally broken selves, and audaciously assuming that God will make us (and the world!) whole.

I close with two focus points for your consideration. One was a wonderful member of this congregation, and the other is an aphorism for the living of our days.

Frances Tirk, now of blessed memory, was a beautiful blessing to her family, her friends and to our family faith. She had a big hug for anyone coming her way and she had a heart as big as anything you can imagine. Frances had known hardship and desperation and yet still managed to construct a wonderful life, despite whatever obstacles came her way. I will never forget the story that her daughter Jean told me about one Christmas in Breckenridge. In pretty sparse times, Frances borrowed money so that she could buy four ornaments to adorn the family Christmas tree. It wasn’t much, but Frances was bound and determined to make Christmas happen for her children.

From her origins in the cold and harsh terrain of North Dakota, to Minnesota, to Canada, and then to Kansas City, there as no disconnect between what Frances said with her lips and how she behaved with her life. “She lived the way she believed,” as one family member put it so tellingly. Within the framework of her daily routines and the rituals that ordered the living of her days, Frances was true blue, the genuine article. If you wanted a definition of “Christian,” you wouldn’t have to resort to a dictionary. All you’d need to do was point to Frances and say, “Now there is a Christian!”

What made Frances Tirk such a person? She plugged into the abundant life of “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers.” And she did so trusting God fully and unreservedly. This is why she didn’t flinch in the face of the cancer that besieged her in her final days. This is what provided her the energy to continue in her 93rd year until she had said all of her goodbyes to you her family and friends. This is what moved her to be at peace as she was released into God’s eternal care.

*“Dios escribe derecho con lineas torcidas,”* says an old Iberian aphorism. (*“God write straight with crooked lines.”*) And while I am not an Iberian, I know that the aphorism’s truth is exactly what Acts 2:42 is all about. Through our acts of devotion – however imperfect, bent or crooked – we plug into the abundant life. With the crooked lines of our lives, God writes straight, beautiful lines of care and compassion and justice and mercy and joy for the world.

Now, somebody might say “Amen!” to that!! Amen. God bless you. And I love you all.

#### NOTES

- 1 Thanks to William H. Willimon for this phrase, from his commentary – *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 40.
- 2 Charles Jeffrey, *“We have lived and loved together”*
- 3 Willimon, p.41.