

The CARING CHURCH
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(Much of the following is taken, some verbatim, from Steve Bell used with their encouragement and permission as part of the 50 Day Adventure of Chapel of the Air)

See if you can identify with these observations made by an elderly couple who have spent their lifetime living in the mountains of western North Carolina.

Now these aren't formally educated folks - just ordinary people, but what they have to say is significant. (from Vol. 3 Foxfire books)

The old man Lawton Brooks begins:

"I've seen lots of changes in my life.
The world is different from what it used t'be.
Back then, when people had more time, they thought lots more
of people than they do now.
People is goin' so fast, they ain't got time to take up
with you.
Used to be all ever'body had was time.
They had plenty of it.
They would stay all day with you if'n they wanted to.
In fact, they could stay all week if'n they wanted to.
They had all the time.
They didn't have nothin' to say like:
I've got to be somewhere tomorrow, or
I've got to be somewhere in an 'our or
I've got to be out somewhere soon.
They wasn't no jobs like that.

Back then, they wasn't no such thing as a car -
you couldn't hurry... Seems like now if you can't
go to Atlanta an' back in the same day. you way behind.
You ain't got time to fool with it.

People livin' s'fast you gotta keep up with it in order
to stay up with things.
You gotta be fast to keep up with it.
You can't slow down liken we used to.

Florence Brooks (Lawton's wife) chimed in:

We used t'walk across the mountains - start early in the
morning till nearly dark to see Lawton's daddy. And we

did it carryin' a baby. Walked twenty two miles.
We'd stay a day or two, rest up and then walk back.
We enjoyed it.

Lawton breaks in:

I'll tell you what, people enjoyed life better than they do
now. Because ever'body thought s'much more of each other.

You never met a stranger. Never met anybody who thought they was any
bit better than you, neither.

If you got down sick, people'd come asking' about your
eatin' supply, too.

If you didn't have it, here'd come somebody with a shoulder
of meat..somebody with a ham...throw it right down there on
your table...see that you had somethin' to eat.
And not never expectin' to get a dime out of it.
We never expected t'get a penny out of nothin' we done like
that.

Nowadays, it seems you can get sick an' people ain't
gonna go see about you t'ask how y'are, let alone do
anything for you. You'd freeze t'death, cause they ain't
gonna get you no wood.

People loved people better in them days.
Nowadays they's livin' too fast.
They ain't got time t'take time with you.

Believe me, we was happier in them days than we is now.

Now Lawton and Florence may never become prime-time T.V. commentators but
what they have seen in our culture is very accurate and their analysis of it is
profound.

"People don't care for people like they used to.

"Nowdays they're livin' too fast.

They're right! What really matter in life - are relationships.

What matter most in this world are other people.

And while we know that, it is disheartening to watch ourselves live so fast and try to
put so many things into our lives that the relationships that we say are so important
get neglected.

In a church of all places it would seem that people are cared for.

But has it ever bothered you to realize how many people "fall through the cracks"?

Seemingly happy marriages that disintegrate apparently overnight - and no one even knew they were having trouble.

Or those fringe families in the church no one knows or reaches out to, and when they finally leave the church - lonely and rejected - most in the congregation don't even notice or care! They just..."fell through the cracks".

Or the man who is struggling in his business.
He's having difficulty supporting his family.
He's entertaining thoughts of ending it all.
He desperately needs words of hope and encouragement
from other members of the church,
without which, he too will fall through the cracks.

The fact is that all around us there are hurting and struggling people who are falling through the cracks because God's people are too busy, living too fast, to slow down and meet the needs of others.

In a recently published book entitled LIFETRENDS: The Future of Baby Boomers and other Aging Americans the authors note:

"The future of the American family will be profoundly influenced by a cluster of unprecedented demographic developments: low birth and mortality rates, high divorce rates, and increasing numbers of people who never marry.

"Taken together these trends mean that that many people will live a substantial portion of their later years without any immediate family because they will have few or no living children or grandchildren.

(Now understand that these are secular authors who ask the next question).

"How will these people meet their needs for emotional sustenance, security, and companionship? From where will arise the ties that bind? And to whom will these people be bound? (p.g. 41-42)

The social scientists are almost at a loss for words to describe the desolate aspects of this lifestyle.

One person described the situation graphically:

"It's getting to the point around here that you're going to have to hire somebody to cry at your funeral"

Unfortunately, people in today's society feel more like this than most of us would like to believe!

BUT ON THE POSITIVE SIDE think of what a tremendous opportunity we in the church have to be difference-makers in people's lives.

I want you to think with me for a few minutes about the church that began in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

Acts 2 gives us a description of a people who practiced this positive "difference making" in people's lives.

Here were people who were ministry-sensitive.
They saw and met the needs of others.

At Southern Gables we talk about being a people whose purpose is:
CULTIVATING, CELEBRATING, COMMUNICATING, AND CARING
We get that purpose right from these verses.

Our Purpose is:

Cultivating our relationship to Jesus Christ -
that means we want to be a learning church just as we see the people in the Jerusalem church devoting themselves to teaching of the Apostles.

We looked at that more closely three weeks ago.

Celebrating our new life in Christ -

That means we want to be a worshipping church.

We looked at that last week.

Next week we will look at ourselves in comparison to this Jerusalem church as a Communicating Church - a people committed to reaching out to others with the news of forgiveness in Christ and the gift of the H/S.

Today we see reflected in this Jerusalem church another aspect of our four-fold purpose: This was a **CARING** church.

Please notice in verse 42 that these people not only devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching but also to **FELLOWSHIP!**

This word "fellowship" is a pretty big word.

It has to do with an intimacy of relationship
and a generosity of spirit.

In other words, it is both an understanding and
an attitude that result in actions.

The word "fellowship" means "a sharing together in something".

These people had something in common that was more important than all of their differences.

Note first of all what they shared "in" - what they had in common:

Notice how verse 42 describes their fellowship:

"The breaking of bread and prayer"

The "breaking of bread" is a reference to the Lord's supper. They came together as it says in vs. 46 and they took the bread and the wine and they did as Jesus had instructed the disciples - they were reminded of the death of Jesus on their behalf - the death that made it possible for them to be forgiven and to know life, spiritual life.

Every time they took it, it reminded them that by God's grace they were his children.

And they prayed together. Nothing draws people closer together than to bow together before the Father in heaven to make known their needs and to vulnerably enlist His help.

Their relationship to each other as members of the same earthly family,

or their relationship to each other as being of the same race or country,

or their relationship to each other as belonging to the same organization or working at the same place, was nothing in comparison to this new relationship of being part of the same spiritual family -

they belonged to each other,
they had the same heavenly Father,
The same Lord, the same Holy Spirit indwelled them, they were brothers and sisters in a relationship that would last for eternity.

That is what they shared together in.

That was the source of their fellowship - that was the foundation of their belonging.

And that fellowship wasn't founded on their actions, but on God's actions toward them. They belonged.

One of the two most important human needs is the need to belong.

Just listen to people, observe them, watch how they act, and you will soon discover that what they long for is to truly belong -

to know a place where there are others who accept them not for what they have done, or what they might do but simply because they are loved.

Our natural home ought to be that way. But even more so, our fellowship in the church ought to be that way, because that is how God has accepted us.

He loves us unconditionally.

Through Christ we have become part of his family.

And when we realize that we are loved unconditionally by God and that the others in the Church are also loved unconditionally by Him - then we can begin to love each other that same way.

It is in that context that we know belonging.

Oh, how people long to belong.

These people in Jerusalem understood that they now belonged. they understood their common ground in Jesus.

Again, there were certainly many differences between these people but they shared together in - they had fellowship - in the most important dimension of life - they were brothers and sisters in Christ.

But please note also that this "fellowship" was not only an intimacy of relationship it was a generosity of attitude and action.

Someone wrote, Fellowship is not only a sharing "in" but is also a sharing "out".

Acts 2:44-47

They had everything in common
they sold their possessions as anyone had need

If you study chapters four and five you will discover that the sale of their possessions was not compulsory.

Neither evidently was it universal - meaning that not everyone sold everything -

for look at vs.46 they met in someone's home.

What our text apparently means is that these people loved each other so much that everything they had was disposable.

If anyone had need, there were others who would even sell what they owned to meet that need.

There was no sense of possessiveness.

These people saw themselves as simply stewards of their possessions.

And those possessions were held by them for the purpose of meeting others' needs.

Does that describe your fellowship?

But it is important to see that their generosity extended beyond their possessions -
These people gave themselves to each other.

They met together regularly.

They prayed together.

They worshipped together even in their homes.

Does that describe your fellowship?

I am certain that prior to Pentecost, prior to the day of their conversion and prior to the day that the Spirit of God began to govern their lives, these people were too busy, moving too fast to truly invest in the lives of others.

But the Holy Spirit changed their hearts

The Holy Spirit was now present with these people.

The Holy Spirit had radically altered their values and their attitudes.

And in response they changed their lifestyles to accommodate each other.

These people loved each other.

And that love evidenced itself in their FELLOWSHIP-

Their CARING for each other and for others.

Earlier I said that "belonging" was one of the two most significant human needs.

The other is the need for significance.

Everyone of us longs to know that our lives will count.

Worse than seeing another person waste their life is to see ourselves waste our life.

We desperately want to know that we can make a difference.

It is what these new Christians shared "in" together that met their need to belong,

And it is what they shared "out" together that met their need for significance.

By being part of God's family, the church, they knew both Acceptance and Significance.

And the beautiful result was that the needs of people were being met. Genuine Fellowship resulted in a CARING CHURCH.

How do we respond?

The Jerusalem Christians were so influenced by the Holy Spirit that they looked for ways to minister to one another.

They were so delighted with their relationship to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ that they naturally reached out to each other.

All of us know people right now we are lonely,
or are going through very rough times.
We all know people who may even now feel overwhelmed by some of life's circumstances.

And most of us can do at least something to help lighten the load.

Have you considered today how Christ might speak through you to another person?

Is it a word of encouragement?

Is it a word of thanks?

Is it a word of invitation to join you in something?

Is it just a simple but sincere greeting?

How long since you have thanked a teacher or a nursery worker?

How long since you have invited someone or a family to dinner?

How long since you have just given some of your time to help someone?

You know, we can strategize and organize and computerize this place but those tools cannot minister to hurting people -

Only people can do that, only you can do that.

This Jerusalem church was made up of people who knew that because they belonged (because they were accepted by God and each other) that they could make a difference in the lives of others.

Because they shared "in" something together
they could share "out" with each other and others.

Lawton and Florence Brooks were right: "People is livin' too fast. And they ain't got time for each other"

But they were wrong about something.
It isn't the culture, society that makes us live
too fast.

You could slow the whole world down and still not
have people who care for each other.

True caring comes out of Fellowship.
And Fellowship comes out of a changed heart.
A heart that knows the presence of the Holy Spirit