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ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

“LUKE’S LIST---THE BIG 4---ACTS 2:42, PART 2---FELLOWSHIP”

A couple of weeks back I began a little four-week summer sermon series based on one verse that is later in the chapter from where is taken the epistle reading for Pentecost Sunday---Acts 2:42. In that verse, St. Luke, the author of Acts, is talking about the first Orthodox congregation---the original Christian church in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. He lists 4 things that that first church particularly focused on. I called it “Luke’s List” and “The Big 4”. Four things about that church that made it pleasing to God; four things that we at St. Matthew’s should be sure to focus on.

Here is that verse, Acts 2:42---“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ doctrine, and to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers.” In the first sermon, we looked at #1 in the Big 4, in Luke’s list: “the apostles’ doctrine.” We saw how important it is for us, like it was for the Jerusalem church, to be faithful to true doctrine, to the apostles’ doctrine.

Today we will go on to #2 of the Big 4. “Fellowship”. Let me re-read the first part of that verse to give the context---“and they devoted themselves to the apostles’ doctrine, and to *fellowship*....”

The Greek word here translated as “fellowship” is “koinonia”. Koinonia means a deeper type of fellowship than we sometimes mean by the English word. It’s not just chit-chatting over a cup of coffee (although that’s a good part of koinonia or fellowship). Koinonia/fellowship means something deeper---it means a congregation being a family. Not a business, not a club, not a “religious organization”---but a family. A local manifestation of the bigger family of God---God’s Church.

Being a parish family, not just an organization, having true fellowship means such things as sorrowing with each other, helping each other, actually caring about each other.

That’s the way our parish, and all Orthodox parishes, should be. But sometimes things get messed up.....

There is a story, a true one, that I may have told you about years ago when it was “going around” in the archdiocese. It’s about a particular parish which shall remain nameless---and, don’t worry, you won’t be able to guess which parish, as I’ve doubt most of you have ever heard of it! And it’s not in our diocese. I first heard about this parish while having lunch with its priest years ago at one of the Clergy Symposiums. He had been at this parish about 2 years at that time and I asked him how things were going. He replied, “Better! After 2 years I think the place is recovering now from the huge Uncle Ben problem.” I asked, “Who’s Uncle Ben? Some parishioner that caused lots of trouble?” He said, “Oh, no, I’m referring to Uncle Ben’s Glorified Rice.” In case you don’t know, that’s a leading brand of rice. (When my brothers and I saw it advertised on TV when we were children, we always changed its name from “Uncle Ben’s Glorified Rice” to “Uncle Ben’s Horrified Mice.”) So the priest went on to tell me the story..... This parish did a lot of fundraising Middle Eastern food dinners---the parishioners and townspeople came and paid for a delicious meal. Usually part of the meal was rice. And for many years they had

always used Kroger's rice. And then one of the cooks insisted Uncle Ben's rice was better. That led to lots of arguing in the kitchen. And then the fighting spread to the whole parish. It even came up often at parish council meetings and people in the parish lined up into two very angry factions----the Kroger faction and the Uncle Ben faction. It even was argued about at annual parish meetings. And lots of members quit the church over it! And the priest I was talking too got to try to put everything back together again! After 2 years, it was at least getting better. (But I don't know what kind of rice they now use!)

Yes, parishes can get all messed up and lose fellowship, koinonia, the sense of being a family. May God preserve us from anything like that!

Instead, let us focus on #2 in Luke's List---fellowship. If we focus on lesser matters, we are in danger. We could end up like the "Uncle Ben church". So instead, let's focus on the big things, like fellowship. On being truly a family of followers of Jesus Christ.

Here are some ways we can focus on fellowship, on being a family:

---Keep reminding ourselves that a church is not a business, not a club, not a "religious association". A church is a family of God's people.

---Words are important. Words mean things. So when you give to the church, please don't call it your "dues". From day one, *we haven't had "dues" at St. Matthew's. As we've often said, dues are for bowling clubs, not for churches, not for families.* "Pledge"? Yes. "Offering"? Yes. Dues? No. None in this parish.

---Focusing on being a family is also why, again from day one, we don't charge for doing weddings, or baptisms, or funerals. Families don't charge their members for things. We are a family, so no charge for such things. It's true lots of parishes do charge.....some years back a priest from another Orthodox jurisdiction called to get some advice. He was trying to convince his Council that they needed to raise the charge for weddings and baptisms from \$100 to \$200. He called because he wanted to let the Council know that other churches charged higher amounts. I had to tell him that the charge here was "zero". That probably didn't help him much with his Council, but we're still friends!

And one time, after a baptism, at the reception, the godfather, who was from a different Orthodox jurisdiction, came up to me to apologize. He said he had forgotten to check how much St. Matthew's charged for baptisms and that, being the godfather, he wanted to write out the check..... I told him we don't charge for baptisms, because we're all one family---so why charge each other? He thought I was joking and insisted we must have a set charge. I finally convinced him it wasn't a joke!

Things like this—not charging dues like we're some kind of professional organization, not having fees for sacraments.....such practices are a way for us to remind ourselves that we are a family, and that fellowship is what matters.

---Another way to focus on true fellowship: *to thank God that we have been blessed as a parish to be made up of people of so many different backgrounds.* Different religious backgrounds, different nationalities, different "social status". And we all get along just fine---such joy! This helps us to remember what is most important. Our ethnic backgrounds are important and good, but what is most important is that we are all together part of one spiritual nation, one fellowship, one family---the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is real fellowship!

So we need to always strive to deepen our fellowship by loving each other, no matter

where each of us comes from or where our ancestors came from. I want to read you a quote from Father Amphilochius, a holy monk on Mt. Athos in Greece. But first, a bit of context..... In case you don't know, over the centuries Greeks and Turks have often fought each other and the two countries certainly haven't gotten along! So here is the monk's quote----"I was born to love people. It doesn't concern me if he is a Turk, or black, or white. I see in the face of each person the image of God. And for this image of God I am willing to sacrifice everything." (Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit, Herman A. Middleton, Protecting Veil Press, 2004, p. 59)

Our fellowship will continue to deepen and grow if we always remind ourselves----that person in the next pew? It doesn't matter what nationality he is or what his background is. He is your brother in Christ!

Another way to focus on fellowship in a parish-----take care of each other. Taking care of each other is a huge help for strengthening fellowship in a parish. Crises are always coming up in parishioners' lives----tragedies, illness, financial problems, etc. Now we can just say, "We'll pray for you." But it's better to take action as well as to say prayers. It is better to support those in a problem, to visit them, to help them. Every so often here at St. Matthew's, we will collect money from each other (totally voluntarily, of course) to help a parishioner in great need. (I often get the privilege of being the deliverer of the help---what a joyful thing to do!). And when we do that, you folks always respond generously. And it gives happiness to those you help---not just the happiness of getting some concrete help for the crisis they face. Of course, that's part of their happiness---but also the happiness of knowing they are not alone in their tragedy or need----their church family is right there with them! It shows that our Christian fellowship, being a family, isn't just words----it's real.

As Christians, we are walking together to heaven. It can sometimes be a very hard walk. And so we need to help each other down the path. Sometimes we have to even carry others down the path.

Some years back, the women's softball teams from Western Oregon University and Central Washington University were playing against each other. There was a young woman named Sara Tucholsky playing for Western Oregon who was a pretty good player, but also a frustrated one. She had played softball for years and hit pretty well, except----she had never hit a homerun. She just couldn't seem to put one over the fence. Her turn to bat came and her teammates, knowing how much she wanted a homer, cheered loudly for her to hit one. Well, she finally really got ahold of one and put it over the fence. Everyone cheered wildly, even many of the opposing school's team, as all knew it was her dream come true. She was so excited as she made her home run trot that she missed first base. She realized what had happened and so before she got to second, she turned around to go back and touch it. But somehow she slipped, fell awkwardly and broke her leg! In great pain, she started trying to crawl back to first but it was obvious she couldn't make it. Her teammates ran out on the field and prepared to pick her up and carry her back to first and then around all the bases----they knew the homerun would count as an out if she didn't get around the diamond. But the umpire warned them that it was against the rules to assist a teammate in base running---if they even touched her, she was automatically out. It looked hopeless and then the infielders from the opposing team, Central Washington, walked over and asked the ump if there was a rule against *their* carrying her. He said there

was no such rule in the rulebook. So the opposing players picked up Sara and carefully hauled her to first—they put her foot on the base and then did the same thing at second, third, and home plate. And Sara finally had her home run! (in “Our Daily Bread”, 11/20/09)

Together, we walk towards heaven. But it’s not an easy road. So, being we’re family, being we have “koinonia”, “fellowship”, we should help each other down that road, even carrying each other sometimes. That’s the kind of fellowship St. Luke is talking about in the “Big Four” in Acts 2:42. And that’s the kind of fellowship we should strive to have here, by grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, what about when people drift away from the fellowship of God’s family, the Church—indeed, from our parish? We’ve all seen it happen too many times. Someone starts attending less and less often, gets less and less involved. Then it becomes rare when we see them. And then sometimes there comes a point when we don’t see them at all. . . . They vanish from the family. And that makes us very sad indeed! Should we get angry at them for leaving us and the Church behind? No. Should we speak badly about them? No.

Instead, we should call them, text them, write them, e-mail them, visit them if possible. All of that to let them know they are missed and that they are important to us. To see how they are doing. To just be kind and show you care.

Now, of course, as the pastor I do all that regularly. And I should. But it’s even better if you do those things. I’m sure it means more if a lay person contacts a person who is fading away than if the priest does---after all, it’s his “job” and expected. When you do it, it may be a bit of a surprise and thus have more impact. So when you notice you haven’t seen someone much lately, don’t just stew about why they’re not coming. Give them a call and ask how they are----it just might help. At least, you tried!

So, in closing, there are lots and lots of things we can do as a parish to focus on fellowship similar to how that first Orthodox parish in Jerusalem did. I’ve told you lots of them this morning and I’m sure there are more that you can think of.

One of the Big 4 on Luke’s List in Acts 2:42 that the first church back in Jerusalem focused on was “fellowship”. Being a family. May God help us to do the same. May He bless and strengthen our fellowship, our family.

Next time---#3 of the Big 4---“the breaking of the bread”.

