

A Taste of the Peaceable Kingdom Acts 2:41-47, Romans 12:5-21

Portions adapted from "Becoming a Community Part Two," Daniel Richter @ SermonCentral.Com

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them...
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9).



Do you recognize this picture? Titled the "Peaceable Kingdom," it is actually one of over 60 variations of the same theme that were all painted by American artist and Quaker minister Edward Hicks, attempting to visualize Isaiah's description of life on God's holy mountain. Most all of these pictures also feature, in the background, William Penn's 1681 treaty with the local natives, founding the state of Pennsylvania as a sanctuary for pacifists in one more of many historic attempts at this Biblically described peaceable kingdom. Including the image of the peace treaty, was Hicks way of reminding those who bought his art of what life in "Penn's Woods" was intended to be.

In academia, this idea is called the "Camelot dream" (as in King Arthur and his knights of the round table). It is a rather common theme in literature and art because it is a desire residing deeply in every human heart; this hope of one day living in a place where violence is unknown and where righteousness feels at home; nothing less than the realization of life in the Kingdom of God.

And yes, this dream, has been temporarily achieved, usually in miniature, at various times and places throughout history: certainly in most good marriages, but also when—usually Christian groups like the Amish, or Brethren, or Quakers—decide to live together in an intentional community, having and sharing all things for the common good. The 1970's term for this would be "living in a commune." And sad but true, usually all such communes fall apart after 10-20 years either when the founder moves on and the next generation cannot sustain the dream or more often when trouble comes from the outside to tear apart their idyllic world. One thing the Devil really hates is a thriving example of God's Kingdom on earth.

It was this Peaceable Kingdom, that was spontaneously forming in the young Christian community which was born that first Pentecost. And this community, surprisingly, lasted anywhere from four to fourteen years in Jerusalem—accurate dating is somewhat vague around this period—before persecution atomized the young church, driving its members to the ends of the earth where they lanted new churches wherever they traveled. And as you read through Paul's letters you can discern that wherever a new young church was planted—with one or two exceptions—the Peaceable Kingdom lifestyle also spontaneously grew among its members. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Today we can only briefly look at the summary results following Peter's first sermon, to get a taste of what God's Peaceable Kingdom living may feel like. Then next week we will return to this very important portion of Scripture to learn some of the ingredients that made this peaceable kingdom a small bit of heaven on earth.

Acts 2:44 summarizes what was so special about life in this first Christian community:

All who believed were **together**
and had all things in **common** ...

And day by day
the Lord added to their number
those who were being saved
Acts 2:44-47

So what made this community special was that even though they had their own homes, they essentially started living **together, holding all things in common** as if they were actually one large family—which is what they had now become because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Although, right here at the start, we need to acknowledge that their personal efforts had little to do with it: God was the ultimate reason that this or any Christian community ever forms. As we heard from Peter's sermon, it is God who calls, convicts, changes us, and gives us His Holy Spirit—birthing us into the body of Christ, His church. It is God who provides the gifts for ministry in the church, and God's Holy Spirit who empowers and blesses our efforts; working in and through us to bring God's kingdom to earth. Without the "tie that binds" us into a real family—the Holy Spirit—any attempt at recreating a peaceable kingdom is doomed to fail: for, *unless the Lord builds the house, the laborers work in vain* (Psalm 127:1). So it was very clear to the members of this first church that it was God who was adding to their numbers daily, God was the primary agent of change and growth, yet these young joyous believers were also working with God to build this first congregation into the Christian community that so impressed their neighbors. And this can happen again here once we change, once we decide that a peaceable kingdom community is something worth working towards; and we begin asking God to help us build such a community that out of pure Christian love lives together having a common heart.

Without a Spirit filled sense of togetherness and a common heart, we're just spinning our wheels. We're ineffective and our ministry is in vain. But when we have these two things in our personal and corporate life, we truly become a reflection of God. We become an extension of His love and goodness and we can accomplish His purposes for us as individuals, for us as a church, and for our neighbors around us.

The first major component of community then is: togetherness.

As I have often said: **we were not made to do life on our own. We were made to live in relationship and the church is God's way of satisfying this need for us, His children.** We don't have any instances of the saints in the New Testament being encouraged to go it alone or to isolate themselves from the body. Even their missionaries traveled as teams. And they taught that **to accept Christ is to become part of a family, to be a part of the body of Christ.** When a part is disconnected from the body it shrivels up and dies, it's only as a part of the whole that we can experience and fulfill God's purposes in our lives. Which is a lesson we can learn from watching that great example of Christian community **Gilligan's Island**; this was an unfortunate group of people who had only wanted a three hour tour, but got stranded on an island.

What made the show Gilligan's Island work—and so funny--was the unique and different personalities of each of the castaways. The **skipper** was smart and fearless, he knew how to take charge and lead the group. The **Howells** were filthy rich and they knew how to handle anything that required a knack for business and administration. **Mary-Ann** was the comforter and encourager, always ready with a coconut pie for whoever was feeling down. The **professor** was better than McGyver. He could figure out a solution for any problem, other than the fact that they were stuck, with one of his incredible bamboo

inventions. **Ginger** could act and she could get them out of whatever jam they were in with whomever was visiting the island at the time. And **Gilligan** was the one with the servant's heart. He would do anything for anyone and usually mess it up but it was always done with a great heart.

It was a great show. It is also a great picture of community. They survived because they complemented each other's strengths. They each had a sense of belonging, that their gifts and talents were important. Their lives were intertwined, each felt supported by all the others and because of that, they were able to handle whatever each new episode challenged them with. In one episode, Gilligan got upset and felt unloved, so he moved into a cave by himself on the other side of the island only to quickly realize that he couldn't survive without the support of the others. He learned that he needed the rest of the group and that together they could accomplish things that he could never do alone.

Yes, Gilligan's Island is a picture of Christian community. Here was a group of people, maintaining their individuality and uniqueness while coming together as one to live life together and move towards one goal, in their case, to get off the island. In our case our goal is to advance the Kingdom of God here on earth. We could learn a lot from this group. This is the kind of community and togetherness that we see in the early church and this is what we can see in this place. But how does it begin--with this sense of living together, of being mutually dependent.

Throughout the New Testament you see the word "church." In a few important instances it is referring to the entire body of believers, but most of the time it refers to a local gathering of believers. **The New Testament teaches the need for, and assumes that believers will become members in a local congregation.** I have heard people argue that you can be a Christian without being a member of a church, not be plugged into the body. There is no verse in Scripture that supports this claim.

As the writer of Hebrews implored the believers

Let us not give up meeting together,
as some are in the habit of doing,
but let us encourage one another –
and all the more as you see
the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:25

There is great value in coming together, in being together. There are those benefits as listed in our Romans passage: mutually complementary gifts, mutual affection, mutual service and support of each other. **A Christian without a church family is a contradiction.**

They are like an unattached part of the body, just lying around, useless, and perhaps even a bit scary by themselves. As Grumpy Maxine observed: *some people see the glass as half empty, others see my dentures soaking there and get freaked out.*

We were designed to be together! *The Bible says we are put together, joined together, built together, members together, heirs together, fitted together, held together, and we will be caught up together to meet Jesus and spend eternity together. You're not on your own anymore* (Rick Warren). So you might as well get used to it!! The early church understood this, they did things together and their lives were intertwined and connected with each other.

Bill Moore, Pastor of the Disciples of Christ Church—who moved this year to a Black Mountain Church—used to live right behind me. And his yard used to hold four of those massive proud oaks that we see around town, trees that grow generally by themselves with no other nearby competition to slow their spread and girth. Compared to his, my yard—my little woods--appears overfull with tall, spindly oaks; each apparently competing with all the others to grow towards the sky. I said Bill's yard used to hold those big oaks because when that Duracho wind came through Bedford several years back, it blew every one of his trees over, damaging his house, the neighbor's house, and the neighbor's car. While my spindly oaks lost nothing more than a few dead limbs. My trees, rather than competing, in my woods actually danced through the storm together, each bending with the wind in support of the other; blocking wind for the tree behind it, and in its turn being shielded by the one in front. You see my yard doesn't have many trees...it has a single woods (a community of trees).



And that's what togetherness can do for you, helping you dance through life's storms—not as an individual but as part of a supportive community.

If you dissect the early church, or any healthy ministry today, you'll find that the reason that they grow, the reason that they minister in ways that seem to stretch beyond their means and abilities, is because they support each other. All the members draw strength from one another; it is hard to tell where the abilities of one ends and another's ability begins. They have learned the value of togetherness, of being connected.

Now, if you have been watching the leadership of this church for the last few years, you have seen something miraculous happening. God has brought in two pastors who complement, support, and enhance my abilities. And, God is raising up leaders who have counseling, trouble shooting, accounting, and architectural abilities as well as people who have missionary experience along with a workman's knowledge of the Bible. What you are seeing here is called "synergy"—the sum of the total is much greater than the sum of the parts. I am very EXCITED to be a part of what's now happening at Bedford Presbyterian!! I see God beginning to build us into a Christian community, a thriving expression of the body of Christ. Together!

Very briefly, you don't have to read too deeply into these six verses to see the ingredients that went into building this common spirit within community:

- Those who heard the message demonstrated their faith by being baptized—publicly tying themselves to the other believers. And when they weren't working...
- They devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching (learning what Jesus had taught)—together.
- They enjoyed fellowship—doing recreation and leisure times—together.
- The "breaking of bread" which I think means so much more than just eating together, rather eating together with a real sense of family.
- They spent much time together both in the temple—listening and learning—and in their homes being family, praising God, and yes receiving the goodwill of their non-Christian neighbors (something which is a true indicator of the Spirit's powerful influence)

All this we will look into next Sunday, but my challenge for you this coming 4th of July week is to do the following thing:

Think about what living in God's peaceable kingdom might feel like.

Ask yourself honestly, "Would I want to live in such a community?"

If not, why not?

What would you be willing to do to help build such a community here in this congregation.

And finally—like those early Christians—I beg you to pray daily, and for more than just five minutes—for God’s Holy Spirit to begin moving through all our hearts, asking Him to shape us into such a family.

Let’s pray together.