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Scripture: Acts 2: 42-27, Ephesians 4:1-6

Acts 2:42-47: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds[a] to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home[b] and ate their food with glad and generous[c] hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Ephesians 4:1-6: I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

I grew up in the Lititz Church of the Brethren. I still remember my first time going to Sunday School at Lititz...actually it is my first memory of attending any Sunday School or church. I was in first grade. I entered the classroom...and I remember seeing some of my new friends that I met in my class at Lititz Elementary school. I remember feeling relieved that I knew someone. My Sunday school teacher was a grandmotherly saint of the church, Mary Weaver. Oh, how I loved Mary.

Over the years that followed, the Lititz congregation became my family. I still consider it my home church. They nurtured me emotionally and spiritually. They protected me and helped me navigate the challenges the secular world threw at me. They called me into ministry...licensed and ordained me. And I know they are still there for me...encouraging me and praying for me.

There was a brief time when I almost left the Lititz church. When Don and I got married, one of the decisions we needed to make as a couple was whether we would attend church? And if we did, where were we going to attend? We were leaning towards looking for another church. We cited the reason being that the pastor preached above our heads and found ourselves struggling to find meaning and understanding helpful to our knowledge of God. I honestly don't know if that was a genuine concern at the time or if we were just looking for a reason to not attend church.

But then, during that time, a new Sunday school class was started, the nucleus of which was five newly married couples. We were one of the five couples invited to be a part of this group which we eventually named the Lamplighters class.

This small group of seekers grew into something more than merely a group that came together on a Sunday morning to work through a lesson from the Bible. We formed a bond that remains strong today even though some of us have moved to different parts of the country. Our bond was formed as we studied God's Word together, as we fellowshiped together...not only during church planned events; but also, as we played and ate together outside of church events.

We participated together in acts of service to others outside our group. We had a commitment to one another based not on total agreement in our beliefs...but based on our faith and desire to

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follow Christ. I look back on those days with great fondness. Sometimes I even long for the return of those days.

When I read the scripture from Acts that you heard this morning, I can easily find myself comparing our time with the Lamplighters to the early church's experiences and find similarities. There was something very special about the early Christians' experience. It's an appealing bond and culture that can be easily idealized. They had an intimacy that many people today crave. It sounds almost too good to be true. One might question if it's possible to have something so special in today's church.

With the forces of evil pressing in on the life of the church, the bond of Christian relationships is threatened on a daily basis. Something as simple as the technology that's available to us today...and which we find helpful to our day to day living...also distracts us from engaging one another. With our phones, laptops, tablets, video games and televisions, we can entertain ourselves without leaving our sofas.

There are so many opportunities vying for our time that our schedules are overloaded...leaving us barely enough time to sleep. Then there is our culture's pressure to engage in selfish ambition and desires. The political battles in our present government threaten to divide us as we pick sides to defend.

Social evils beyond our control threaten the bond of a Christian church community. Violence plays no favorites...leaving our church communities as possible targets for people angry with the world...and God. People worshiping God and holding bible studies have been murdered in their own houses of worship. It seems every day we hear about sexual violations in the church...jeopardizing the integrity, trust and safety expected from the church.

Yes...I know, as is the case with many congregations...you are well acquainted with the menacing evils that attack the church. You have your own battle scars. These attacks of evil on the church create pain and brokenness. The safe space that we've known our churches to be...is standing on shaky ground for some people...within our communities of faith...and those on the outside. In some communities of faith, trust has been broken as evil has been granted **a blind eye**. That is unacceptable.

But lest we think we are alone in this struggle...we are not. Fear and pain are not new to the church. The early church faced many pressures too. The formation of the bond we read about in the scriptures happened on the heels of the violent crucifixion of Christ. The ascension of Christ, while amazing, meant that the great Teacher, Healer, Savior...would not be physically present with them.

It was a time of persecution. Both Jews and Gentiles sought to smother this small spark of faith...putting an end to something that threatened their own beliefs and practices. The believers suffered countless losses...many lost their lives. It was not an easy time...even so, the church survived and grew. How was this possible?

One reason they survived is because they had each other. They were more than a group of friends meeting for worship. They were a family. So are we. Throughout the scriptures we hear the faithful being addressed as brothers and sisters...or brethren, which in the Greek is both male and female. We are brothers and sisters because God created us and God is our heavenly Parent. We are bound together through the sacrifice of our Brother and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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This special relationship that we have is not without its' challenges. Just as our blood related brothers and sisters...we have our differences. Sometimes we even hurt one another. It takes some work to have a healthy relationship. I read and shared a wonderful quote written by Anmol Andore that I got on Facebook this week...maybe you saw it. It said, "Relationships don't last because of the good times; they last because the hard times were handled with love and care." This is so true.

We read that the members of that early seedling of a church nurtured their relationship using a variety of tools. We find that they learned together as they listened to and discussed the apostles' teachings. They fellowshiped together in the temple....**and** in their homes. They prayed together for themselves and for others. They worked together to make things happen. They shared with those who had needs. They worshipped together.

In doing these things together they created a safe space for opportunities to really get to know one another. They developed feelings of sensitivity and responsibility to one another so they could support and help with each other's physical, material...and emotional needs. They made personal sacrifices of time to offer care to their brothers and sisters.

They matured in their respect for one another in spite of their differences. They built secure bonds of trust. They grew to delight in one another's presence. They wanted to be together. The bible says they were happy together...and others outside the church noticed. All of this was possible because they knew they needed each other and they made a commitment to each other. They were not going to allow outside pressures...including persecution beat them.

They had something else going for them. They survived and overcame fear and pain because God was at the center of their lives together. They knew God personally. We know this...because we are told the Holy Spirit was upon them. They were obedient to Christ's teachings...they followed the example of Christ...they loved God...and that then opened them to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In the Ephesians reading for this morning, Paul speaks of the strength of our oneness to one another when we are one with God. It is in that unity with God that the Holy Spirit lives in us and because of the Spirit's indwelling...we possess the life giving and healing qualities of humility, patience, gentleness and love that strengthens our bond with each other.

You have a special bond with one another. A lot has gone into fostering that bond. Within the last year, that precious bond has been threatened by a couple of hard hits...but I believe, you are not going to let those hits destroy your bond with one another. It just might require a little extra intentional..."tlc"...tender loving care right now.

The road behind you took a beating as the forces of evil attacked your bond with one another...and so a few potholes of fear, pain and grief opened up. Some people fell in those potholes...leaving them with wounds. Maybe you feel like one of those people. Maybe you feel like you are on the outside looking in...wondering if the bond you felt with the church family at one time can ever be the same. I'm going to be honest with you...if this is how you are feeling...now is when you really need your church family. Don't let fear and pain win...because if you do, it will be hard to escape its' grip.

Church...you are brothers and sisters...bound together in God's love. The Spirit is on the move in you. I don't know if you realize this...but you have a grand opportunity on your doorstep...to use this unique Christian bond to help each other make the journey through this transition period

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you are in...and at the same time...strengthen your bond with each other. We should always be working to nurture this precious bond we have with one another. How are you going to do that?

I suggest following the same path as our ancestors did...beginning with putting God first. Listen again to what happened next... “All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

In closing this morning, we are going to take a few moments to pray for one another. We will first pray silently for the person seated to the right of us...or in front of us if there is no one to our right. I will then invite you to do the same for the person seated to your left...or the person in front of you if there is no one on your left. You may not know that person...but that doesn't matter...you can still pray for hm or her. We will then close our prayer by praying the Lord's prayer together. Let us pray...