

Good morning! Here in our Osaka International Church family, we have people from many nations, and we also have many Japanese who have traveled or lived overseas. One of the results of international living is that you begin to notice things about your own culture that you did not notice before. The things you notice may be either good or bad, but either way, once you have lived overseas, your own culture does not seem quite as normal as it once did.



For example, since coming to Japan, one of the things I have really noticed American culture is our strong emphasis on the individual. The American focus on the individual can even be seen in how American Christians read and understand the Bible. The American church tends to strongly emphasize the idea of faith as an individual journey. We talk a lot about things like, making an individual decision to believe, having a personal relationship with Jesus, and the importance of private devotional times of reading the Bible and praying alone. None of these things are bad; in fact, they are all essential things that are found in the Bible.



However, I think that the American emphasis on individual faith sometimes makes us quite blind to how strongly the Bible emphasizes the community experience of faith. Overall, I think the Bible emphasizes the group much more than the individual. In **Matthew 18:20**, Jesus said, **“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”** And in **Acts 1:14**, while the disciples were waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, **“They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”** Clearly, there is something special about joining together in Jesus' Name.

The journey of faith portrayed in the Bible is much more like a group hike than an individual pilgrimage. Jesus chose a group of twelve disciples to be with Him, and Jesus often spent time eating and talking with groups. It is true that Jesus often went off alone to pray, and that is an important example for us also. But if we read our Bibles carefully, I think we will see that the community is emphasized much more than the individual. The journey of faith is meant to be a community journey. The individual decision is essential, but the life of faith is a group activity, and even the decision to believe is easier to make in a community context.



Let's think for a moment about the images the Bible uses to describe the church. **1 Corinthians 12:27** tells us, **“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”** So, first of all, the church is the Body of Christ



The church is also the Bride of Christ. In **Revelation 19:7**, we read, **“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.”**



And the church is also, a spiritual house, a temple that God lives in, and we are each living stones in that spiritual building. In **1 Peter 2:5**, Peter writes, **“you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus**



Christ.”

Each of these images emphasizes the idea of individual believers being brought together to make something new, a new community, dedicated to God. Take a look at **1 Peter 2:9-10**, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”** Notice that part, **“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God”** What is Peter saying here? I think Peter is telling us that although we may come to Jesus as individuals from many nations, tribes, and tongues, as we come, we are made into something new – the people of God.

When many people come to faith in a particular time and place, it is not just individuals, but whole tribes and nations that are brought together into the new nation, the people of God. Do you remember the story of the tower of Babel? In 1595, Lucas van Valckenborch painted the Tower of Babel like this. The story is in Genesis 11, and it tells about how all of the people of the world were once united as one people with one language and culture. But instead of being united in the worship of God, instead they were united in rebellion against God. Instead of honoring God, they just wanted to make a name for themselves. God would not allow united rebellion against Him, so the Lord went down and confused their language so they could not understand each other and scattered them over the face of the earth. That is where the beginning of all of the different languages and cultures comes from.



We looked at **Acts 2:9-10** a couple of weeks ago, but let’s take a second look, **“Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”** When the Holy Spirit came on the disciples in Acts 2, there were people from many nations gathered in Jerusalem. But all of the people heard the disciples in their own home language. In addition to being literal history, this miracle is also symbolic of a restored unity of the nations. In a sense, it is the reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel and it points forward to a time when there will once again be unity among all the people of the earth, but this time we will be united in praising God.

So, when we speak of the Good News of Jesus Christ, we are speaking not only of individual salvation, but also of the restoration of fellowship with God and the creation of community on a global scale. Let’s jump ahead in Acts a little bit for just a moment and read **Acts 3:19-21**, **“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets”**

Here, Peter emphasized the need for all to repent of their sins and return to God and he also speaks of the Second Coming of Jesus. But, notice the part where Peter says, **“until the time comes for God to restore everything.”** Individual salvation is only a part of the Good News of Jesus Christ; the promise of the restoration of all things is also Good News. And that includes the bringing together of a new community of mankind, a community which will be united in the worship of God for all of eternity. The building of that community will not be completed until Jesus returns, but it has already begun. It began back in Acts 2. We looked at this same passage last week, but let’s read **Acts 2:40-47** again. This time, let’s notice what happens to the community of believers.

I. Scripture Reading Acts 2:40-47, NIV 1984

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and

had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

II. Teaching

Peter preached the need for individual repentance and faith, but the result was not just a bunch of individual believers, the result was a new community of faith. **Verse 41** says, **“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”** Last week we focused on the number - three thousand were baptized in a single day – wow! Praise the Lord! But take a look at that phrase, **“added to their number.”** This phrase is not talking about making a list of names. They may have made a list of names, and they obviously counted the new believers. But this phrase is really talking about community and it is great cause for rejoicing. Loneliness is one of the biggest problems we face in our modern societies. But the Good News of Jesus has an answer for that; there is a solution to the problem of loneliness; the solution is to be added to a loving community of faith.

When we trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, our relationship with God is restored and we have fellowship with Him. That is essential, but it is not the whole story. Another chapter of the story of salvation is that we are added to the community of faith. We gain a new family. God is the head of our new family, and we all His children, brothers and sisters with one another. **Romans 8:15-16** expresses it this way. **“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”** You see, the church is the family of God. And a harmonious family lives in community with one another.

How did they live in the first church? **Acts 2:42**, tells us, **“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”** This verse points out four key aspects of that first church community. They devoted themselves to:

- (1) The apostle’s teaching – That means they were constantly listening to and learning from the teaching of those who had been with Jesus before them. As the apostles preached and taught from the Scriptures and from their memory of all that Jesus had said and done, the community grew in knowledge and wisdom.
- (2) The fellowship – In the modern church we tend to think of fellowship as just visiting or talking, especially with our friends. But the basic meaning of fellowship here is, “sharing.” Sharing our experiences and concerns in conversation is a good start, but it means more than that. Fellowship also includes sharing our lives, our time, and our possessions. In verse 44, it says, **(Acts 2:44) “All the believers were together and had everything in common.”** That’s fellowship!
- (3) The breaking of bread – This can refer to both eating together and to the ceremony of communion. Eating together, of course, is also connected to fellowship. And, communion is related closely to the apostle’s teaching, since it commemorates the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection. But, actually, the words for communion and fellowship are both related to the same Greek word, and, as I mentioned a moment ago, the basic meaning of this word is sharing. So, communion is actually a shared cup and a shared loaf of bread. In fact, historians tell us that in the early church there was little distinction between a shared meal and communion; so communion was often a full fellowship meal lasting for several hours.
- (4) Prayer – The fourth key aspect of early church life was prayer. The followers of Jesus joined in prayer regularly and deeply. As we go through Acts, we will see how miraculous things often happened after times of concerted prayer, as they sought the Lord and His will in their lives and were filled again and again with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:45 records that, “**Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.**” As I just mentioned, this sharing of possessions to provide for the needy was part of the fellowship of the disciples and it is also an outstanding example of generous giving. The connection between Acts 2 and socialist ideas is also apparent, but there are big differences as well. First of all, the sharing in the early church was voluntary; many people shared their positions, but no one was required to do so. This is in sharp contrast to the imposition of socialism by government decree. Second, the early Christian community was composed of people who had placed their faith in Jesus Christ and been born again. Their values and priorities had been transformed by the Holy Spirit. The deep love and care for one another that is expressed here by the complete sharing of all things is possible only in a community of people who have been washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Love is the key, but it is not the kind of love the world knows and it cannot be produced by a government rule or human effort. The love that is needed is the love that the Holy Spirit brings into the heart of all who trust in Jesus. Actually, all of these key aspects of early Christian life can be summed up in the idea of love. Love for God. Love for each other. Where these exist in abundance, lives are transformed and new loving communities are formed. When we truly believe in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit and our lives are changed. And, as transformed individuals gather together, a new community of faith is born, a transformed community.

We will not attempt a full sharing of all things here at OIC. It would not be wise or practical in our situation. But it would be wonderful if we could move a little closer to this early church pattern. In **Malachi 3:10** there is an extraordinary promise from the Lord. “**Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,**” says the **LORD Almighty**, “**and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.**” In the Old Testament, the giving of one tenth was Law. In the New Testament church age, we are not under the Law of Moses, but the example we see in the early church is an example of generous giving far beyond the tithe. Notice the purpose of the giving that is mentioned in Malachi 3:10, “**that there may be food in my house.**” Why was food needed in the house of the Lord? First of all, this refers to the support of the workers at the temple, priests and others who spent their days serving the Lord and the people. Second, this refers to the role of the temple as a center for meeting social needs, taking care of the poor and needy.

In the church today, we can still see the same needs and the Lord is still working in many of the same ways. And, although Malachi 3:10 is a promise given specifically to the Jewish people in a particular time, the principles of how the Lord blesses those who give generously remain the same. And the need for generous giving to support the work of the ministry continues. This is one area where we can grow to be more like the early church. We can also grow to be more like the early church in all of the areas mentioned in today’s reading. We can be more diligent in our study of the word. We can fellowship more deeply and break bread together more often. And we certainly need to spend more and deeper time in prayer.

III. Conclusion

In your bulletin today, I have also provided a printout of some of what we can call the, “one another’s,” of Scripture. Meditating on verses like these is one practical way to focus on developing deeper fellowship. Let’s close with a few of them now, you can read the rest on your own later.

- John 13:34-35, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”
- Romans 15:7, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”
- Ephesians 4:32, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”
- Ephesians 5:21, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”
- Colossians 3:13, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”
- Hebrews 10: 25, “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.”

Let's pray.

IV. Prayer

Dear heavenly Father,

We praise your name and give thanks for all of your wonderful works. Help us to draw near to you and to walk with Jesus always. Fill us with your Holy Spirit and pour your love into our hearts. Teach us to be kind and compassionate, generous and gentle, loving others as you have loved us. We are weak and foolish; we fall into sins of all kinds and sometimes we harden our hearts against you. Come Lord, come to us. Change our hearts and draw us near to you by your love and grace. Lead us to the place of repentance and strengthen us against the temptations of this world. Have mercy on us and forgive us our sins, as we trust in Jesus and in His finished work on the cross. Pour out your Holy Spirit in this place Lord, for your glory! Bless this church and all of the churches of this city; be glorified in this land and around the world. We give thanks that you are the true and living God and that you hear all of our prayers. Thank you, Lord! In the Name of Jesus, I pray. Amen.