

Arise, Church, Arise!
By Jason Huff
John 12:44-50, 1 John 5:1-5, Acts 2:42-47

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Acts 2:42-47. Listen now to God's Word. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Many of you may have missed what happened in San Diego over the last couple of weeks – the 41st annual Comic-con. Over 35,000 people came together over four days to see celebrities and snippets of new films and celebrate all things sci-fi, fantasy, and comic book related. What amazes me about these conventions aren't the celebrities so much as the everyday people who attend. Rooms are filled with stormtroopers and caped crusaders and vampires. But it's not just about the weekend...at a convention, you meet people who spend their free time stitching together the perfect costume or searching for that long-lost toy on a dealer's shelf they know will bring them joy. As a fan of Star Wars and Star Trek and Lord of the Rings and Japanese animation, I've been to conventions and seen the people who live for this stuff. There's one thing you can say about these folks: they're dedicated.

It's easy to think that people getting dressed up in costumes or obsessing over the latest comic book is a bit weird. But many of us are devoted to our own pursuits and interests, maybe boating or sports or cars or arts and crafts...might be music or movies or coin-collecting or politics...even gardening and home improvement can become passions. Our interests sometimes breed friendships, and sometimes we look to them to give us meaning and purpose. But I wonder: what if our obsession was Jesus Christ? What would the world be like if Christians had that same kind of passion for Jesus that others do have comic books and costumes?

The early church had it. We see it in today's passage, which is packed with the fundamentals of a life dedicated to Christ. The believers were convinced of the truth and acted on it. Today we're going to learn how we can have their passion and be like the first believers. Take out the cards that you've received – they are going to be our guide for the next two weeks. This passage shows us what God calls us to do as Christians – we are to **GROW** in Him, and here's how we do it. Often we feel like we would love to be faithful followers of Jesus but we just aren't sure how. Here's what's spelled out for us in black and white.

The first thing we see in the passage is **G** - we **G**ather with other believers. The early church was together all the time. They fellowshiped together. They ate together. They prayed together. They lived in community and what they bought and sold, they did for the community. They gathered at the temple daily. They praised God together. It was this togetherness that convinced the crowds of their sincerity. It wasn't an act. They truly loved each other.

This is a countercultural concept for us. As a society, we have become sucked into radical individualism to the point where our neighbors are strangers. We drive into our garages and down goes the door and we disappear until the next morning. We are fragmented. We don't trust each other. Community is non-existent. And yet we long for it. We know that community, that real relationship, matters. I am amazed at how popular reruns of **Friends** and **Seinfeld** are despite ending years ago. High school and college students, new fans, are seeing them now for the first time. They're everywhere. But we've grown up as a generation where community wasn't modeled. We latch onto even faulty and flawed and dysfunctional models because we so desperately want to know that somebody knows us, that we matter to somebody else. Despite all their character flaws and sins, when we watch those shows, we see people who stick together.

We are called to live our lives together. Sunday morning is a start; it's a time when we gather. But the church is not just the *people* of faith; it's the *community* of faith. If the early church went so far as to have everything in common, it meant they were constantly together. That doesn't mean that they didn't work or have their own homes or that they always met in a large group. But they were regularly with other believers, strengthening each other's faith and being a part of each other's lives. For us, it's not as easy because many of us live a ways from the church itself; it's easier to be in community with others whose homes are close to ours, and that's OK. It's also OK to be in community with other Christians who live near us; we should be developing Christian friendships outside this church. But we must support one another.

I've had questions over the last year about friends we don't see much anymore at church. Where did they go? The answer to that question is different from case to case. But if *nobody* knows where they went, we've failed at community. When you're in true community, you realize when someone is missing. Not all of us at once; even as a small church, we are too big for that. But God calls us to live interconnected lives. If someone is in need or in trouble, they should feel close enough to someone in the church to talk about it. Proverbs 18:24 talks about the difference between many superficial friends and a friend that sticks closer than a brother. We need to be that close. We need to be willing to be Jesus with skin on to others around us. If we're that close, we're also going to be able to minister to one another when we are in need.

So how do we gather? That's up to you! Call somebody new and ask them to lunch. Get a group together and study the Bible together for a few weeks. Plan an outing. Old friends, new friends, church people and not – it doesn't matter. What's important is that we are gathering together in the name of Christ...not just for coffee, not just to catch up, but to realize that we are bound together by our love for Jesus Christ and His amazing grace to us.

The second concept I want to talk about here is the **R** on our cards – **Renewing** our minds. The passage says that the early believers were devoted to the apostles' teaching. They also met in the temple courts, which was the primary place where teaching at the temple took place. This means a couple of things. First, they were dedicating themselves to making sure they knew all they could about Jesus and His message. Second, it means that they were getting immersed in the Word of God itself. The temple was *the* place in Jerusalem to hear the Scriptures read. They were plunging headfirst into both the sacred writings passed along in the Jewish faith and the saving grace they had received through Jesus Christ and His gospel.

We are called to follow in their steps. Romans 12:2 is where the conceptual idea of renewing our minds comes from, so let's look at it for a moment. It says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will." The Holy Spirit is the one who transforms us into new creations. How? By renewing our minds. When our minds are changed – which is the literal definition of repentance – we receive the ability to test and approve of God's good, pleasing and perfect will. The Holy Spirit is moving in us, building in us the ability to read Scripture and understand it, as well as the desire to do what it says. Our minds are renewed not by looking to this world, but by looking to our Creator.

The renewing of our mind takes many different forms. It's most important that we get into Scripture and learn from it. We may think that this means fighting our way through the Bible, but that's not it. Reading devotionals about Bible passages count. Participating in studies that make the Bible more understandable renew our minds too. This is not about being forced into some narrow pattern and feeling guilty because you can't do it the way some other person can. It's about finding out how you best work and doing that. I listen to the Bible on CD all the time. I listen to sermons and teaching on CD too. There are plenty of ways to study the Bible; they all count. Starting in October, we're going to do it together in our services using a book called *The Story*, which takes the Bible and puts it into bite-size pieces where the overarching story comes alive without all the bits that get us tangled up, like the "who begat whos" and all the "do and do nots." There are many different ways to be in the Word...but be in the Word.

The other key way we work with the Holy Spirit to renew our minds is to live our lives with God-colored glasses on. Philippians 4:8 says, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things." This is how we renew our minds in the everyday things. We might spend twenty minutes a day in the Scripture, but we spend the rest at a desk, working, helping the kids, mowing the lawn, paying the bills. When we are doing those things, the Holy Spirit guides us to think on how the things we are doing are pleasing God...and if they aren't, abandoning them. Sometimes this is simple, if a show or a song comes on that affects you or tempts you in some way, you shut it off. But often it's more complex. When we pay our bills, we think about how much we are spending on ourselves and how much is going to others and to God's work. When we mow the lawn, we think about God's goodness in creation...except maybe for Michigan mosquitoes. But if we are sold out to God like the early church was, we are going to need to look at life with new lenses. That way, our minds will be prepared when we face temptation or suffering or tragedy.

The third issue we see here is the **O** – **O**utreach to the lost. Wonders and signs were being done by the apostles, the needy were being helped, and daily people were being saved. That's the pattern we see in the early church. They gave of themselves physically and spiritually, and people took notice. The Lord brought these people to Himself, but He used the early believers to be His representatives so they could see His love.

Outreach to the lost has become a lost art. As our culture has turned inward and self centered, far too often the American church has done exactly the same thing. We take care of those within the church, as we rightly should, but we ignore those outside of the church. In my opinion, it's a result of bad theology. If we are passionate about Jesus, we will be passionate about the lost. Christianity is not a system that helps us feel better about ourselves or a social club to make us happy. Jesus taught that repentance and faith in Him lived out were the difference between eternal life and eternal death! Every single person we see every day is someone who's going to spend eternity either in the presence of God or eternally separated from God. The Bible overflows with calls for us to reach out and save those who are perishing, to offer them the gospel. Our society believes that everybody will get to heaven, but the Bible says faith is a necessity if we are to enter the presence of God. We should have a sense of urgency to this call. If we have no passion for the lost, we are squelching the Spirit's voice.

Let me be clear, though: there's a difference between having no passion for the lost and being unaware of how to reach people. We can have that passion but feel inept at actually doing outreach. Most of us feel we don't know how to do it. The early church was no different from us in that regard. They simply acted out their faith in public and talked about it with their friends and neighbors. Our culture is different in many ways than theirs. The early church was in the midst of a highly religious culture deeply entrenched in Scripture. Even the Gentiles who didn't know God were still spiritual people who worshipped their own idols and gods. Our culture, on the other hand is antagonistic to faith. How do we bridge the gap? By building trust and relationships and providing for physical needs for the sake of Jesus Christ. We're going to spend the month of September talking about how we can reach out to those around us in simple, loving, and personal ways that are natural. What I ask you to do now is pray about it. Ask that God would give you an open heart to outreach, a desire to share your faith, and a passion for the lost. Ask that God would break your heart for the things that break His heart. Be ready as 1 Peter 3:15 says – "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, doing this with gentleness and respect."

The final step of the GROW paradigm is **W** – **Worship** the Triune God. We read that the early church was filled with awe over everything that God was doing. They met together, they praised God, they prayed, and they celebrated God's mercy to them in Jesus. When we think of worship, we tend to think of going to a building once a week and listening and maybe singing and sometimes saying a few words, perhaps the Lord's Prayer. But worship goes far beyond that. In fact, we need to go back to the core concept to understand it. The word worship comes from the Old English term "worth-ship." We are assigning worth to something or someone of value. That means a couple of things for us. First, it means that when we worship God in eternity, it doesn't mean that we will all have to stand around singing songs. We will be ascribing worth to God in various ways. I imagine the ways will be as numerous as the number of souls God saves. We will have joy in eternity because we will be with God and honor God in ways that show His worth. But it also means something else. It means that we need to take great care in what we honor here on earth. When we get obsessed with a hobby or passionate about our job, when we praise things for themselves and not ultimately for how they point us to God, we are assigning worth – we are worshipping something other than God. When we realize this, it's easy to see how quick we fall into idolatry.

I look at my own life and see where there are chinks in my spiritual armor where I have given more honor to things than I should. It used to be that when the boys went to bed at night, the TV went on. It was a reflex. I don't watch much TV, but I do love movies. A couple weeks ago, I realized that Catha and I needed a prayer time just to ourselves. We've started doing that once the boys are down...but that cuts into movie time. I've had to face that idol in my life – that I was valuing my leisure time more than praying with my wife. Those idols are difficult to take down, but they are a must for us to give God glory and to acknowledge His worth. It's putting on those God-colored lenses I talked about earlier and seeing our idols for what they are.

It's freeing, actually, to realize that “worship” in our sense of Sunday mornings is only one part of joyfully acknowledging God's worth in our lives. Our worship can take many forms; it may come through music or reading or conversations, through time spent with Him out in nature or in fixing an old car for someone or serving a meal. God may redeem our hobbies and interests by showing Himself to us through them. The key issue is giving worth to, worshipping, the One who created us rather than the created things. I encourage you this week to examine how you spend your time, what you are passionate about, and see just how much of God there is in the worth you assign to things. Look at your life and see if it reflects a true passion for God. See how your finances, too, show how you value God.

I also encourage you to look at your worship and see if it reflects the Trinity. We're all guilty sometimes of forgetting that we are Trinitarians, that we worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our music often does this too – a lot of songs reflect our love for Jesus or our wonder at the Father or our awe at the Holy Spirit, but not all at once. What makes Christianity unique is that we worship a God who is in relationship in His very being. A simple Trinitarian prayer is something like, “Thank you, Father, for creating me. Thank you, Jesus, for saving me. Thank you, Spirit, for living in me and guiding me.” We simply need to realize that we worship a unique God who has made Himself known to us in Trinity.

As we've looked at this passage and the GROW paradigm, you might be thinking, “How do I grow by doing these things? They aren't focused on *my* growth at all.” And that's true. The things we are called to do are focused outward – on God and on others. Even when we renew our minds, we ask God to accomplish it by focusing us on Him. But that's the wonder of the gospel. When we give up our lives for Jesus' sake, we gain them in return. When we set ourselves aside to do the work of God's Kingdom, we find that we are the ones who grow most.

The early church lived out Christ's love and followed His call. Their passion for our Lord and Savior is an inspiration to us. They beckon us to throw off everything that hinders us so we might be single-minded in our pursuit of Christ. Let us be the people who hear the call and obey it. Let us be the people who seek after God with our whole hearts. Let us grow in Christ as we bask in the mercy and salvation of our God by serving Him and serving others.