

Title: New Family
Text: Acts 2:42-47
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Date: 8 September, 2013

Over the past few weeks we have been exploring some of the many images and metaphors the bible offers us for the church.

The first image we explored is Peter's description of the church as a Spiritual House – a house built on Christ the Cornerstone, enlivened by Christ the Living Stone and completed by Christ the Capstone. In this Spiritual House we make sacrifices acceptable to God, which is any thought, word or deed – any act of service - offered to God in response to, and through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

The second image we explored was Peter's description of the church as a Royal Priesthood. In this Royal Priesthood we are princely servants whose lives are found in, modelled on and empowered by Christ the Servant King.

This week we will explore a third biblical metaphor for the church – perhaps less obvious than the first two – that of the church being a New Family.

Before we jump into the scripture, let's pray...

This is a story of 30-year-old friends who had a reunion and were discussing where they should go for dinner. Somebody suggested that they meet at the Glowing Embers Restaurant because the waiters and waitresses there are young and beautiful. They all agreed. Fifteen years later, at 45 years of age, they met and discussed again where they should have dinner. Somebody suggested the Glowing Embers because the food and wine selection there are very good. They all agreed. Another 15 years later at 60 years of age, they once again discussed where to meet. Somebody suggested the Glowing Embers because you can eat there in peace and quiet and the restaurant is smoke free. They all agreed.

Another fifteen years later, at the age of 75, the group discussed again where they should meet. Somebody suggested that they should meet at the Glowing Embers because the restaurant is physically accessible and they even have an elevator. They all agreed. Finally, 15 years later at the age of 90, the same group of friends discussed one more time where they should meet for dinner. Somebody suggested that they should meet at the Glowing Embers because they had never been there before. And they all agreed.

Memory is powerfully evocative. Memory can help us capture moments of the past and freeze them in time. But memory can also play tricks on us. Recently Sue and I travelled back through Camperdown, the Victorian town I spent all of my primary school years in. Memories flooded back as I showed her around the old haunts. Here's the thing though; as familiar as everything was – my old homes, schools, shops – nothing was quite the same as I remembered it. Specifically, everything seemed smaller – the homes a lived in seemed tiny compared with my memory, as was my school – even the clock tower in the main street which in my memory cast a long shadow over the main street, was disappointing.

Over time, memories can magnify and exaggerate the past to the point where our recollections become separated from reality. This is why it's critical for memory to be grounded in historical, verifiable truth. The Book of Acts is Luke's first-hand recollections of the birth of the church. With a historian's eye for detail, Luke provides us with a series of snapshots – freeze-frame moments – that ground the history of the church in facts supported by evidence. These are remarkable memories we can rely on, free of inflation and exaggeration, at the same time telling a story so remarkable we can struggle to comprehend, even believe it.

Today I want to look at just one of the snapshots Luke provides us, perhaps his most famous one. It immediately follows the remarkable events of the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit fell with fire and power on some disciples huddled in an upper room, driving them out into the streets where they boldly proclaimed the gospel of Jesus. As the dust settled on that remarkable day, Luke describes the church this way:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who 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.

(Acts 2:42-47)

Not long after I arrived here at Newlife, in an unscripted moment in a long –forgotten sermon, I referred to our church as ‘one, big, happy – sometimes dysfunctional – family.’ Unlike the rest of that message, the phrase stuck. As this week I reflected on the New Testament story of the early church, I realized that this description is not just for us, but in many ways is for them as well, as it is for the church through the ages.

The church is one, big, happy – sometimes dysfunctional – family.

In the time I have left I want to explore each descriptive word in this phrase; it’s applicability to the early church and its relevance for us.

Family

One writer defines the family this way:

The family – that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor, in our innermost hearts, ever quite wish to.

(Dodie Smith)

In the Ancient Near East of Jesus’ day, family and clan and tribe were everything. It was your prime loyalty, your provision of employment and housing, your very identity. This was true for Jew and non-Jews, or Gentiles, alike. What was changing in Jesus’ day was the growth of urban cities or cities. Using the genius of the Roman road system, in the 1st century, in search of a better way of life, people migrated in massive numbers from rural areas to the cities, not unlike what is happening in India and China right now. In migrating, people became dislocated from their families and clans – the social fabric that held society together.

We have this distorted picture of Roman cities as places where people lounged around in togas eating grapes with one hand and drinking wine with another. The reality was for most people, Roman cities were densely crowded, miserable slums. The fourth largest city in New Testament times was Antioch, which was also the home of the largest church for much of the first century. Historian Rodney Stark describes Antioch in this way:

Any accurate portrait of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair and hatred. A city where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy...A city filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms...a city so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence. A city where crime flourished and the streets were dangerous at night.

(Rodney Stark)

It was in cities like Antioch that the church flourished, one of the primary reasons being that it provided a new community – a new family – to which people could belong and find safety and refuge in. This new family was a radical departure from the ties of race and blood. None of the old divides of class and gender and race applied. In this new family there was neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female – all were joined together through the blood of one man – Jesus Christ. Rodney Stark says this:

Christianity revitalised life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships.

(Rodney Stark)

The early church enjoyed the favour of the people in large part because they modelled a radical, new family that was attractive and winsome.

I am going to repeat an exercise I first did a few years ago. Can you please stand if you were born on the Gold Coast....

Most of us migrated to live on the Gold Coast. Most of us are from somewhere else – whether that somewhere else is New Zealand, Hong Kong, Egypt, Palestine or Brazil. Goodness me, we even have Victorians here!

Our common identity is not in our love for the Springboks, All Blacks or Wallabies.

Our common identity is not in our skin colour or first language. At last count, we had at least 25 different birth nationalities at Newlife.

Our common identity is not in our denominational heritage. We have everything from bells and smells Anglicans to pain the ceiling Pentecostals here. We are a mongrel mob.

Our common identity is not in being of the same generation. Some of you came here and were shocked at so much grey hair, just like I am when I look in the mirror every morning.

Our common identity is not in where we live. Some of us live in caravan parks, while others of us live in million dollar plus homes. At least they used to be million dollar plus homes.

Our common identity is not in our love of the same music. Definitely not!

Our common identity is in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and by his grace and under his lordship.

We are sisters and brother in a new, eternal family.

We have a place to belong. We have a family. We are a city within a city.

Sometimes Dysfunctional

On many car rear vision mirrors is a little warning message. Can you remember what it says?

Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.

When we look at Luke's description of the early church we are tempted to treat it like a utopian moment in time that will never be repeated – when the church was pure and spotless and perfect. But the truth is our experience of church is much closer to the first century than it appears – both for positive and negative reasons.

Like all families, the early church had its share of dysfunction.

Two key leaders, Peter and Paul, had major disagreements.

There were some in the Corinthian church who loved drunken orgies a little more than they should.

Some Jewish Christians were a little too keen to pressure new believers to be circumcised.

I could go on. The fact is that if it wasn't for Paul and Peter and others needing to challenge and correct dysfunction we would have large holes in our New Testament. Families have conflict, because families are made up of people – and the church was no different then, and is no different now.

Apart from anything else, the church is this wonderful God-given laboratory in which we learn to love people we wouldn't normally cross the street to talk to. Let's be honest, it's easy to love people who think like us, act like us, are like us. Far more difficult, and far more Christian, is it to love people who are different.

It is in the church we get to practice and grow in the fruit of the spirit.

Heather Allen is a journalist and recovering alcoholic who surprised herself by making a commitment to Christ. Here she reflects on her experience of the church as a new Christian:

My first impulse was to think, *My God, I don't want to get sober with THESE nutcases!* Nothing shatters our egos like worshipping with people we did not hand-pick The humiliation of discovering that we are thrown in with extremely unpromising people!—people who are broken, misguided, wishy-washy, out for themselves. People who are ... us.

But we don't come to church to be with people who are like us in the way we want them to be. We come because we have staked our souls on the fact that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the church is the best place, the only place, to be while we all struggle to figure out what that means. We come because we'd be hard pressed to say which is the bigger of the two scandals of God: that he loves us—or that he loves everyone else.

As with the early church, Newlife can sometimes be a dysfunctional family. We can hurt each other in large and small ways. But then we learn the power of grace and forgiveness.

Nicky Gumbel says this:

Some people come into your life as blessings, other come into your life as lessons.
(Nicky Gumbel)

Today you are sitting next to either a blessing or a lesson. Actually, that person who is lesson is also actually a blessing.

Newlife, let's own our dysfunction - let's own our brokenness - know that in Christ, all things will be made new.

Happy

When you read Acts you can't help but be struck by the effervescent joy that bubbled out of the early church. They loved God, people and each other and they were happy – full of the abundant life that Jesus promised

They ate together with glad and sincere hearts and were always caught up in spontaneous praise services. They didn't come to church; they were the church – full of joy, not a fleeting joy, but a joy in God that sustained them through incredibly trying circumstances

Their joy was founded in what God in Christ had done for them, and that God through the power of the Holy Spirit was doing through them. The early church was marked by a sense of joyful expectation that God was present and that God would move with power.

One of the guys in my small group is heading off on a business trip this week tomorrow. He shared with us that he is really going to miss being at worship on Sunday and small group during the week because he hates the idea of missing out on what God is going to do. He has a joyful expectation that God is present at Newlife and that God can, has and will move with power.

How many of you know that the gracious hand of God is on this community? God has been, and is so good to us!

I have been in churches where there is no expectation and no joy. There is no point!

There is no better place, no happier or joyful place to be than in the midst of a move of God. And Newlife, and I know I am risking hyperbole here, I believe we are in the midst of an unmistakable move of God.

Big

On the day of Pentecost, the church numbered 120 people, a miniscule figure when you understand that the population of the Roman Empire was around 60 million. But it grew rapidly. 300 years later the Empire's population was still 60 million, but the Christian community numbered 6 million.

The Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved.

Historians estimate that the growth rate of the early church over those first 300 years was an average of 40% a decade, all in the context of persecution and suffering.

Next May we celebrate our 20th anniversary as a church. 20 years ago a few hundred people from four smaller churches stepped out in faith to form this new community.

Today 2100 people call Newlife their spiritual home.

Every weekend, 1400 people worship in a Newlife community, starting with Crossroads on Friday morning and finishing with 12two on Sunday night.

And we are growing. This graph plots the growth of our Sunday Worship attendance since 2005.

In 2005, an average of 584 people worshipped every Sunday at Newlife. Today that figure is 950 and by the end of the year it will be over 1000.

Over the last eight years, God has grown us by 63%, and over ten years it will most likely be 100%.

Some of us are uncomfortable with all this talk about numbers. After all, the church isn't a business, right? To those of us who are feeling uncomfortable, I would offer these words of Perry Noble:

Every Number Has A Name, Every Name Has A Story, Every Story Matters To God!
(Perry Noble)

Rejoice with me – as of the early church, the Lord is adding daily to our number those who are being saved.

One of my privileges is to hear first-hand people's stories. I have permission to share two of them with you this morning. This one is from this week:

Rhonda was raised as a Presbyterian, but drifted away from church as a teenager. Later she married into a Mormon family and went to the Mormon Church, not realising that it wasn't a Christian church.

After her husband died 10 years ago she felt ignored. She just wanted to belong, but felt wasn't accepted. Sometime later she started coming to Newlife. Occasionally someone would ring from the Mormon Church checking up if she was doing her 'program'. She would tell them she wasn't doing it and wasn't going back.

Trish Clarke has been meeting with Rhonda, and helping her understand the heart of the Good News. Last Sunday she received a text from the Mormon Church she used to attend wishing her dead husband a happy Father's Day. On the same day, as she attended church here at Newlife, Rhonda heard something I said that helped everything Trish had been teacher her become crystal clear.

And so on Monday Rhonda rang Trish asking her to come around because she wanted to be baptised, which will happen on November 10 in our new auditorium. On that day Rhonda will publicly renounce Mormonism and confess Christ as her Lord and Saviour and her complete reliance on his saving grace.

The Lord is adding daily to our number those who are being saved. Hallelujah!

INTERVIEW RAY

In a couple of months we move into our new auditorium here at Robina. For quite a while some of us on the ministry staff, including me, have been working with the assumption that with 900 seats, we will move to one morning service. We were really looking forward to it. But even why we build and worship on a construction site, God has been adding to our number those who are being saved. Right now we have 700 people or more people who worship here every Sunday morning. We would be comfortably full, car park and auditorium, with one service – how cool is that!

Except. Except we are not building for our comfort, but for those who are to come. So on November 3 we will have our all in, packed to the rafters opening service, and then on November 10 we will continue with our 8am and 10am times. Because its not about our comfort, but his glory and those who are to come.

To be honest it's all a little bit scary. We started to do the sums. With a growing church we need dozens and dozens of more volunteers – Kidzlife leaders, Connect team members, Car parkers, drummers – the list goes on. And we need them now; in some cases we're desperate. For example, it's not enough to celebrate the great things God is doing at Kidzlife if we are going to stand

on the side while Heath struggles to find the men and women prepared to share Jesus with our kids. We want to steward this moment in time God is blessing us with. We don't want to waste it.

Today we have given our newsletter over to share the serving opportunities that are many varied here at Newlife. Please read it carefully and prayerfully. Consider how God might be calling you to use your gifts to bless those who are to come.

I've shared Nicky Gumbel's words with you before:

The church is often a bit like a football match: 22 people desperately needing rest being watched by thousands desperately needing exercise.
(Nicky Gumbel)

Those of you sitting in the stands, I am calling you down. I'm calling you onto the ground and into the game – not for your sake, not for my sake – but for his sake, his glory and for those who are to come!

One

Finally, the early church, with all of their dysfunction and diversity, were by God's grace, one. They had everything in common, including their purpose.

They had one message; Christ crucified and risen.

They had one mandate; to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the world.

They had one mission; to make disciples – baptising and teaching them in Jesus' name.

In the Sermon in the Mount Jesus called his followers the light of the world; a city on a hill that cannot be hidden.

In Galilee of Jesus' day there was such a city, literally. It was Sefphoris, a city on a high point built by Herod of stone so white that the sun would reflect off it for miles, like a beacon.

We are only light for the world - a city that cannot be hidden - in so much as we reflect the light of Christ. This is the one message, mandate and mission that unites us to our brothers and sisters from the first century.

This week the UK media reported about an unexpected problem with a new 37 story skyscraper in the London financial district. The skyscraper is curved and covered in glass windows, which when the sun shines at a certain elevation, reflects brightly off it. Which wouldn't be a problem, except that that it seems that reflected light is really strong – so strong in fact that it melted parts of a parked Jaguar. Wild!

It got me thinking. That building is angled in such a way that it catches the sun, focussing it with powerful intensity. The church is a city on a hill whose reflected light cannot be hidden. The church shines only as it reflects the light of Christ.

One evening this week we were driving back home north along Bermuda Street. Easily visible over the trees was the red cross that marks our church at night. I love that red cross – I love the landmark that it is. I love its visibility and its silent testimony to the power of God. But that LED lit cross is not, can never be, the most powerful light to emanate from this church.

The most powerful light we shine, the only light we should line – is the reflected light of Christ as we orientate our lives as a church towards Jesus and towards the world that desperately needs to be bathed in his love.

So Newlife, I charge you:

Don't 'spectate'; participate.

Don't sit back; step up.

Don't observe; engage.

Don't come to church; be the church.