



GOOD SHEPHERD

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Lessons from Camp Bluegrass

Acts 2:42-47

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May 5, 2019 ("Bluegrass Sunday" at Matthews Presbyterian)

⁴² They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This scripture passage from Acts 2 describes the earliest church and is often looked to as a kind of model passage for what we aspire to as churches. Do we have the core activities of teaching, community, sacraments, and prayer? Do we experience God at work and lives being changed? Do we continue day by day and year by year in unity, in fellowship, and in deep community with one another? I can't speak for each congregation, but I know that while Good Shepherd aspires to those dynamics, it's easy to get in a rut or get focused on secondary things and make them primary. Perhaps in this text is a reminder of who God first called us to be as the Church... a reminder of who we can be again by God's grace.

In order to get at that, and since it IS "Bluegrass Sunday" after all, I'd like to share three brief stories from an experience I had at "Camp Bluegrass." This is something I did with my brother a number of years ago when we were looking for something to do together. He lives in Lubbock, TX, and we don't see each other often. So we signed up for "Camp Bluegrass" at his suggestion, he as a beginning banjo player and I to get better at mandolin, which was pretty new to me at the time. While I did learn a lot about the

mandolin and I treasured a whole week spent with my brother, I came away with several 'aha' moments about the Church and being a Christian.

WELCOMING: "Please Introduce Your Mandolin" [gladness and sincerity of heart]

There were several hundred folks at the week-long camp, with instructors on each instrument. The schedule was divided into times of class, concerts, and informal playing together. When I signed up, I could choose between beginner, intermediate, and advanced mandolin. I chose intermediate. Even though I was new on mandolin, I had been playing guitar for a long time and figured I knew enough about chords, rhythm, and picking to be intermediate. However, when I arrived and registered I found that they had not had enough people for an intermediate class, so I had to pick between beginner and advanced. I figured I'd rather be stretched than bored, so I went with advanced with some fear and trepidation.

I went to the first class and there were about 8-10 people in a circle. I found a seat and tuned up, waiting for the instructor to arrive. The other participants were already talking about him, his skill, and some had seen him in various concerts here and there. I was not very familiar with bluegrass musicians, but apparently was going to get to work with a pretty well-known musician. He arrived and took his place and did what one might expect at the beginning of a week long time together: introductions.

But here's the thing; he said, "Let's go around the circle; please say your name and introduce your mandolin." I'm sorry; what? But this was the advanced class, and everyone else knew exactly what he meant. Fortunately, he went the other direction and I would be last to go. So the first guy said his name and then something like, "This is a 25 yr old Kentucky-style mandolin, with a spruce top and maple back. It was made by Master Luthier, Jack Dawson." (I'm making all that up from memory now; don't go looking for a Jack Dawson.) And around the circle we went, with various types of wood and names of different mandolin-makers.

Now I don't know if you noticed my mandolin earlier or if you can see it now, but if you could look closely you would notice something: it is not very fancy. In fact, my mind was racing as to how I was going to introduce my instrument, the very same one I am playing today. Ultimately, I decided to tell the absolute truth: I'm pretty sure my mandolin is plastic and I got it from Amazon for \$64. (Actually, about half that cost is the pick-up to plug it in... I know because I got the same model for my daughter for \$36 without the

plug-in!) I was expecting some looks of disdain if not outright disgust. But I was surprised to not only get a hearty “welcome” but a clap on the back and the same full and sincere welcome that each person there got, regardless of their instrument. All of a sudden, fear of being a poser or an outsider turned to a warm appreciation for belonging. And that proved to be true, not just in the moment, but throughout the week.

What are our expectations of visitors at church? Do we look at the exterior? The pedigree? How do we respond to people who dress or talk differently? People of other races? Do we have any kind of grid or filter for determining “who belongs here?”

In Acts 2, the early worshipers were taking meals together with “gladness and sincerity of heart.” It was just an act or a marketing ploy to boost membership. It was genuine and real and full of joy. How do we welcome people into the community of faith?

LISTENING: Meet the Leaders

In the first assembly, the whole camp gathered (about 200 people) to meet the instructors. There were about 20 instructors on the various instruments (guitar, mandolin, banjo, bass, fiddle, dobro, vocalists). After being introduced by name, they were introduced musically. They all played unamplified and, as is the custom with bluegrass music, played a song and took turns improvising. The skill and musicianship was AMAZING. I would have paid to hear any one of them in concert, never mind 20 of them. But I was also struck by several things during this 10 minute "introduction."

I love sound gear and noticed right away that the auditorium was amazingly equipped for amplification of this style of music. Think about the setup we have here this morning, with each instrument plugged in and everyone with an individual microphone. And this place had state of the art equipment, acoustics, and speakers. So I was shocked when the instructors lined up across the front of the auditorium on the floor and unamplified. It was about three times as many instruments as what we have this morning. And I don't know if you've noticed, but banjos are LOUD! (no offense to Chip!) This meant that when one of them soloed, the other 19 instruments played amazingly softly in order that each might be heard. And that's what happened: each, as they took their turn playing the lead part, was heard clear as crystal, even the very softest of instruments.

In addition to that, I am fairly confident that the piece was unrehearsed, though it was familiar to each of them. They just soloed in the order of the 20-person line they formed across the stage, and the handoffs were SEAMLESS. As each neared the end of their improvisation, they "set up" the next, who often picked up a riff or sound from the one before and wove it into their own improvised solo. And each nodded and honored their 'neighbor' (and even left space for the applause of the one who went before). There was very little ego up front, though these were world-class musicians. There was not the one-upmanship that you might expect, but a genuine interest in each other and what each brought to the whole. This ethos was borne out in class, when these virtuosos would patiently meet each of us at our level and help us grow. These soloists weren't trying to upstage their neighbors, but build on, add to, support, and interact with what each had brought.

The Bible describes the Church as having a range of gifts – different “instruments” if you will. Do we take turns, listen carefully to others and build on, add to, support, and interact with what they bring to the church community?

We read in Acts 2 of the early church being together, having things in common, sharing with all. I imagine some came with a lot and some came with a little. But in order to make that level sharing work there has to be a lot of listening, mutual respect, and care for the other. It's one of the core things Jesus taught and modeled... to serve and love others. I was stunned to see such an embodied illustration of what the Church is to be.

LEARNING: Learn a Song, Share a Song [breaking/sharing of bread]

Finally, I discovered another thing about bluegrass culture that has proven to be true just about everywhere I have run into it: bluegrass folks love to share! This is, perhaps, nowhere more evident than in the teaching and learning of songs. A very typical bluegrass gathering (picture 4-20 people in a loose circle) involves each person having the opportunity to choose a song for the group to play. If a song is unfamiliar, they will take time to teach it to you or one person will pull you aside and walk you through it. It is not unusual to come away from a bluegrass gathering having learned a bunch of new songs. It would be very unusual to come away without learning at least one!

While you can get written music for bluegrass, most tunes and chords and licks are learned from the community, around the circle or in friendly and willing collaboration off to the side. The whole culture of bluegrass is family and friends sitting around

swapping stories, tunes, lyrics, and encouragement - and is one of participation WITH rather than attention TO a performer. In fact, that just happened a few days ago when we met to practice. Sarah asked me to start a song off... it's one that I have played every year here, but always just chords on the guitar. But she wanted me to kick it off with the melody and I admitted that I didn't know the tune. So we took a moment out and she came over and slowly sang her way through it so I could learn it. That is par for the course in bluegrass circles.

Is that how we do church? Do we take time for one-on-one mentoring and sharing the faith? Do we expect people to arrive already knowing all the major stories? Surely you know David and Goliath... everybody knows that. But what if they don't? Do we maintain a posture of welcoming the outsider or the new person to faith? Are we willing and ready to share the stories of God in groups, around tables, in our homes, with visitors, with children, with seeming outsiders?

Bluegrass culture doesn't seem to identify folks as outsiders. If you are there you are invited in and welcomed in so many ways. What a parable and model for the church! In Acts 2 we read about the fellowship and breaking of the bread. The early church was ready to welcome folks to the table and share what was there. Are we?

Every time I remember "Camp Bluegrass" I remember great music, an even greater week hanging out with my brother, and I remember these three lessons I took away for my life as a Christian and part of the Church. I was reminded of what turns out to be a very biblical model for being the Church, one that welcomes, listens, and shares. That's a tune worth singing about! Amen.