

... they were all together in one place

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Acts 2:1–21

John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

Text: Acts 2:1

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

Introduction

At the beginning of April new polling data was released on the eagerness of Canadians across faith traditions to gather again in their churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples. [Poll results released](#) by the Angus Reid Institute in partnership with Cardus (a faith-based think tank and educational institution) show that about 80 per cent of those who attend regular worship service across faith traditions report missing being able to worship together. Forty per cent of them—50 per cent in British Columbia—feel lockdown restrictions on churches, temples, mosques and synagogues were unfair relative to other sectors of society.

Cardus Executive Vice-President Ray Pennings noted that “The bottom line message of this poll is that people are missing worship more than they thought they would. It highlights the importance of community, of communal in-person worship as part of what holds religious communities together. It’s a core part of our identity.” Pennings commented, “that from a Christian perspective, that sense of being locked out of contributing as well as gathering goes to the heart of the faith.” When people finally feel confident about gathering together in groups will there be a sudden explosion of people filling churches for worship? I have no prediction on that; I am confident that Jesus is the Lord of his church and Lord for his church.

What caught my attention in the [article](#) was this comment: “The experience of missing (attending worship together) has highlighted its importance and might invite religious leaders to rearticulate in clear ways for a new generation a theology of worship and a theology of community, of presence in the community.” I was challenged by this comment. In our tentative hopes of a future free from pandemic restrictions on gathering, it may be an important theme for pastors and preachers to revisit and proclaim. As John Wesley noted, a churchless Christian is a contradiction in terms. One is a Christian only as one worships with fellow-Christians in a particular congregation.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I invite you to reflect with me in the event that is often regarded as the birth of the church; let us give special attention to the latter half of the opening sentence of the story, “When the day of Pentecost had come, **they were all together in one place.**”

1. After a year plus of lockdowns, health measures, and virtual meetings, we have all been changed, to some degree, on how we think about the importance of meeting together. The technology that allows us to meet virtually has been a benefit in many ways. Things we once thought required an in-person meeting we discover can be done as effectively in a virtual meeting. The prayer meeting that many in our congregation join in via technology has been a

vital connection and a joy. It means that we don't have to leave our homes on a cold snowy evening in January to get to the church to meet. The livestreaming of our worship service has been vital for keeping the people of this church connected to its worship ministry. It has the added benefit of rendering geography mute for others who find connection to our worship services a blessing. We realize that being able to connect online has a continuing benefit and plan to keep on livestreaming our worship service into the future when in-person worship becomes the norm again, we hope; or will it become the norm again? It also should not escape our attention, that these sorts of questions are 'first world' questions; they arise in an affluent culture that can afford internet services and connected devices and sufficient data plans.

They were all together in one place. This is a common theme in Luke's account of the early church. Luke tells us that "all who believed were together," (Acts 2:44) and that when believers were scattered as persecution broke out against the Jerusalem church they continued to gather together in new settings (Acts 9:31). We are told that Peter became an itinerant preacher among these various congregations. (Acts 9:32). In fact, the entire new testament is written to be heard by the church as they gathered together for worship. Did they meet together merely because they lacked the technology to meet virtually? Is there something about believers gathering together that is inherent in the good news of Jesus Christ?

In our era where the individual autonomy is prized above all else; where the individual is considered the ultimate authority for all things pertaining to me; faith have been relegated to the private and personal. Faith is considered by many as something between me and God only. This cultural emphasis on the individual has affected the way Christians regard faith. Often when church leaders articulate the reasons for going to church they offer a list of benefits; the proffered reasons answer the question of what's in it for you. It is as if we are competing for customers by offering 'powerful worship' and 'inspiring music.' Don't misunderstand, there is nothing wrong with moving worship services and well done music. We ought to offer God our best in worship.

This emphasis on the individual has had the effect of losing sight of the corporate and communal aspects of the gospel. To be sure the personal is important; you must believe for yourself. Faith always includes the personal but is never limited to the personal. You are not alone in your believing, it is always with others that we believe. All the gospel writers agree that among Jesus' initial acts of public ministry was to call disciples to follow him and they were together in this ministry with him. We know Jesus because of his Apostles; there are no Apostles without Jesus. Believing in Jesus is to be joined into the same company of Jesus' followers that began on the shores of the sea of Galilee.

The Apostles' creed, first articulated around 150 AD, was formulated to capture fundamentals of the gospel upon which all the Apostles agree—hence the Apostles' Creed. Each line finds its antecedent in scripture and the Apostles' teaching. Its purpose was to keep the church on a trajectory that was consistent with the gospel. When we confess to believe in "the holy catholic Church"—the word 'catholic' (small 'c') meaning 'universal'—we are confessing that we belong to this universal church of the Lord's believing people that began by the lake as Jesus called people to follow him. By 381 AD the church clarified this point even further in the Nicene Creed by saying, "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church." This is the

reason that we confess faith with the Apostles' Creed at Central United, we belong together with them and, in that future day, will all be together in one place.

2. Consider, not only that Jesus calls us into company with himself, but also into company with one another. Let's go back to the night before he gave up his life for us. He is with his disciples and is explaining what his body broken for us and blood shed for us means for the disciples. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Listen to the prayer Jesus offered that evening. For the disciples in the room he prayed, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." For us Jesus prayed, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." (John 17:11, 20-21)

Clearly the disciples embrace the message. In the writings to the Apostles admonitions about how believers are to treat 'one another' abound; there are 70 plus such admonitions. In writing of our fellowship with God for example, the Apostle John said "if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7) Note that company with God includes fellowship with one another. The writer of the letter Hebrews understands this means being together; "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

The gospel announces that Jesus turns us to himself in love and out of that love then turns us towards one another. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The gathering doesn't have to be large in numbers but the fact that they gather is essential in the fulfilling of this promise. We must keep in mind that Jesus assumes a Biblical (Hebrew Bible) understanding of the human. We humans are indeed spiritual beings but we are so with our bodies. The totality of the human always includes the body; while the human is never reduced to a body, the human is never without a body. So when Jesus speaks of gathering, physical presence is in mind. When I say that I can meet you at the church, I don't say, I will meet you there at 10 but my body will show up around 2. When you say you will do something it includes all of you. You have never had a spiritual experience except in your bodies. The Bible teaches, not that you have a soul, but that you are a soul. This is the understanding that prophet, apostle and Jesus assume.

Now about meeting virtually. I will not deny that there have been many positive things that emerged for the church in the use of technology. It has helped us navigate a very unusual period of gathering restrictions placed upon us. It can be useful for certain kinds of meetings just as a text message can be for certain kinds of communication. Even so, these are no substitute for what must be done face to face and in person. The church's public worship of God is, by its nature, a communal event. Watching it online is not the same as being in the house. Preaching, as John Wesley understood, is both an oral and aural event. It is spoken and heard. There is a big difference between preaching to an empty church and preaching with people present. You receive what can only be received in person by being present in person.

Think about parenting. Yes, you can communicate certain things to your children by electronic means. But you cannot parent your child virtually. There is big difference between a child arriving home from school engaging with a parent via Zoom and arriving home engaging with a parent who is in the house.

Many have had the truth underlined during the isolation of lockdowns that as humans we were not meant to live alone. My point about virtual church is this; as we move ahead to a day when restrictions are lifted I encourage Christians to lead the way in coming back together; in coming back together to lift the name of Jesus who calls us to himself in love and out of that love turns us to be for one another.

3. “They were all together in one place.” Jim Cymbala is the pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City. About this Pentecost event he said, “The Christian church was born not in a clever sermon but in a prayer meeting.” As the church meets Sunday by Sunday much of worship is dedicated to prayer. Jesus called us to love one another as he loved us and meeting together for corporate worship is an act of loving one another. Jesus loves us sufficiently to be present in our worship as we gather in his name and so too our love for one another is expressed by being together in this worship.

All of us know those days when we find it hard to pray and worship and find ourselves carried by the worship of others. Our faith is strengthened as we are borne along by the faith of others. Think of the story of the four friends who carry their paralyzed friend to Jesus and rip open a roof in order to lower him in front of Jesus. Mark tells us that when Jesus saw their faith—the faith of the four friends—he told the paralytic that his sins were forgiven. (Mark 2:5) Think of Thomas who just couldn’t bring himself to believe the witness of his friends that Jesus was alive. His friends keep him with them and on the next occasion when Thomas was in the house with them and Jesus appeared, Thomas believed. We understand that being supported by others in this way is one of the myriad of blessings of being together for worship. Still, after all the blessings are listed, the reason Christians are to gather together is Jesus Christ—he calls us to this love for one another. The one who poured himself out without remainder for our sakes assures us that this love for one another is an act of loving him.

Jesus said, “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” The truth at the bottom of this saying is the self-forgetful self-giving love of God. The believer discovers that our true self emerges as we give ourselves for Jesus and for others. So too in our worship. When we gather if we are looking for what we will get we may go away disappointed. It is, in a way, like happiness. If we are looking for something to make us happy, happiness alludes us; when we are engaged in something for its sake, it dawns on us that happiness has overtaken us. When we gather and offer all that we are for Jesus’ sake in our praying, singing, listening, and greeting of one another; when we do so for the sake of him who gives himself fully for us and for the sake of his people, blessings overtake us.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.