

Sermon for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Guest Pastor: Rev. Harald Karpe

Sermon Text: Acts 2:41-47

*So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. <sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Who wouldn't wish for such wonderful conditions as the ones described to us here by Luke in the early church? Through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the early church was formed and it worked outwardly through their witness so that the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. The early church quickly began missionary activities. How can one be silent about what one has experienced? But here, in what Luke describes to us, it works outward simply through what it is, through what happens in it. It was a living congregation. But fortunately, neither the congregation nor the church live from what works out for us and it also doesn't perish when something doesn't work out for us. The church, the congregation, lives from what the Lord Himself gives His church and what He makes possible. It's only a matter of embracing it as best we can and making it happen. Even the early church didn't consist only of heroes of the faith. The ship called the church, no matter how big and beautiful it appears, is held together by rivets. Like it is today. This statement should free us from all posturing, from all self-conceit, arrogance, and also from all false modesty. Dear ones, if the church doesn't go under in spite of us, what a mighty Lord it must have. It is the same Lord around whom the early church gathered and on whose gifts it lived. What Luke describes to us here is the worship of the early church and how that worship carries on in everyday life. The church doesn't live by its own activities, but by what God communicates to it. When the church itself becomes busy and active, it is a response to God's activity, it is a reaction and thanksgiving. The Word goes out into the world. People proclaim God's Word and point to Jesus Christ, to His sacrifice on the cross, that He died for the sins of the world. Those who now accept the Word, who believe this Word and are obedient to it, are baptized. So, they are baptized into the church, into the body of Christ. They live because of what Christ does for them. But baptism is just the final point under the old life without Christ. It is not the closing point, but the starting point for life with Christ – and that is always a life in the church, in the body of Christ. Otherwise, a Christian cannot live, can't survive. He must continue to live on what Christ gives him. A Christian doesn't have to attend worship in the church, but he does attend. How could he stay away from the place where God is to be found? The first Christians remained constant in the teaching of the apostles. So, baptism is followed by adherence to the Word which redeemed me. It is followed by an eager occupation, a persevering, continuous contact with God's Word and Sacrament. We need the steadiness, the practice, the perseverance, the unbroken contact with being an active Christian. Where there are active Christians that draw from the sources of God, there is also a living church. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have an obligation to come to church on Sunday. We Lutherans are not so legalistic and therefore, have largely gotten out of the habit of adhering to this and in turn break the Third Commandment – Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. This is hardly seen as a sin among Christians which results in a decline of knowledge and understanding of the apostles' teaching and an alienation from God. Luke, by the way, is talking about the apostles' teaching, for teaching is the business

of the apostles. Only fanatics think that they don't need the apostles or those who carry on the ministry of the church. Of course, this does not replace personal Bible reading, but it does contrast it to the sermon as a supplement and corrective measure. From the beginning, the breaking of the bread, the Lord's Supper, has been part of the service. By eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, members share in the presence of the Lord. And the congregation responds to the Lord's presence with prayer. This prayer lives from the devotion to the Psalms. Where we find prayers in the New Testament, like the prayers of Jesus Himself, they are shaped by the Psalms and by the Christian confession of faith. But they are also specific to the joys and needs of the community and the environment. The congregation should know that in their prayers during worship, they are doing a priestly service to the world, for all people, even for those who can't pray themselves. And then many miracles and signs happened in the church, just like now. Miracles that people come to Jesus, that people become healed, that others see in them how worthwhile it is to live with Jesus, plus the miracle that Christians remain faithful to their Lord throughout their lives. If we were to start telling each other the miracles we have already experienced, we would not be done any time soon because our God is still doing miracles among us today. Let us not overlook this. Luke tells us about one miracle in more detail here: that every believer used his possessions to benefit fellow believers as they had need. They understood that their possessions are a loan from God, and these possessions not only serve themselves, but should also serve others. Perhaps some of the vitality of the early church has been lost to us here. We often live such demanding lives and are fully occupied with securing our standard of living that we often don't have a hand free to help our neighbor. But to do this, I also must know about the needs of others and to do that I have to let others share in my needs too. After all, how are we to know about one another if we hardly have any more contact with each other than people who go to a movie theater? Mutual help is characterized by the experienced love of Christ. Love begins with seeing and hearing and discovering things about the other person. To this end, fellowship in the church must not be limited to worship. The first Christians were together daily in the temple with one accord, but they also broke bread in one another's homes and ate meals together with joy and with sincere hearts. How important it is that we visit one another and invite one another to eat with us as well. It's not about the calories, but about the table fellowship. I remember very clearly how a young Christian in the town of Halle, who was a newcomer and therefore had no connection to anyone there, was repeatedly invited to dine with church members. In this way, he got to know the church from the inside and the church members got to know him. It is good if we manage to live like the early church. Fortunately, the church does not live by what we succeed in doing, nor does it perish by what we fail to do. The ship is held together by rivets, rivets that live off of what the Lord Himself gives us. Let us perceive and accept these gifts of God. Nothing is as good as the gifts so richly given to us by our Lord, who gives Himself to us. Amen.