

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, JUNE 11, 2023**

**“4 SIGNS OF A SPIRIT-FILLED CHURCH---ACTS 2:42—SIGN 2:
FELLOWSHIP”**

I am currently doing something I haven't done in a long time----a sermon series: four sermons in a row on one subject. On one Bible verse actually—Acts 2:42. In this passage the author, St. Luke, describes our first Orthodox parish, the church of Jerusalem, in its earliest history after Christ ascended back to heaven. That is when our Faith's 2000 year history began—it was our first congregation.

In this verse St. Luke lists the four main things that parish focused on. In this series, I am calling them the Big 4. Here's the verse, Acts 2:42, where the Big 4 are listed----“And they devoted themselves to the Apostles' doctrine (#1), to fellowship (#2), to the breaking of the bread (#3), and to the prayers (#4).” Last week we looked at #1—the Apostles' doctrine. Today we will look at #2—fellowship.

The Greek word translated as “fellowship” is “koinonia”. It has a deeper meaning than we sometimes mean when we use the word “fellowship”. It's not just a cup of coffee and a chat (although coffee and chat could be an important part of koinonia!) It means when a congregation is not just a gathering together once in a while of folks, but a *family*. Because a church is not a business, it's not a club, it's not a “religious organization”. It is a family. Rejoicing together, sorrowing together, helping each other, actually caring about each other---a real family.

But sometimes, most unfortunately, Christians can't get even get along with each other, much less be a close and loving family. A few years ago a survey was done of Christian missionaries who left the mission field in various countries prematurely. They had signed up for a certain length of time overseas in various countries, but had resigned and come home before the allotted time was up. The survey's point was to find out why. They were asked such things as----was the foreign language too difficult for them?; was the pay too low?; were the living conditions too hard?; etc..... By far the number one reason was: too much squabbling among the missionaries themselves! (Becoming A Healing Presence, Albert Rossi, Ancient Faith Publishing, 2014, p. 106)

Squabbling and fighting can happen in parishes, too. Sometimes the

biggest problem in a church is simply that the members can't get along! May the Lord preserve us from that! Like that first parish in Jerusalem, we need to have real fellowship, koinonia, to be a true family of the Lord.

We will now look at some ways that we can focus on real fellowship, on koinonia, on being a family. Some of the things I'll mention we have actually been really focused on, thank God. But, of course, we can do better in those areas. And also perhaps some things not so great where we need to, with God's help, improve.

First is to remember what I already mentioned----we are not a club, not a business, not just an organization. We are a family of God's people.

Second---words are important and have real meaning; they can affect our thinking and behavior. One word that isn't part of our 35 year parish history is "dues". We really shouldn't use that word to refer to our giving to God because St. Matthew's has never had membership dues since day 1. The accurate words here are "pledge", or "gift", or (hopefully!) "tithe", or "donation". But no dues! We are a family. In your house, does each family member have to pay annual dues to be in the family?---I doubt it. Not in this family either. Bowling league or neighborhood association?---there will probably be dues. But not in our church family. Remembering that fact helps us to remember we are family.

Third—Because we are a family, we don't have a charge or fee for such holy events as weddings, baptisms, and funerals. How could we ask a brother or sister in our church family to pay to get married in their own family house--our church? So we never have done that.

One time a priest friend of mine called to get a bit of info about St. Matthew's. His parish was really hurting financially and he told his parish council that their charge for weddings, funerals, etc. should be raised from \$100 to \$200. The Council disagreed and he was checking with other priests to see how much they charged, figuring maybe his council would give in if they found out other churches were charging more than \$100. I had to tell him, "Well, Father, we don't charge anything." He was surprised...guess I wasn't much help!

And another little story in this regard. One time at a baptism reception here, the godfather (from a different congregation) came up to me and said, "Father, it's my responsibility as godfather for the baby, so I wanted to find out much the charge is for the baptism..." I answered, "There's no charge at all." He thought I was kidding and when I didn't change my answer he actually got a little upset as he thought I was teasing him about an important

subject—money!

Not asking money for sacraments---it's another way to remind ourselves that we are family.

Fourth---another way to focus on koinonia is to thank God that He has blessed us in that we are a congregation made up of folks from many different backgrounds. Different religious backgrounds (or no religious background), different nationalities, different accents, different types of work, etc. And we all get along well. That is real fellowship and really peaceful! That person in the next pew? They may be very different from you in several ways. But that doesn't matter----because he is your brother in Christ!

Fifth----another way to strengthen koinonia is to take care of each other. Crises happen in life---tragedy, illness, financial hardship, etc. Perhaps we then say, "I'll pray for you". And that is a great thing to do! But...often more than prayer is needed. And you folks are a blessing to me because you do it. Bringing food to those in need (in and out of the parish), giving rides to those who need them, visiting the shut-ins, etc. And sometimes just banding together to help someone with a severe financial problem. You always respond generously----may God bless you for that! Let's just keep being that way with the Lord's help, as it makes our fellowship, our koinonia, more real.

We help each other in this way because we are all walking together on the road to heaven. We don't walk alone. We need each other's help on this long walk. And sometimes we need to carry each other along the way----or be carried ourselves.....

About 15 years ago there was a college women's softball game between Western Oregon University and Central Oregon University. One of the Western players, Sara Tucholsky, was known as a softball star, but she had never at the college level been able to hit a home run----and she really wanted to. In this game she finally put one over the fence---the home crowd cheered wildly because she had achieved her goal and she ran for first with great joy. She was so excited she neglected, however, to touch first with her foot. And as she headed for second, everyone screamed for her to go back.... She turned around too abruptly, wrenching her knee and falling to the ground in lots of pain. She knew she would be out if she didn't touch first, so she proceeded to start crawling in agony back to first.....but even if she made it, how would she be able to crawl around the whole diamond in her pain? Some of her teammates went running to her to pick her up and help her---but the

ump yelled for them to stop---because if they touched her, the rule book said she would be out—no home run. The second baseman from Central, the opposing team, asked if *her* team could help Sara round the bases. The ump said that would be fine—no rule against the opposing team helping a runner! So they did—they helped her, half-carried her, back to first, then on to second, third, and home plate. Sara had her home run dream come true after all! (“Our Daily Bread”, 11/20/09)

That’s what fellowship should be like in a church. We are headed for heaven together---and on the way sometimes we need to carry each other for a while.

Last one... sixth---Sometimes people drift away from a church. Maybe not a matter of leaving abruptly, but you notice that someone who used to be here most of the time starts coming less often, then maybe rarely, and then perhaps not at all. It makes us sad! And there’s no point in getting mad about someone fading away or gossiping about it. Instead, being they are part of the family, we should take action.

We should reach out to them. As individuals, we should give them a call, or send a text or email to see how they are and tell them they are missed and we hope they will be back soon.

Priests, of course, do this (part of our “job description”, I guess!)_but it will mean more when a lay person reaches out. I don’t know if we as a parish do that well with this. Perhaps better than I think, because you may be doing more of this than I guess without reporting in to me....and that’s fine.

But it’s a simple thing to do---to show we care for each other and when someone isn’t here, we miss them. Please give it a shot---not hard to do!

May we at St. Matthew’s focus on fellowship---koinonia---as did our first parish in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. St. Luke considered it one of his “Big 4” for a church in the second chapter of Acts. We should pay attention to what Luke wrote. Let us be a genuine family, serving and worshipping our Lord Jesus Christ in genuine fellowship, genuine koinonia, with each other.