

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
June 14, 2020

## **Together**

Acts 2:42-47

“Stay safe. Be well. And remember, we’re all in this together.” That was the conclusion of the announcement that came over the public address system in the grocery store as I was shopping one night this past week. Seems that everywhere you shop, eat, watch, read, and listen, someone is reciting the expression, “We’re all in this together.” And like all popular slogans, it contains some truth and some untruth. It’s true that we all live in a world where the coronavirus exists and spreads. It’s true that the pandemic has impacted all of us, in one way or another. It’s true that there are things, big and small, that all of us can do to help combat the spread of COVID-19, protecting the well-being of others and staying safe ourselves. So yes, in one respect, we *are* all in this together.

But at the same time, we’re often experiencing the coronavirus pandemic in strikingly different ways. Where you live, the type of job you have (if you still have a job), the color of your skin, your age, your gender, and other factors can influence the type of impact COVID-19 has on you and your household. The pandemic has exposed and amplified social and economic disparities that were already present for a long time. As one journalist put it, “The coronavirus has been anything but a great equalizer. It’s been the great revealer, pulling the curtain back on the class divide, exposing how deeply unequal this country is and how deep the fissures are.”<sup>1</sup> So in another respect, we’re *not* all in this together.

The Samsung company put out an advertisement that tried to capture the mood and the potential of our present circumstances. It read: “Apart. We’re all feeling it right now. But it’s not going to define us. Instead, let’s come together—not with hugs or handshakes. Come together from the four walls that surround us but can’t constrain us. Together, we’ll turn living rooms into classrooms, gyms and offices that welcome in the rest of the world. We may be apart right now. But we won’t let distance stop us living together. Stay apart, stay together. We’ll get through this, together.”<sup>2</sup>

“Together” is a term that’s often easier to use than to define, especially in the midst of a pandemic. But even when we can’t nail down its meaning precisely, we can at least try to picture it. We can attempt to visualize what togetherness would look like. For instance, our deacons and I have been working to plan for our church’s reopening next Sunday, June 21. In order to do that, we need to imagine the regathering. We need to see it in our minds. We need to visualize the seating arrangement. We need to envision where and how technology will facilitate the service. We need to picture the order of worship unfolding. We need to visualize the routes that people will take to exit the building when we’re done. Our planning is partly an attempt to anticipate the future through mental photos. These are pictures of what togetherness might look like as we regather.

In today’s text from Acts, Luke presents us with a picture of togetherness, not in anticipation but in hindsight. We’re invited to go back in time and peek through the window of the early church. This is just one of several snapshots that Luke gives us in the early chapters of Acts. When you consider how perfect everything seems to be among those first

believers, it's fair to say that Luke may have taken the pictures and photoshopped them just a bit. After all, he goes on in the rest of Acts to tell us about all sorts of disruptions and problems that emerged within the Christian community. But here in the early stages of Acts, Luke simply wants to leave us with an impression of what an amazing thing God was doing as the Holy Spirit was poured out on the first followers of Jesus. A new kind of community, a community of those living under the reign of God, was being formed.

Within this community, remarkable things were happening. Worship services were dynamic and inspiring. Signs and wonders were occurring on a daily basis. People were hungry for the Word. Bible study classes were multiplying like loaves and fish. Fellowship meals were overflowing with joy. Everybody was tithing. Nobody was fighting. Every week, hundreds more were being baptized at both the traditional and the contemporary services. In short, Christ Community Church in Jerusalem had the respect and admiration of the whole city.

Thomas Long tells about a time when he was working with a class of preaching students. They were studying the story in Acts 2 about Pentecost and the creation of the Christian community. Here was a picture of the church at its beginning, in all its unity and energy. As the students listened to Luke's description of life in the early church, they began to feel very gloomy. They were about to graduate and would soon be appointed to relatively small churches where they would encounter all sorts of congregational problems. As the gloom settled on the class, one of the students finally said, "You know, this account of the early church reminds me of Eleanor Reynolds." "Who is Eleanor Reynolds?" asked Long. "Oh, she was this woman back in my home church. She wrote the church history. She can describe a family night supper and it sounds like the Messianic banquet."

Long goes on to say that local church historians can describe a congregation's life in ways that give us a glimpse of the church that God has promised at the consummation of his kingdom. In fact, he says that we should measure the character and quality of our life together in the church now by how it participates in and reflects the life of the world to come. In other words, God has called the church into existence to be a sign in the present of what God has planned for the future.

That future involves togetherness, as we are fully reconciled to God and to one another through Christ. Our togetherness will be much more than just a matter of occupying the same space. It will be full mutuality and unity in the life of God's kingdom. It will be deep communion with God and with one another. In today's text, we see foretastes of that life in the Spirit. The believers were living in intentional and purposeful community with one another. Every day they met together. Now keep in mind that this was before the benefits of modern technology. They couldn't join a Zoom gathering for the youth group. They couldn't make their contribution to the common fund through online giving. They couldn't livestream their service from the temple courts. They couldn't check Google reviews to see how they were being perceived by the public. Instead of doing church digitally, the believers in Jerusalem were devoted to the daily discipline of living in face-to-face community.

During the coronavirus pandemic, we've gotten a new sense of appreciation for many of the benefits of the digital age. Technology has enabled us to stay connected as a congregation, day by day and week by week, for the past three months. Emails, online meetings, and text messages have helped us sustain the tie that binds. I'm especially grateful that we've had this electronic means of bringing the weekly sermon to you. Going forward, it will seem strange not coming to the church on Saturday night to record each Sunday's message. But as we begin to reopen the church, the joy of seeing many of you in person, and preaching to you live, will be a tremendous blessing. True, in many respects we've been able to take

our church online, and that's good. But God has called us and created us to be much more than simply an online church. Being together in cyberspace is beneficial, but it's no substitute for real people gathering in real places to worship, work, and witness.

During COVID-19, we as a congregation have been exploring ways to come together while staying apart. We've been connecting while at the same time socially distancing. We've been reaching out while drawing back. This is a strange way to do life, including our shared spiritual life as a fellowship of believers. In the process, there are things we gain and things we lose. In particular, we can lose some of the depth that comes from unmediated, in-person interaction with one another. When we rely more on being present digitally than being present physically, our sense of community and accountability can diminish.

About a decade ago, Sherry Turkle wrote a book titled *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. In addition to describing the way that our devices change the way we communicate and interact with each other, she also talks about what this means for who we are as human beings. She says, "These days, whether you are online or not, it is easy for people to end up unsure if they are closer together or further apart." She goes on to point out that "the new technologies allow us to 'dial down' human contact...."<sup>3</sup>

Next Sunday, we'll begin the process of trying to go in the other direction and dial up human contact by regathering as a congregation, live and in person. Understandably it will be strange and somewhat awkward, what with everyone wearing masks, maintaining social distance, and being cautious about how we interact with one another. Things will feel different and work differently. It certainly won't be a quick and effortless return to "the way things used to be." But going back to the way things used to be has never been the church's motto. The shared life of God's people is always designed to point forward. Even a description of congregational life as idealistic and wonderful as the one Luke gives us isn't there to make us long for the past but to enliven us for the future, to draw us into what's ahead.

The church created there in Jerusalem by the Pentecostal power of God was a community with deep roots and distinctive practices. But it was also a community open to newness and change. Luke says that daily "the Lord added to their number" (v. 47). That kind of flourishing automatically brought with it the need for flexibility and agility in responding to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Our spiritual ancestors had to keep growing into the new normal created by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We ourselves, like those first believers, are still growing into the reality of kingdom life. And the only way to do that is together. For Christians, then and now, togetherness doesn't mean setting the boundaries around who we already have and who we already are. Togetherness means being tightly knit with one another but always open to what's ahead, welcoming others who are ready to join us in following Jesus and being led by the Spirit.

At a ministers' conference, Leonard Sweet once spoke about the new tasks facing the church at the end of the century. He asked 10 volunteers to form a circle. Then he asked 10 more and then 10 more and finally 10 more. So eventually forty people formed 4 circles of 10 each. There they stood, facing each other, feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable. Sweet asked them if there were any other ways to form a circle. Some held hands. Some locked arms around their waists. Then he asked, "Is there any other way to form a circle?" Some of them moved in a circular pattern, some knelt, and one circle bowed toward each other. One group formed the circle, facing outward.

Sweet said, "This is the problem of the modern church. The world is in a terrible mess. And even though the gospel tells us otherwise, we form our circles, week in and week out, facing inward. We even get pretty creative about different ways to face inward, but not nearly often enough do we form our circles outward."<sup>4</sup>

In today's Scripture passage, the early church knew how to form a circle, but it was an outward facing circle. So as we prepare to be reunited with one another next Sunday, even though we won't be allowed to literally join hands to form our circle of fellowship, let's already start to envision what togetherness will look like. And may our togetherness always include outwardness and openness to how the life of Jesus will fill us and take us forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Mya Guarnieri, "Stop Saying 'We're All in This Together.' You have money. It's Not the Same." The *Washington Post* website. April 18, 2020. Accessed June 10, 2020. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/18/coronavirus-retail-jobs-inequality/>>.

<sup>2</sup> "Stay Apart, Stay Together" Samsung Newsroom Canada website. April 28, 2020. Accessed June 12, 2020 <<https://news.samsung.com/ca/stay-apart-stay-together>>.

<sup>3</sup> From an excerpt of Turkle's book at the Moyers on Democracy website. October 17, 2013. Accessed June 12, 2020 <<https://billmoyers.com/content/book-excerpt-alone-together-why-we-expect-more-from-technology-and-less-from-each-other/>>.

<sup>4</sup> William D. Shiell, "The Miracle of the Magi," Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Sermon of the Week, January 20, 2006. April 5, 2007 <<http://www.thefellowship.info/News/060123.icm>>.