



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea**

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

**THE FOURTH  
SUNDAY OF  
EASTER**

**APRIL 30, 2023**

**A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham**

Slightly over 30 years ago, Jo and I were attending the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters in Las Vegas, Nevada, as we did every year until we answered our calls to ordained ministry and went to seminary in 2002. We invariably would be in Las Vegas for the better part of a week that included a Sunday. So, of course, we would find an Episcopal Church and go to church. And if that's not holier than thou enough for you, we always stayed at the Alexis Park, as far as we know the only hotel in Las Vegas without a casino. And we did find Christ Church, which we attended every year, sometimes even for Holy Week services, as the NAB Convention always takes place in April. Why does that matter, you might ask.

For two reasons. First, on our first Sunday at Christ Church, during the sermon, I whispered to Jo, "Listen to the priest. He sounds like he is from Alabama." And he was. His name was Massey Gentry, and, Massey, most of us will recognize just retired as the canon to the ordinary, the bishop's right-hand man, in our diocese. We stayed in touch with Massey over the years, and he often would call us with openings in the diocese that might be of interest. And, of course, in the COVID spring of 2020, he alerted us to six openings for clergy...including St. Andrew's By-the-Sea...and here we are.

The second reason the NAB convention and Las Vegas mattered involves our interviewing for the rector's position at the same Christ Church in Las Vegas, some years after Massey had left. At the time we were serving in Calgary, and for some reason a high of 109 seemed more attractive than a low of minus 24. The chair of their applicant review committee was a retired Northwest Airlines pilot by the name of Steve McNamara. I always recall his wondering why surgeons did not rely on checklists as flight crews do to be sure they did not forget something crucial to the safety of their passengers. Landing gear down. Check. Forceps removed from the abdomen. Check.

Which brings us to the reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning. Acts is one of my favorite books of the Bible. It is essentially a continuation of the Gospel according to Luke, with the same author, recounting the story of the formation, development, and expansion of the early church. And these few verses from chapter two summarize the characteristics of the early church that might be considered a checklist for churches today.

The first line should be very familiar to us as Episcopalians:

Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.<sup>1</sup>

This is precisely what we promise in our own Baptismal Covenant.

And here begins our checklist. Item One:

Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...<sup>2</sup>

Do we devote ourselves to the church's teaching? Are we curious? Do we seek to learn more about God and the Church, and dare we say, ourselves? The late William Barclay, our often go-to Scottish Biblical scholar, from whom I unashamedly borrowed many ideas for this sermon, put it this way:

We should count it a wasted day when we do not learn something new and when we have not penetrated more deeply into the wisdom and the grace of God.<sup>3</sup>

Item two: Do we devote ourselves to fellowship, or to avoid the notion that only fellows gather, to community and togetherness. Do we break bread together, becoming then companions? Many people come to church initially to find community. Do we seek them out? Do we welcome them? Do we incorporate them into our church community?

Item three: Do we pray? Because when we pray we say so much about ourselves and our relationship with God. We admit that we cannot go it on our own (though often we think we can). And we acknowledge that it is God who is our true source of genuine strength and support.

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:42 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:42 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, "Acts 2," *Barclay's Daily Study Bible*, StudyLight.org, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/acts-2.html> (accessed April 24, 2023).

Item four:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.<sup>4</sup>

Are we in awe of God and what God has done for us? Do we see the work of God on our lives and in the world? Do we accord God the true reverence God's work and presence demand?

Item five: And this is a big one.

Many wonders and signs were being done...<sup>5</sup>

Are things happening? Do we expect great things from God? Do we attempt great things for God? As we often pray, "Glory to God, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine."

Item six: And this is an enduring challenge on so many levels...

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.<sup>6</sup>

Do we feel a sense of responsibility for our neighbors? Are we giving? Are we generous? Can we bear to have too much when others have too little?

Item seven: And it speaks to why we are here today...

Day by day,... they spent much time together in the temple...<sup>7</sup>

Do we worship together? Do we appreciate that things happen when we gather together and function as a Godly community? Do we recall the words of John Wesley, the Anglican priest who became father of Methodism, and who reminds us that "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion."<sup>8</sup>

Item eight:

[T]hey broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:43 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:43 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:44 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Acts 2:46 (NRSV).

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, *quotation.io*, <https://quotation.io/page/quote/bible-knows-nothing-solitary-religion> (accessed April 24, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Acts 2:

Are we glad to be here? Are we happy as a church? William Barclay observes so aptly, “A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms.”<sup>10</sup>

And, lastly, Item nine: And here we will dwell for a moment...

[T]hey spent much time together in the temple... having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.<sup>11</sup>

Do we have the good will of all the people? Are we adding to our numbers? Do we look good? Are we attracting people?

Barclay reminds us of two Greek words for good:

*Agathos* simply describes a thing as good. *Kalos* means that a thing is not only good but looks good; it has a winsome attractiveness about it.<sup>12</sup>

If you want to understand what winsome means, just listen to one of Jo’s sermons. That’s the word our homiletics professor used to describe them. They would not drag you to the water to drink. They would just make you thirsty. Or as I describe them, they fall like warm gentle rain and slowly penetrate the earth – and our hearts – to nourish them.

Maybe as we witness the ongoing decline of mainline Christian denominations – and the Episcopal Church is no exception – we should remember the winsomeness of the early Church, and check that final box.

---

<sup>10</sup> Barclay, *supra*.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:46 (NRSV).

<sup>12</sup> Barclay, *supra*.