

## *All Were Together – Acts 2:42-47*

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**April 26, 2026**

This morning, a little bit about community. The text for this, in addition to that from 1 Peter 2, is from the book of Acts, chapter 2, verses 42-47:

“<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds<sup>[a]</sup> to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home<sup>[b]</sup> and ate their food with glad and generous<sup>[c]</sup> hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

This community that Luke writes of, the same community we famously see life breathed into by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, is one that is contrary and purposely lives in contrast to what the Roman empire was doing all around it. It resisted some of the hierarchical, dominating, exploitative, and violent organizing principles of Rome.

Rather than mimicking Rome and taking away what people needed, this community shared so that everyone had what they needed. Rather than using wealth to make others more vulnerable to death (as Rome did), this community used wealth to develop more opportunities for life.

In its early life as a community of Jesus followers, they were filled with the Spirit that had anointed Jesus as Messiah. And that led them to sharing everything they had in common.

This community was clearly Spirit-led, trusted Jesus as the Anointed-One, and understood their economic life as social and communal.

They did life together, all in the name of the One who created them, redeemed them, and gave them new life. They leaned into each other as the empire attempted to press in on them.

Now, rarely do strong communities today share all their resources among them like that community did. And rarely do communities in our culture feel the outside pressure of empire. And yet, we know the value of Spirit-led communities because we've experienced them. We know what it's like when another member of our community gifts us with something we need at just the right moment. Rarely is it financial; more often it's something that buoys our spirits, encourages us, and strengthens our endurance through hardship or challenge.

In Christian community, we find common allegiance toward Jesus' shepherding us through tough and uncertain times. He truly is, as Peter writes, the shepherd and guardian of our souls. And because of that common bond as Christ's sheep, we find our place among one another.

This happens as part of the larger church community, but even more so among the micro communities of the church—small groups on Sunday nights, music groups like the ensemble and the chancel choir, PW study groups, men's groups, mission outreach groups that serve the community.

We're made up of communities within our community—all under the banner of a loving and gracious God that unites us and helps us find our own place in the journey of faith.

As you know, last Sunday, Laura and I worshipped at First Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa. It was College Sunday there, and the students in the UKirk Presbyterian Campus Ministry at the University of Alabama (housed at First Pres-Tuscaloosa) led worship. That included the six senior students who preached the sermon, one of whom was our son, Jacob.

He and the others did a very fine job in the articulation of how each has lived in the light of Christ both on campus and through their experience as part of UKirk there.

When we got home that evening, I texted Jacob and once again said how proud I was of him for finding his way down there and in that congregation as a college student. And he texted me back and included this line: "First Pres and UKirk have been my biggest community in Tuscaloosa and where I've been able to be most vulnerable."

He used the word "vulnerable." And for all of us, especially those of us who are men and young men specifically, it's difficult to be vulnerable any time and anywhere. And for Jacob to acknowledge that it was that specific faith community that unlocked his vulnerability spoke to the power of Christian community and its potential for it being the setting for taking steps that further solidify our place in the kingdom of God.

That's the power of community. That's the power of the Church and the power of people of faith being together.

We fret about the Church's future. Especially leaders in the church. We're constantly worried about how we're going to ensure that the church thrives into the future.

There's a fine line between concern for making sure the Church is at its best so that it can continue to be open to the needs of people of all ages and backgrounds and panic when it comes to fearing that the Church won't survive.

The pastor and author Craig Barnes cautions against the latter when he wrote, "The future of the church is a question that makes it way deep into my bones. I worry, too. But the church has never looked less attractive than when it dresses in anxiety. Historically, that's when we've made our worst mistakes. ..."

Yeah. We really do need to stop fretting about our future, because that's when we're not our best. The anxiety that comes with all that fretting makes us too lethargic to offer anything to the world. We should do instead what we do best: provide opportunities for what we know is true, what we have evidence of: When we are together and provide the avenue for others to join us, when we're together breaking bread with glad and generous hearts, God will add to our number and will further bring the kingdom of God to earth.

When opportunities for welcome and invitation are made possible, we're setting the stage for people of all ages— young and old—to be vulnerable. And to be vulnerable reflects a level of trust among brothers and sisters that says they are valued just as they are.

Maybe some of us are never able to be totally unguarded when it comes to our questioning, confidence, and belief that indicates our faith. When we are together, however, we are more likely than less to rummage around in the messiness of faith and allow ourselves the possibility of growing into it.

I'm working with a congregation in our presbytery that's going through some trouble. There's unhappiness on the part of

the Session and some of the members with the performance of the pastor—to the point that their joint future together is now somewhat in question.

In a long meeting with the Session one evening this week (without the pastor in attendance), another presbytery colleague and I listened for over two hours to the litany of complaints they had with how the pastor was performing or not performing in the position.

And one highly respected elder in that group was so concerned over what this all was doing to the church—fracturing the membership and risking their collective future—that he exclaimed in frustration, “I don’t even come to the church because of the pastor or the music. I come because of the people!”

That was humbling for this pastor to hear, and it reflected what’s most important in the church—the people, the community. Church communities thrive not necessarily because they have excellent pastoral leadership. All they need is competent leadership that doesn’t get in the way of what the Holy Spirit is up to. The bonds it creates among those in the community are enough for God’s children, the Good Shepherd’s sheep, to find their place. It’s a place that leads to vulnerability, camaraderie, and a chance to grow closer together and to the God who bonds us.

The first half of verse 44 here stands out: “All who believed were together.” They weren’t living their faith in isolation. They recognized that in order to ward off the threats around them, they had to be together and rely on each other.

In doing so, they would endure. And their faith would endure. And their commitment to serving each other and their God would endure and grow.

Day by day, we live together. Day by day, we grow together in our faith. Day by day, God works to redeem and save the lost.