

Series: A.D.: THE UNFINISHED CHAPTER - May 22, 2011

THIS AMAZING NEW COMMUNITY

Acts 2:42-47

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1. How many of you watched the Royal Wedding—with William and Kate? [pic] Wow! It was something else. Pomp and circumstance at it's best. Thousands of people waiting just to catch the first glimpse of Kate's dress. Designers getting all teared up over how exquisite it was. Riding in Bentley's and Rolls Royce's and carriages—and **two kisses on the balcony!** [pic]

-And there were **hats!** [pic]

Big hats, small hats, stylish hats, bizarre hats! Did anyone see the ones worn by Princess Beatrice? Yikes! Now, think, for just a minute about the **next day**. All the clothes get put in plastic—most, never worn again. The **hats**—well, the latest bid on Princess Beatrice's hat was \$30,000! The church goes back to normal. The question is—will the marriage—the **point** of the whole thing—live up to all the drama, money, effort and pageantry? The jury's out on that.

- a. Life is like that, isn't it? We focus on an event—a wedding, a promotion, a graduation, a birth, the purchase of a house--and it's **really** exciting with lots of pictures, energy and—well money, of course--and then? Well, after that comes life.

-Life returns to normal—even with William and Kate's wedding. There's boredom, morning breath, In-laws, Out-laws. See, no matter what happens—even if you marry a prince—you take **you** into that new world—with all your fears, flaws and habits.

- b. We talked last week about Pentecost—this incredible day when the Holy Spirit was poured out, 3000 people transformed, and a whole new chapter in history started. I wonder if there was a **day after** feeling. The wind, fire and tongues stopped—and people still had to eat, sleep, dress and care for their kids.

-I wonder if any of the 3000 who went public by being baptized thought, "Oh no! What have I done? Will my friends and family still accept me? Will **I** end up on a cross like Jesus? Will I still have a job?" Do you get what I mean? There's **always** a morning after. When you've been to the mountaintop—the highest high—you don't get to build a house and live there.

- c. Well, I'm sure there was some letdown—you **can't** live on **feelings**—they change. What we **do** know is that the same Holy Spirit who **birthed** the church took care of it—and continued to lead it. Yes, God's mission to bring everyone to Himself was in the hands of weak people—but these people now had the same Power that raised Jesus from the dead living **in** them! And the Spirit, working through them, turned the ancient world upside-down!

-What was **most** clear was that the Holy Spirit was doing a powerful work through them. Know how we know? Because the **fruit** of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness and goodness was deeply imbedded in everything. They were **changed** people. So changed that the prevailing mood around them was, “I want to be a **part** of that—even if I have to risk everything!”
 -My deepest longing is that this community, The Olive Branch, can have the same spiritual power as theirs. So, first I want to talk about what they were devoted to—what they **did**—and then what it was like to be a part of it.

2. We read in this chapter that 3000 people repented of their sins, believed in Jesus as their Messiah and received the Holy Spirit—and were baptized on the Day of Pentecost. It must’ve been overwhelming to the disciples! **What do we do now?**

-Well, Jesus **told** them what to do. “Go make disciples; **check!** Baptize them; **check!** Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you; **That’s next!**” And surely—**I will be with you!** Whew! Glad for that!” My guess is that they divided up this crowd of 3000 people into manageable groups, first, and then the record continues:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 NIV)

- a. Notice some of the words used here. **Everyone—ALL the believers.** I mean, this wouldn’t work if like 50% of the people showed up—and the others said, “Sorry—I’ve gotta check my calendar. You know—my son’s got hockey, and then my daughter has rep hockey three nights a week—I can maybe book you in—let’s see—in three years!

-The word **devoted** communicates something, doesn’t it? It means to give yourself wholly or purposefully to something; actually, to **continually center your attention and activities** around something that is strategically important to you. Devoted employees will drop **everything** to please their boss; devoted parents **center their lives around** their kids—and all their activities. The word **devoted** is an extreme word.

-Question: Are people who are **devoted** to someone or something willing to **inconvenience** themselves? Pay a price? The answer would be... **YES!** When you’re **devoted** to something—it means that it’s at the top of your list of priorities. If you don’t have time—you **make** time. In this setting, my guess is that Jesus’ words still rang in the ears of his followers:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:23-24 NIV)

-Following Jesus, accomplishing his Mission, is **not** recreational—a good way to shine up your life in your spare time and get to heaven too. As we talk, hold onto this **devotion** thing—because it's important.

- b. So...what were all these people devoted to? Well, first, they were devoted to the apostles' teaching. What you have to remember is that these 120 followers were communicating 3 years--24/7 of what all that Jesus said and did. I can't even remember what **I** did last **week!**

-And no one in that culture had a spiral notebook or journal—to record it all, you know—knowing that they were one day going to write a book and lead a movement. But they **did** live in a culture where people trained their minds to record and memorize words and actions. Jesus repeated the message of the kingdom many times over—and he strategically used visuals and stories so that people would connect everyday things like seeds, bread dough, salt and light to what He said about life.

- c. Most of us have been at least raised around Christianity—and so we're familiar with the teachings of Jesus. What we **may** not understand is how huge of a shift this was for Jewish people to shift their allegiance away from the Temple and the Jewish religion—to Jesus. I mean, Jesus was **clear** that He was replacing religion with **Himself** as the way to God. **He** was Lord of the Sabbath; **He** was the way to the Father. **He** was the Good Shepherd David spoke about. This, friends, was a **seismic** shift.

-Add to this the fact that Jesus, the Messiah, was **not** going to do what all the Rabbis had said He would--deliver the Jews from the Roman occupation. This was the equivalent of spiritual whiplash! They devoted themselves to this teaching—because it was the way of **grace**—not law. It was a whole new way of life that **defies** circumstances!

3. This passage also says that they **devoted** themselves to something called **fellowship**. The Greek word for this is one you may have heard; **koinonia**. How many of you have ever heard the word **fellowship**? In one of my Dad's churches, there was a group that called themselves the 3F Club—which stood for **Food, Fun, and Fellowship**. Now, I don't want to be cynical—but I think the group was mostly about the food and the fun.

-If you divide the word **fellowship** in two—it gives you a sense of what it originally meant. A bunch of people who are all in the same boat. Kind of a small sailing team. On ships—as most sailors will affirm, quarters are close and everyone has a job to do. And people are in your face under **all** kinds of circumstances—most of them unflattering. The result is that you **really** know each other.

- a. Koinonia is deep friendship. It's love, acceptance and servanthood that extends beyond flaws and overlooks insults. It's a deep commitment to someone—where they don't hold their cards close; where you really get to know them. You could put it like this; **koinonia** is what everyone in Canada wants from

others—but is **very** reluctant to give. Koinonia/fellowship is **expensive**. Risky. You **could** get hurt. How many of you would like a friend like that?

-Here's the problem. To have friends like that—**you** have to be a friend like that. If you want to be known and accepted and loved at that level—you have to know, accept and love like that. It takes time. It means being vulnerable--hearing feedback you may not like.

-Something else about this community; it was a level playing field—where slaves hung out with slave-owners; where cake and tea people hung out with people who ate with their fingers; where former prostitutes hung out with Bible-thumpers!

- b. There's only **one** way this could happen. First, Jesus flipped the value system of his world upside down. Remember who He blessed—the poor in spirit, the bottom-feeders, the people who long for justice? And then He called His followers—not just to love their neighbours—but to love and forgive people who made their lives miserable.
- c. Know how this **koinonia** think worked—and **why** it worked? Because people **devoted** themselves to it! See, friends, this kind of love and servanthood is not for the faint of heart. It's not for prima-donnas. For people with fragile egos. There was something deep in these people—called the power of **Holy Spirit**—which made this depth of commitment to each other more than a hobby. And they didn't give up. Some felt awkward. Some had to humble their pride. Some had to love extravagantly—even when they didn't get loved in quite the same way. They were **devoted** to it!

-It's important to realize—this kind of depth does **not** happen while you and I hide in our homes, watch our favourite shows and order pizza or Christian Chicken. It happens when you and I are **devoted** to living and loving as Jesus called His followers to live and love.

4. This group was devoted to something else—breaking bread or sharing meals with each other. Now, why was that important enough to include here in the list of **things they were devoted** to? Well, it's interesting—some recent research shows that when people eat together—barriers get broken down. In 2006, a Time magazine published an article entitled, **The Magic of the Family Meal**. It says:

Studies show that the more often families eat together, the less likely kids are to smoke, drink, do drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders and consider suicide, and the more likely they are to do well in school, delay having sex, eat their vegetables, learn big words and know which fork to use.

-Other research has shown that people who eat with others actually live longer than people who have healthier diets—but eat alone. Author John Ortberg puts it like this; "Eating Twinkies with friends is healthier than eating broccoli alone!" It turns out that eating with others is good for your emotional health, your social health—and for your spiritual health! Go figure!

-In Jesus' culture, sharing a meal with someone was the ultimate form of acceptance. And it's clear from this passage that Jesus' followers did that a **lot!** In fact, from Paul's writings, we learn that before the Lord's Supper—eating bread and drinking wine to commemorate Jesus' sacrifice—they gathered for a **love feast**. Jesus ate with a **lot** of people—and got criticized for it. It's pretty cool, isn't it—that eating together is spiritual! That **everything** we do is spiritual!

-I'm guessing that an invitation that says, "**Hey, a bunch of us are getting together to eat—wanna come?**" is more likely to get a response than, "**Hey, a bunch of us are going to hold a religious meeting—wanna come?**"

5. And they also were **devoted** to prayer. Now, actually, praying sounds **way** more spiritual than eating, doesn't it? Jesus revealed a brand new kind of connection with God to His followers. Prayer wasn't a good religious activity to prove to God and others how spiritual you are. Prayer is a conversation with your Dad to express your love and ask for help! When we pray, **Abba Father—Daddy**—He loves, He hears, He acts—**even when we can't tell where His hand is!** When your kids ask you for something, is **NO** an answer? Is **YES** an answer? Is **WAIT** an answer? Of course they are.

-Now, think about this. The Mission God has called the Church to is massive. And the church is dwarfed by the money, power, politics and machinery of the world they lived in—and the opposition they face. How dependent do you think they are on the power of God? Somewhat? Quite? How about **profoundly** dependent!

-Jesus only instructions were: Love each other, engage—and **ask for help in my Name!** He'd **taught** them how to do that and **showed** them how to do that. Jesus said, "Ask for anything you need in **My Name** and you'll receive it!" So—they **did!** They were **devoted** to praying—maybe because they were desperate!

-I sometimes wonder if my prayers center too much around me—you know, complaining about life. We do that, don't we? "Bless me, my life, my friends--! Make my life wonderful and prosperous—and **easier!**" Sometimes our prayers never even click into God's mission—what **He's** up to.

-Now, if Jesus has made it possible for us to be **friends with God—sons and daughters**—think about prayer from that perspective. How would you feel if the only you're your kids—or best friends talked to you—was when they wanted to criticize how you were handling something—or demand that you do something? How many of you would look forward to seeing them come your way? I wouldn't!

-For this group, being devoted to prayer meant treating God like someone they deeply loved and deeply respected. They simply included Him in **all** the conversations they had. He had a seat at every table, a chair in every circle. Because He is all-wise, they never acted without asking Him for direction. Because He held all the power—they didn't to **anything** without asking for help. And it wasn't all about their personal comfort; they asked **first** for His Kingdom to come—**His** will to be done. God was **not** their good-luck charm! HE was the head of—and power behind their mission!

6. This combination of what they were **all** devoted to—growing in their understanding, learning to love and be loved, breaking down relational barriers—and talking to God about **everything** had a powerful effect on their lives—and their world. Let's read again the description of what happened.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47 NIV)

- a. This description is pretty clear, isn't it? God authenticated the apostles' authority—by doing amazing things—and the people were **stunned!** They lived in awe of this God who heard their cries and cared about their suffering. As small and unimportant as they felt—there was this collective sense, **Nothing** can stop God's power and love for this world!
- b. The Spirit gave them power to love as Jesus said to love; Love God with everything; love others the way you love yourself. One of the most powerful things about this community was their **incredible** generosity. The Spirit, when He's allowed to work, friends, disintegrates that selfishness and self-pre-occupation and greed that seem to flow so naturally in us.

-There was this **genuine** sense of, "How would I want people to respond to me if **I** didn't have food; if **I** didn't have a place to stay; if **I** had no one to care? Think about that! Can you imagine a being a part of a community where the norm was **sharing** your stuff—not showing it off? Where people said things like, "Don't **buy** one of those! I have one—use mine!" Or—"You're going to lose your home? **Man!** We have a cottage..." And this didn't happen out of obligation! It was a **joyful** response to need!

-Let me say something important to you **Olives** or **Branches**—just about everyone who visits or has been touched by The Olive Branch **knows** about and **comments** on your generosity. World Vision, Pathways, Light Patrol, Hands Across The Nations—everyone feels it. And I just need to say, **WAY TO GO!** In a materialistic culture that **loves** and **worships** money and stuff—only the Spirit of Jesus can release the cold, rigor mortis grip that stuff has on our hearts!

- c. We get a little bit of insight into how this community was structured. Because they couldn't all fit into the upper room where they used to meet—their new gathering place was in the only other place big enough—the courts of this magnificent temple Herod had built. They did that **daily**. Just a side note—to meet in a larger group like that encourages and inspires—and would be a great place for someone like Peter to teach everyone.

-And, besides this massive outdoor gathering—filled with joy and gratitude—offering themselves to God and to others—they also gathered in homes in smaller, more intimate communities in homes. And the two words that described them were **GLAD**—there was joy and gratitude; and **SINCERE**—there was transparency. You could be weak—without worrying that someone would take advantage of you. What Jesus had asked for in his final prayer—that they would be ONE—happened.

- d. And the bottom line is that people wanted to be a part of this community—no matter what it cost them. And this movement just keep growing, spreading, reaching out further and further.

-How many of you are thinking, a little longingly in your heart, “Man, I would **love** to be a part of a community like that—honest, transparent, powerful and loving! I would **love** to experience that kind of extravagant generosity! Can you understand **why** this group was literally unstoppable? Why the just kept spreading—no matter **how** many of them the Roman Empire imprisoned or threw to the wild animals? I can!

7. I want to just speak with you heart to heart in closing, if that’s okay. There are a **lot** of people who travel from church to church looking for the perfect community—one that looks like and feels like this description. I get that! **I** want to hang around people who will love me regardless of my flaws. **I** want to be with people who are learning and growing. **I** want to experience the joy, power, freedom, sincerity and love of people who are filled with the Spirit.

-The problem is—if I were to step into a church like that—I’d screw it up! I’m a flawed person—deeply disappointed in how selfish—and self-pre-occupied I can be. After 40 some years of following Jesus--I’m not nearly as loving as I always hoped I’d be.

-Sometimes, especially in our world, people say, “You know—if you **just** had the Holy Spirit—there would be all kinds of supernatural phenomena! The implication is that the Spirit brings this constant trance-like “high” with all kinds of emotion and supernatural phenomena.

What you find as you read the book of Acts—and read history--is that Satan can duplicate that and does in pagan worship. One thing Satan cannot mimic, though, is the **fruit** of the Spirit. The **evidence** of the Spirit—the **fruit** of the Spirit is:

...love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23 NIV)

That’s what you see here.

-The analogy of fruit is perfect, actually. Fruit is colourful and beautiful to look at; it’s sweet—and it attracts humans **and** animals. But the **fruit** is not about the **fruit!** Really. It’s about the **seeds**. Even if no one eats the fruit—it drop on the ground—and provides context where the seed can grow.

-The fruit of the Spirit beautiful—attractive—sweet-smelling—and it draws people. Friends—**that’s** what drew people to this community! When someone’s heart and

attitudes and priorities are permanently transformed—and they become loving, joyful, grateful, humble and generous—people are **drawn** to that! That's why people were **dying**—literally—to be a part of it!

- a. I want to focus, in closing, on the key word that **describes** the way this group of people pursued this new way of life. **Devoted**. They were devoted to teaching. They were devoted to loving and helping each other. They were devoted to breaking down the natural barriers by eating together. And they were devoted to including Jesus in **every** meeting and conversation. See, He told them, "I will **always** be there—don't ignore me!"
- b. I need to ask me—and you—a tough question. What are you **devoted** to? Like, what is it that has your full attention? What is it that you truly pursue—and put your time and energy and money behind? If the people who know you best were asked, "What is he/she **devoted** to"—what would they say?

-This is a **really** tough question in our world, isn't it? Every single day, the message blares at us, "If you give yourself **fully** to making, saving and spending money—you not only be safe, you'll be happy—and live an excellent life!" And I want to say, "What did we learn from the stock market crash 2 ½ years ago? Anything? I mean, is everyone coming back from the fountain of wealth saying, "Wow! This is **so** cool, **so** life-giving—don't miss it?"

-Every single day we're told that if we can just give our kids the edge in this world—get them well-educated, skilled in sports and music and at the head of their class—they will be **winners!** Really? And what about God? What about them **becoming** a person who can persevere and be truly great in God's eyes? No sports team, music competition or education can do that!

-Every single day we're told on the big screen of 21st century North America—that if you have the perfect job, or an adrenaline producing life—or of you're beautiful, fit, healthy—**that's life!** The promises are endless.

-And the **question** we need to ask ourselves is—**are they telling the truth?** Is that what brings life? Is **that** what's going to change the world—and fill our hearts with hope and transform the way we live. If you **devote** yourself to those things—will you find **life?** My take on it? They're all lying. Jesus said, **What good is it if you gain the world...and lose your soul?**

- c. I heard a story recently that grabbed me by the heart—and illustrates this perfectly. It's the story of the **Orange Revolution**. In 2004, the Ukraine was trying to move toward democracy. A political reformer, Victor Yushchenko, challenged the entrenched party—and then almost died, mysteriously, from a dose of dioxin poisoning. **[pic]** Though he was permanently disfigured, he stayed in the race and, on election day—he had a clear 10% lead in the polls.

-That night, the state-run TV station reported, "Ladies and gentlemen, we announce that the challenger, Victor Yushchenko, has been decisively defeated!" But somehow the TV station didn't take into account that Ukrainian

TV features a small corner screen, where a person interprets with sign language for the hearing impaired. And it was there that a brave woman signed a different message:

I am addressing all the deaf citizens of the Ukraine. Don't believe what they say. They are lying and I am ashamed to translate these lies. Yushchenko is our President!"

-So, deaf people, inspired by the translator, led the Orange Revolution. They texted her message to as many friends as they could—to the point where as many as a million people wearing orange flooded the streets of Kiev. After being forced into a new election, Yushchenko emerged as the undisputed winner. [pic]

-The big screen in our world announces the consistent message that what matters is how rich you are, how beautiful you are, how successful you are, what kind of a winner you are, how great your golf swing is, or how successful your kids are. And if that's the screen you're watching—**that** will be your truth—and **that's** what you will devote your life to. And you will believe a lie!

-But there's a small screen in the corner—and on that screen is Someone who speaks softly—and tells the truth. His name is Jesus. And He says, "Don't believe the big screen! They're lying—Will you, instead, follow me?"

Q & A