

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
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This week you might have turned on the news and heard a commentator supporting the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare. A flip of the channel and another commentator supported the American Health Care Act. You may have wondered, “Which voice should I listen to?” So too, when we look in the mirror, do we listen to the voice that says we are strong and wonderfully-made, or do we hear our inner-voice fat shaming us? Do we let the voice of advertisers tell us that without this face cream or that phone we cannot be happy? Different voices are all around us. And often we wonder, “Which voice do we listen to?”

In today’s Gospel, we’re reminded that the sheep hear the voice of the shepherd. The sheep follow the shepherd because they *know* the shepherd’s voice. John’s gospel argues that we should listen to Jesus’ words because they bring us new life. Following Jesus’ voice is what we aspire to do as the church, and it’s how we strive to structure our lives as Christians. However, before we can build our lives around Christ’s speech, we first need to know Christ’s tone through a relationship with God.

Relationship – let’s unpack that quickly. A relationship with a friend, a family member, or a significant other requires time, commitment, and communication. When I think about my relationship with my boyfriend, Alex, I see this come alive. It’s important for me to spend quality time with him. To know Alex’s voice more fully, I also want to experience being with him in multiple settings. I want to spend time one-on-one, with his family, in group situations, over meals, at important events, and in public places. I want to come to know his voice, so that when he says something I can put it into context and interpret it correctly.

So too, the early Christians in the book of Acts developed a process for learning God’s tone. We heard this in Act 2:42-44. It says: “[The baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers” and “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:42,44). That was their approach.

To best understand this approach, let’s breakdown the early church’s method for knowing God’s voice. To help, I’ve give you a chart. First, we’ll record the early church’s method to hear the voice of God in that first empty column, then we’ll see what it looks like at WPLC in the second column, and, finally, I’ll invite you to evaluate how you’re doing individually in third empty column. Ready? Grab a pen and let’s dive in.

Exploring Acts' Approach to Discovering God's Voice

	The Early Church was Devoted to...	WPLC's Communal Practices	Self-Evaluation (Strength or Growing?)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			

Let's look at verse 42. What's the first thing they were devoted to? They came to know the voice of God through devotion to **the apostle's teachings** (that's the first column). What does that mean? It's exploring and learning from the writings of those who have gone before us. In other words, it's exploring the scriptures. How do we practice that at WPLC? In **worship, bible study, and our own scripture reading** (that's the second column). Remember, even when we're not reading directly from the scriptures in worship we're enacting it and often we use wording directly from the scriptures. Worship helps us explore our faith. The goal is not to get out of here as fast we can to feel accomplished for attending church; instead, worship is about building a

relationship, it's about deepening our understanding of God so that we can recognize God's voice and live abundantly.

What does verse 42 also say they devoted themselves to? Fellowship. They came to know Christ's voice through **fellowship with the faithful**. You see, the Christian life is about gathering with other Christians. Here at the church we serve with **The Night Ministry, gather in Book Club and Meet-Ups, converse during Fellowship Time after service, and we live out our mission in our committees and work days**. We do these things together not because our staff is lazy, but because we all come to learn the voice of Christ in conversation with other people of faith. To be clear, that's not to say that we remove ourselves from outside things. In fact, we do live out our baptismal calling in our daily lives. What it does mean is that we need regular time with people of faith so we discover Christ's voice and nourish our relationship with God.

Ok, so we've got devotion to the apostle's teachings and fellowship, then third is **"breaking of the bread."** Last week's gospel reminded us that Christ is known in the breaking of the bread, but what does the author of Acts mean by this statement? Two things. First, we glimpse God's presence in sharing **a meal with someone different, like at our potlucks, fellowship time, and dinner gatherings**. "Breaking of the bread" is also our fourth row too. The second thing Acts means is the **sacrament of**

communion. Here in worship we know with certainty that God is present at this table. Christ is the host of this meal.

We remember that when Jesus hosted a meal all were welcomed. Jesus ate with rich government officials, sex workers, religious outcasts, people who were differently-abled, sexual minorities, hated nationalities, convicted criminals, people with mental and physical illnesses, and people who were his enemies. So, if Jesus ate with *those* people, and if this is Christ's table, then we *must* be hospitable to those same people. And, if we take seriously that Christ is found in breaking bread with those people, then what does Christ's tone say about our treatment of those people this week? What do Christ's words say about how we treat those with pre-existing conditions, people on Medicare or Medicaid, people who pay the highest tax rates, people staring at border walls, people harmed by government sanctions, and people unjustly imprisoned? What would Christ's voice utter to those people? It's an important question. As Christians, we need to explore what it looks like for us to break bread with some different in a Christ-like manner.

Let's keep moving. We've discovered that the early Christians experienced Christ's voice in the apostle's teaching, fellowship with the faithful, and in two ways of breaking bread. The fifth place they experienced Christ is in **prayer**. In prayer, we commune with God. In prayer, we become transformed into the likeness of Christ. In prayer, we **re-center in love of God, neighbor, and self**. Prayer is our Christian

equivalent to Buddhist or Hindu mindfulness meditation. Prayer calls us back to what is important and grounds our lives. In our prayers of intercession during service, we pray for the church, the environment, our government leaders, those in need, and those who have died. In these petitions, we are grounded in Christ's voice. So, when we get caught up in the lying murmurs of the world, we're reminded that there is so much more to life. In prayer, we discover a relationship with Christ in all of creation.

Alright, the last one is found in verse 44 and 45. (Can someone read that again?) "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" (Acts 2:44-45). Their sixth devotion was to **giving wealth for the common good**. This aspirational principle of the early church was important. This bold action helped create a community of mutual support. It reminded them that we each have a responsibility for all people and things. This method of understanding God's voice is probably one of the more jarring principles for us in the western world. Our culture puts a high priority on personal autonomy and the acquisition of wealth. Money, personal freedom, and possessions have become our cultural idols. We don't often give freely, but rather we give to charity with stipulations and expectations. We restrict our trusts, wills, and gifts so that we can maintain control. Yet, this congregation's practice and its policy is to **give freely and fully to pursue love and justice**. We give of our wealth so all can live. In this faithful action, we find Christ's voice reminding us to love our enemy, to

shelter the poor, to feed the hungry, and to work for justice for all. For Jesus said that whatever we do to the least of these, we do to Christ.

Exploring Acts' Approach to Discovering God's Voice

	The Early Church was Devoted to...	WPLC's Communal Practices	Self-Evaluation (Strength or Growing?)
1	the apostle's teachings.	Worship, bible study, scripture reading.	
2	fellowship with the faithful.	The Night Ministry, Book Club, Fellowship Time, Committees, Work Days.	
3	breaking of the bread.	Sharing a meal with someone different– fellowship time, dinners, The Night Ministry.	
4	breaking of the bread.	Sacrament of communion.	
5	Prayer.	Re-centering in love of God, neighbor, and self.	
6	giving wealth for common good.	Give freely and fully to pursue love and justice.	

Well, there are six of the ways that the early church was devoted to discovering God's voice and how we try to model that in this congregation. There's one step left, though. Today's reading from Acts gives us a chance to do a self-evaluation. So, ask yourself, "Where is my approach to learning God's tone feeling out of balance?" Do I only look for God's voice in the scriptures while ignoring giving my wealth to support the common good? Do I forget about prayer but feel a deep commitment to fellowship with the faithful? Do I learn God's voice in both a shared meal with

someone different and in communion? Take a moment to write either an “S” for a strengthen or a “G” for a growing area next to each method to discover God’s voice.

In the weeks ahead, I encourage you to make a commitment to one of those growing areas. Find new life in the voice of God. For, God keeps calling your name. God calls you so that you might learn Christ’s tone. You are invited to hear the shepherd calling you - calling you to the scriptures, calling you to fellowship with the faithful, calling you to break bread with someone different, to break bread in communion, to pray, and to give everything for the common good. In this calling we’re reminded of God’s loving voice, of God’s abundant gifts, and God’s never-ending grace. In that voice, we find our resurrection in Christ. Alleluia! Praise God! Amen.