

“Together Is Better”
Acts 2:36-41
April 23, 2023

Last week I attended a pastors’ conference in Myrtle Beach. The conference took place at a hotel right on the beach and this was the view from my room. It’s not always easy to get away, but I was willing to make some sacrifices in order to attend this conference. Seeing a picture like this, the conference planners probably did not have to work very hard to convince pastors or anyone for that matter to attend. In the picture you see the blue sky, the sand, the ocean and I’m sure we all could imagine relaxing on the beach, enjoying the sunshine and warm weather. However, while this picture may look very nice, it was only 52 degrees that day, it was very windy, and as I was standing on a balcony to take this picture, a man on the beach decided to jump into the ocean. As he came out of the water he immediately ran back to the beach shouting, “It’s freezing.” He then fell while he was in a shallow part of the water as I think he stepped into a hole and hurt his foot, because a friend then went into the water and helped him out. This picture may look very nice and warm from a distance or outside of the water, but on the beach or inside the water it was very different as it was cold and windy.

Sometimes our relationships with others can be like this picture. Maybe they look good on the outside or it may appear that you have a good friendship with someone, but deep down, on the inside, it’s very different as you may feel a sense of emptiness as something is missing. Why is that? What’s the cause of this problem? How do you change a shallow, empty relationship into something deeper or more meaningful? Today, our first lesson from the book of Acts tells us that our relationships with others begins with our relationship with God. When we are in a right relationship with God, then we will find that our relationships with others will be stronger, deeper, and more meaningful than we would ever expect.

In our reading from Acts, we see Peter preaching his first sermon to a large group of people about 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead and it appears that we are catching Peter in the middle of his sermon as he tells the crowd that they have a problem in their relationship with God. In verse 36, Peter is very direct as he says to them, “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” These people thought they had a good relationship with God. They didn’t think they needed Jesus, so they rejected Him – even to the point of handing Him over to be crucified.

But they were not in God’s good graces as they had thought. If they were, then Jesus, whom they crucified, would have remained dead. Instead, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, showing the people they were wrong for rejecting Jesus. And they clearly understood this, because when Peter told them they had crucified Jesus who was both Lord and Christ, the people did not object by saying, “We didn’t crucify him” or “He’s not the Christ.” Instead, verse 37 says, “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’”

Our world is plagued with an “I don’t need Jesus” attitude and it can even sneak into our way of thinking, too. As believers in Jesus we can easily struggle with this when we say to ourselves, “I can get through my day without praying. I don’t need to hear God’s Word every Sunday. If I worship every other Sunday or at least once a month, or maybe just on Christmas and Easter, what’s the big deal?”

You and I may not reject Jesus as blatantly as our world does, but as Christians we do struggle with the temptation to turn away from Jesus, thinking, “I’ll pray later on when I’m not so busy,” or “I’ll be back in church when things slow down.” While our rejection of Jesus in those instances may be subtle, in the eyes of God it is just as bad as the blatant rejection of Jesus by

our world and by this crowd in the book of Acts. So we also must ask the same question as the people in the crowd, “What shall we do?”

We are in the middle of a sermon series titled, “RSVP – Responding to God’s Invitation,” and two weeks ago on Easter we celebrated Jesus’ resurrection from the dead in which He not only lives, but He invites us to have a relationship with Him by living with Him forever. So how are we responding to that invitation? Is there more to this invitation than just gathering for worship on Easter Sunday once a year and shouting, “He is risen, Alleluia”? And the answer is “yes.”

What Peter says to that crowd in verse 38 he also says to us. If you want to have a real relationship with God, and ultimately with other people then, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Peter then goes on to say in verse 39, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off (that’s us), everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” What God offered to those people many years ago, He still offers to us and to all people today. Just think how incredibly easy this is for us. If you want to have a relationship with God, be baptized. God could have told us to climb Mt. Sinai to receive forgiveness. He could have demanded that we give all our possessions to the poor. He could have offered baptism only to the rich and powerful or to the good and faithful. But instead, God says that in order to be forgiven and to have a relationship with Him all you need to do is to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No matter how evil you have been, God will wipe away your sins in baptism. No sin is too great and no past is too checkered for God to forgive. It’s that simple.

But forgiveness of sins is not the only benefit of baptism. Our text says that God will also give to the people and to all of us the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts, enabling people to believe in Jesus as our Savior and to have a relationship with Him. So how did the

people respond? After Peter laid out a very easy course for them, the Holy Spirit worked through that message to give many of them faith. Now I suppose some of the people may have thought it was too easy and walked away; but others believed this promise and invitation as we are told that 3000 people were baptized that day.

But was that the end of it? Did the people say, “Now that we have been baptized, we can just go ahead and live however we want.” No, not at all. When these people repented of their sins and were baptized, their lives changed. In verse 42, the verse right after our text, it says that these people “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” These people were engaging in God’s Word together. They were praying together. All of them knew that their sins were forgiven, that Jesus was their Savior, and that they were going to heaven someday because of the work of Jesus.

These people had a special bond with each other. These were not shallow friendships. They didn’t look one way on the outside, but very different on the inside. These people really cared for each other. They ate together and worshipped together and were genuinely happy – like many of the people we saw in the opening video. What was their secret? Each one of them had a relationship with Jesus. All of them enjoyed being together with God, which enabled them to have a deep and meaningful relationship with each other. And that is what we are striving for here at Holy Cross. The purpose of the church is to be what these people were in the book of Acts. We want to be people who, first of all, have a relationship with God through repentance and baptism. And, secondly, we want to be people who respond to God’s invitation of life by being devoted to God’s teachings, by praying together, looking out for each other, breaking bread together, and by worshipping together. And we want God to add to our numbers, just as He added 3000 people to those Christians in the first century. With the Holy Spirit living in us, we

don't have to ask, "What shall we do?" We know what we should do. We know how we should respond to God's invitation. So let's make every effort to grow in our faith through worship, Bible study, and prayer, and to strengthen or deepen the relationship we have with Jesus and each other right now.