

Sermon (5/7/17, Acts 2: 42-47):

‘Life Happens’. It’s a phrase we often use to refer to those moments when our plans don’t go quite the way we had hoped. I think it’s a modernized version of a similar phrase that goes something like, ‘You know what they say about best laid plans don’t you?’ The implication is, of course, that no matter how well planned and well organized a plan might be, something unexpected tends to always get in the way and muck up the works. Life happens.

I’m sure you’ve all noticed the construction going on in the choir room downstairs as we try to recover from a battle with termites. A battle we, unfortunately, lost. On the surface, the project seemed pretty straight forward – rip up the old floor and build a new one. What could go wrong, right? The work began. Won’t be long now, I figured. Well, life happens, as they say. A board was removed from one of the walls and out pours vermiculite. Up until that point, I didn’t know what vermiculite was. If you had asked me to explain it, I probably would have guessed it was some type of pasta. Turns out it’s a type of asbestos insulation. Our plans came to a screeching halt. An unexpected detour took us on an unplanned journey. A number of weeks and five thousand dollars later, work resumed and is now almost complete. Finally!

The book of Acts, believed to be written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, is a treasured book of the Bible. It provides a glimpse of the early church after Jesus’ ascension. Initially, the picture it paints is enough to make any congregation and Pastor blush with envy. It might also make us wonder what in the world we’re doing wrong.

Initially, at least, the wins of the early church just seemed to keep piling up. First there were the 11 along with a few family members. Then Matthias joined the ranks to fill the spot Judas left vacant. Then there were 112. And, then, after Peter’s first sermon, and, no, it wasn’t even a short one, there were over three thousand people clamoring to be baptized. Did you hear that? Three thousand people! I’d love to know what preaching conference Peter went to!

I mean, I’m amazed when you guys show up here again after putting up with my preaching the week before! For me, that’s proof enough of the

Spirit's miraculous work. I don't think I would know what to do if three thousand people went rushing for the baptismal font after I preached. It would scare the dickens out of me!! Nor would I know where to even begin putting together a Pastor's class for that many people. I'm afraid to imagine the response I would get from Beth Williams, who usually graciously supplies goodies for these classes.

'Uh, Beth, I will need goodies for about 3,000 folks.' I'm guessing the next sound I would hear is a loud dial tone.

And then the time would come for me to contact the elders to set up a meeting to receive these new members.

'Where are we going to meet?' The Elders would ask me. 'The front pew of the sanctuary like usual?' 'No,' I'd have to tell them. 'Joe Bruno stadium.'

Well, the news just gets better. This huge group of believers are filled with 'awe', we're told. When was the last time awe, I mean full-fledged, speechless, take your breath away awe, filled this place?

That was then followed by a stewardship campaign that makes our attempts look like a bake sale. With little prompting, people cashed in their pension funds, sold their houses, liquidated their portfolios and dumped all the proceeds into the church's offering plates. Imagine the workout the ushers got that day!

Maybe here's the best part of this church we'd all like to be part of...they spent time with each other and they seemed to like it. They prayed together, learned together, debated while holding hands, fellowshiped, and they ate together. Wow! This group didn't seem to even want to go home!

'Uh...sorry gang, we really need to close up the church now. It is after midnight, after all. You can come back tomorrow, I promise.'

Well, before we overflow with pining envy, we need to remember this is only the second chapter of the book of Acts. There are 26 chapters to go and, the truth is, things unravel pretty quickly. Peter ends up getting arrested after his second sermon, tension rises among the Apostles over leadership issues, intense theological debates ensue, stormy pressures come from all directions, persecutions intensify including the martyrdom

of Stephen which, sadly, is only the first of many.

Now, that's more like it. That's the church we're familiar with, right? Rocked with controversy. Threatened by nasty fights and those vying for control. Do you know why we're used to that? Here it is. Are you ready? Life happens.

I don't think this unraveling is because they were doing something wrong in those early days, it's just that life happens – human nature happens, creation's brokenness happens, sin happens, mess happens, ugliness happens, best-intentions-gone-awry happens, despair happens. But the interesting thing is that, even in the mess, even when their best laid plans fell apart, even when despair could have easily pulled them into a dark abyss, they didn't forget those early days and the things that held them together. They kept on doing them. They 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, they fellowshiped, they prayed, and they broke bread together.' Such simple, low tech practices. No extension cords, no flashy light shows, no cutting-edge gadgets (bread had been around for a while after all), no blue tooth connections, no texting, no fast cars, no driverless cars...just teaching, prayer, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. Could such things be so life transforming, so community fortifying, so powerful? It's a little hard to believe. Maybe even harder than the idea of three thousand people rushing a baptismal font after one of my sermons! Okay, maybe not that hard.

Of course, the reference to breaking bread has overtones of Eucharist or Communion or the Lord's Supper. It's intentional, I think. The sharp divide we often assume between meals and celebrating the Lord's Supper wasn't so back then. There was often an overlap between the two not unlike the Lord's Supper being an extension of the Passover meal when Jesus first instituted it.

The breaking of bread. In a short while we'll be doing just that, not unlike the early church. And, as they did, we break this bread knowing that Jesus has promised to show up right here, right now, in the midst of this very place, broken though it may be just like this bread soon will be. Yet, Jesus is here. In the midst of all this brokenness. Bidding us to come. Welcoming us to partake. Nothing that we do or say can make that

happen, it just is; a reality of a covenant God has promised to keep with us no matter what. And just like when Jesus walked the earth, miracles happen when Jesus shows up. The risen, living Christ is revealed. The church finds its strength, purpose, and resolve. Mercy comes to the forefront of our identity. The value of who we really are unavoidably confronts us. And we even find ourselves looking into each other's faces, as if for the first time, realizing that there's a real person in there crying out to be known, forgiven, loved, accepted and healed.

Yes, beloved church of Christ, sometimes, many times 'Life happens', making a sorry mess of even our best hopes, dreams, and efforts but here's the promise, all is not lost. More importantly and more powerfully, Jesus' happens. This bread is broken for you. Jesus happens and when Jesus' happens in the church, well, let's just say it would be a sorry mistake for anyone to assume that the church has completely lost its ability to inspire the goodwill of all the people. Yes, even us.

To God alone be all the Glory!