

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Ekklesia

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In 82 AD Emperor Domitian built the arch of Titus. It was to commemorate and celebrate his older brothers' military victories around the Roman Empire, most notably the siege of Jerusalem. In fact, you can see on the arch there are some of the clearest depictions we have today of the looting of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, we can see very clearly the Menorah being taken out of the temple. The emperor of Rome had overthrown the God of the Jewish people, or so he thought. What Emperor Domitian didn't realize is that the Jewish God of the temple in Israel had moved out a few years earlier. Already all around the Roman Empire there were small bands of people, Jews and Gentiles, men, women, children, Roman soldiers, and slaves and merchants who were following the teachings of a Jewish rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. And 300 years later, this fledgling Jewish sect would become the religion of the empire. 300 years after the building of this monument to the glory of Rome, the tables would completely turn. The religion that the empire tried to extinguish would be embraced. Now, if you're standing in the year 82 AD and your Emperor Domitian, and you're told that 300 years from now, the glory of Rome would be overshadowed by the glory of the Jewish God. That all of a sudden the pagan temples would be replaced with the worship of the God of Israel, and that the face and the lightness of this Jewish carpenter from Nazareth would be spread all over the city of Rome. That idea would be in the words of Vizzini inconceivable, illogical, incomprehensible, impossible, but it happened. And in fact, you can go today to the coliseum, which is one of the greatest monuments to the glory of Rome. And as you look at the emperor's box in the coliseum, you look at where the emperors, what stood in their glory and their power and their majesty. There's a Christian Cross that stands right in front of it. What was once the symbol of Roman brutality and power is now the symbol of God's grace and power? How did the inconceivable and the impossible and the incomprehensible happen? How is it that 300 years later the religion that the empire tried to extinguish it embraced?

If you have your Bibles this weekend, turn over to Acts chapter two. I'm going to get there in just a moment, but before we do, I want to take us back a little bit further to something that Jesus said to his followers. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said, *I will build my church and all the powers of hell will not conquer it.* Now in the original Greek language, he uses a word that I want to introduce to you, he says, I will build my Ekklesia and all the powers of hell will not conquer it. The word Ekklesia means an assembly a gathering, a group of people who are committed to one another and committed to a specific mission, it is a movement. It was often used in the Greek language to refer to political movements and Jesus said, I will build my Ekklesia an assembly, a movement, and the gates of hell will not conquer it. They will not overcome it. Nothing will stop it. The Ekklesia that Jesus imagined was a group of people who were committed to one another who were gripped by his message, who were galvanized by the idea of resurrection and against all odds spread across the Roman Empire, I will build my Ekklesia.

Over the past six weeks, we've talked about this idea of being better together. We've talked about being better together in marriage, in friendships, with Jesus. We've talked about the idea that 'we'

is better than 'me' and walking in humility and loving people who are different than us. And what I want to do this weekend is close out this series by talking about what it means to be better together as the movement, the people, the gathering, the assembly, the Ekklesia, the church that Jesus imagined that what swept across an empire.

Now, before we go any further, I feel like I need to make a confession. I need to put all my cards on the table so you know where I'm coming from. I love the church and I know you're thinking, well that's a good thing cause you work for one. But I mean, I have always loved the church. I was a weird little kid when other kids my age were playing house, were playing school, were playing Star Wars, I was playing church, alright. Now, I know that for many of you, that was not your experience, you didn't grow up loving church. In fact, some of you still don't like church. And the reality is if I had had the experience you had, I probably wouldn't like church either. Now, I know that across our locations this weekend that some of you are sitting in our gatherings and you walked away from church at some point and maybe you walked away from church for very good reasons. But what I want to encourage you in this weekend is that maybe you walked away from a church that wasn't exactly what Jesus envisioned.

Because along with my confession that I loved church, I also have to confess that there were things I loved about the church that perhaps the church should have never been about. Let me say that again. There were things I loved about the church, genuinely loved about the church, that I'm not sure the church ever should have been about. Let me give you some examples of some things that are very embarrassing, but it will help put skin around this. I once had a dog tag that said, I am the Christian the devil warns you about. I don't even know what that means anymore. I think I was trying to get at the passion of the gates of hell will not overcome it and I'm in this with you Jesus. But I'm not sure what I was trying to prove with that. I'm not sure that's what Jesus envisioned his assembly being about. I'm going to move on from that one cause it's embarrassing. A second thing I loved and I still love, I love apologetics. It's a branch of theology that seeks to bring historical and scientific and philosophical weight to the Christian faith. It's about defending, knowing why we believe what we believe. But here was the problem, there were moments growing up where I loved to debate so much and I love to win so much that I often won arguments for Jesus but lost audiences for him. That's not what Jesus was about. There have also been times when I've been involved in churches that felt like they fit very, very neatly into a certain political party and in fact, at times they were almost indistinguishable. And yet when I read the words of Jesus, Jesus says, I am the way, the truth and the life not a particular political position.

So, if you walked away from a church because it was judgmental or it was argumentative or it was too political or it was just nonsensical, then I need to personally apologize to you because even though you may not know me or you didn't know me, then I was contributing to a version of church that may not have been exactly what Jesus envisioned. And I want to invite you this weekend to consider coming back, and I want us to look at what the early church looked like so that maybe we can catch a glimpse of what it was that they were about that caused them to spread so quickly and so powerfully across an empire that sought to destroy it. Look there were also things about my church that I love. My church gave me an insatiable hunger for the word of God. My church gave me a community of people that loved me and prayed for me and believed in me even when things were going very, very badly, my church helped me to be gripped with

the message of Jesus in awe of the power of the resurrection. The reality is that I'm still getting things wrong and I don't even know what I'm getting wrong. We're all broken people stumbling forward, trying to follow Jesus.

So let's look at the earliest description of the church in Acts chapter two. To bring you up to speed on what's going on; Jesus has ascended back into heaven. He told his followers, go to Jerusalem and wait for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They went, they prayed. Pentecost came 10 days later, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the people and they see 3000 people saved and baptized around the temple in one day. And then the author tells us this,

⁴² *All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer.*

⁴³ *A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders.*

⁴⁴ *And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.*

⁴⁵ *They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.*

⁴⁶ *They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity*

⁴⁷ *all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.*

There were three big realities that they were living in. One is that the Holy Spirit was moving among them. Secondly, they were all contributing, they were all in and everyone found that their needs were met. Finally, they grew, they multiplied, people were being added to their number daily. The Holy Spirit was on the move, it says that awe came over the apostles were performing signs and wonders. People were getting healed, miracles were taking place, people were speaking in other tongues and people were hearing the Gospel in their language. This was normal every day experience for the church. The supernatural was a natural part of their lives and not just in the gathering together in the church, they found miracles happening out in the marketplace, out in the public square, the Holy Spirit was moving.

The second thing we find is that no one was in need, they were all together, they had everything in common, they sold their possessions and property to give to those who were in need. In fact, what caught the attention of the Roman Empire was not the early church's doctrine, not its moral code, but the way it took care of people. Emperor Julian the second said that it is a scandal that the Galileans care not only for their own poor, but for ours as well. He couldn't stand the notion that anyone would be considered more good, more benevolent, more noble than the Roman Empire. And here was the church taking care of not only of their own people, but of those in the community, in the area around them.

Now, when I think about NCC, this is one of those things that I'm actually really proud of us for. I mean, when we look at the way that we're involved in mission and on mission every day and the causes that we're a part of, the Dream Center, I feel like we're doing a good job here. But here's where I've got to check myself every now and then; sometimes I can assume that I am acting generously, I am acting hospitably, I am on mission, I am serving because I'm connected to people who are. And where I want to push us a little bit this weekend is to not give ourselves a pat on the back simply because we're in close proximity to people who are generous and hospitable and on mission and serving.

And also the text doesn't say, and they were all together and had everything in common and 10% of them went on mission, 20% of them served on a ministry team, 30% of them gave financially. It says, "all", are we all all in?

And then finally it says that they grew in number on that particular day of Pentecost, they grew by 3000. Other places in Acts it says they grew by 5,000 that more were added, people multiplied, many were added to the church. This was a group of people that realize they did not exist for themselves; they existed for those who were not yet apart. And they were called to be a movement that was growing; they realized they were part of something bigger than themselves.

Are we a spirit filled people? Is the supernatural natural in our lives? Are we a people who are contributors or do we see church as something that we come to consume? And are we growing? Are we wanting to grow? Are we desperate to grow? Are we an inviting people? Are we a movement that is actively following where Jesus is going or have we just become complacent and satisfied with the status quo, comfortable, right where we are?

Let's reverse engineer for just a moment and talk about what they were doing. Now, I don't want to approach this as a formula or as a prescription or as a if we do this, then this will happen, but there are four things that we find that the church was committed to or devoted to or gave themselves too, depending on what translation you read. They were devoted to the apostles teaching, they were devoted to fellowship, they were devoted to sharing meals together, including the Lord's supper, and they were devoted to prayer.

So, let's look at those four things for just a moment. First, they're devoted to the apostles teaching. Now, keep in mind at this point there is no New Testament. Being devoted to the apostles teaching did not mean that they were sitting in a circle doing a Bible study on the book of Ephesians. Okay, not that there's anything wrong with that in fact, that's a great thing, that's one of the great things about being on this side of church history, we get to study Ephesians. They didn't have that, they had the Old Testament, which they already knew, had already studied. And then they had the experience of the apostles, those who had been with Jesus for three years. They were devoted and clinging to and hungry for what these guys had to say, what they saw Jesus do, what they had heard him teach, what they heard him command. They were hungry for the teachings of Jesus. Love your neighbor as yourself, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You are the light of the world, take up your cross and follow me, love your enemy, turn your cheek to those who have slapped you once. If you want to be first, you have to be last. Being a follower of Jesus does not mean believing something about Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus means being obedient to what he has said.

You know right now, many of us during the season of Lent are reading through the Gospels together and one of the habits I'm trying to form every day is it that every day I'm trying to write down one thing that Jesus said so that I can be careful that I do something about it. What if every time we come to the red letters of scripture, the words of Jesus, we ask ourselves two questions; one, what does Jesus saying and two, what am I going to do about it? You know all of our small groups could just wrap our entire curriculum around that? Just open up the Bible, what did Jesus say? What am I going to do about it? And in those places in scripture that aren't the red letters, that's where the Holy Spirit has inspired someone else to say something, and in those moments you should say, what is the Holy Spirit revealing to me and what am I going to do about it? Are we devoted to, committed to, giving ourselves to being obedient to the words of Jesus?

Secondly, it says that they were committed to fellowship. They were devoted to fellowship community. Now, I think to understand this one, to understand the magnitude of it, to grasp kind of the scandal of it, we've got to go back to something that Jesus taught in the book of Mark and we'll put it on the screen. I'll read through it very quickly, but in Mark chapter three verse 31 we read this.

³¹ *Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him.*

³² *A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."*

³³ *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.*

³⁴ *Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"*

³⁵ *Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

I think it's hard for us to find how shocking and scandalous this was because when we read it, we, we tend to read it as awe Jesus is just giving us a nice little metaphor, there's just hyperbole. But could you imagine for just a moment being Mary? You had put your life and your reputation on the line to give birth to this guy? And he's saying, my mother and my brother and my sister, are you sitting around the circle? See, in the Old Testament, having a large family was a sign of God's blessing and Jesus here just flips it on its head. He redefines family. He says, no, no, no, you don't just have biological family, you have spiritual family and the spiritual family is the one that I am most focused on building. He makes the claim that anyone that is his follower is family.

Now, I wonder if sometimes in our church experience we flip this back backwards. I know a lot of times and in my own experience growing up somehow in the teaching and in the programming that we had, it was almost as though marriage was the ultimate goal. It was almost as though we assumed that marriage was everyone's wish and God's will for most people. And if there was a singles ministry, it was just kind of a, hey, um, this is just while you're in a holding pattern. And I wonder if we need to rediscover something here about family. Now look, I'm eternally grateful for my biological family. Yesterday marked a year of my grandmother's passing and for those that may have heard me speak before, you know, the impact she had on my life. And I spent time

just remembering and being grateful for her legacy and the heritage and the teaching, the way she has paved the way for me, the shoulders I get to stand on. I am eternally grateful for my marriage, for my kid. I mean my marriage brings me joy, it shapes my character. My kid shapes my character and brings me joy and shapes my character a little more. It's not about dismissing those things, but it's about opening ourselves up to a wider reality that there is a form of community that Jesus envisioned that includes all of us. And that's what the early church did; they formed a new family where they leaned into one another and learned from one another where the testimony of one another strengthened one another and encourage one another. It was this proving grounds in this practice field for trying out this new ethic of love that Jesus had introduced that if you love one another as I love you, then the world will know that you're my disciples. It was a place where the passion of the young and the wisdom of the older generation can connect. Ryan and I are very grateful for the wisdom we've received from spiritual fathers and mothers. The encouragement and the comradery that we've experienced from spiritual brothers and sisters and the joy we have found in spiritual sons and daughters?

Now, I'm little bit older and I'm married, so I'm gonna speak to the older marrieds for a moment because you're the ones I feel like I have a level of credibility to give some application to. If you're in our category, would you consider inviting others around your table regularly, older, younger, singles, other marrieds? Would you consider as a family, maybe inviting someone who's single on your next family vacation? Would you consider starting a small group that is intentionally intergenerational? Were kids and grandmas and grandpas and aunts and uncles and moms and dads and young adults can all come together and experience the family of God together. And here's what's great about this, I don't think that we have to add anything to our lives in order to do this. It's simply about sharing the life we already live. It's about inviting people into the experience that we already have. Are we a people who are devoted to one another as family?

Next, they were devoted to sharing in meals and in my translation in parentheses it says, including the Lord's Supper. I think we need to rediscover a robust theology of the table. It seems to me when I read scripture that God loves the table. He loves mealtime time. He shows up to Abraham to restate this promise that he is going to have a son. It is the Passover that marks the liberation and the freedom of the Jewish people from slavery; it was like their version of a 4th of July barbecue. It's at the table that Jesus feeds 5,000 people and it reveals something about his divinity. It's at the last supper, that he gives his followers a glimpse of the salvation and the redemption that is to come. It's on the road to Emmaus that he's talking with a couple of people about the Old Testament prophecies that reveal who he is, but it's not until he sits at the table and breaks bread with them that their eyes are open and they realize who they've been with. It may sound like a stretch, but I don't think it's a stretch to say that our table should be one of the primary places where people encounter the power and the presence and the provision and the promises of God. We need to reclaim our table as holy ground and meals as holy moments.

Now this Lord supper thing is really interesting because we often tend to think of that is one of the rituals that we experienced when we come together in a setting like this and that's true and here at NCC we try to do it when it matches sermon series, we try to make sure we do it regularly and consistently and we try to do it about once every six weeks, every couple of months. But here's what I think was going on in the early church, I think they were also doing it

in their homes, it actually says that it says they were meeting in homes for the Lord's Supper. They were turning normal everyday meals in to opportunities to remember and celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus. What if we took our everyday meals our every day gatherings and just took a moment in that to remember, to commemorate, to celebrate, to give Thanksgiving for the sacrifice of Jesus. Are we devoted to making our tables holy ground and meals, holy moments?

Finally, they were devoted to prayer. For this group prayer was not an afterthought at the last two minutes of a small group. It was their first thought. In moments, it was all they knew to do, to pray. Someone needs help, they prayed. If someone was sick, they prayed. If someone was in prison, they prayed. If somebody was scared, they prayed. If somebody needed something, they prayed. They were a people committed to getting into the presence of Jesus and praying.

Now, I think the best way to pray is the simple way that Jesus taught his followers. We often call it the Lord's Prayer. We're going to put it on the screen and here's what I want to encourage you to do; I want you to take out your phone and take a picture of it if you don't know it, because there may be times this week when you don't have your Bible with you or maybe you don't have a Bible at all, but this is a prayer you can pray anytime, anywhere, and I would encourage you, pray it every morning, pray it every night.

The Holy Spirit was moving, the people were thriving and they were all in and the church was growing. In 82 AD the Roman emperor built a monument to the glory of Rome and 300 years later, Rome would be filled with the worship of the God of the Jewish temple and the likeness of Jesus would be found all over the city of Rome. The empire worshiped what it sought to wipe out. How did that happen? A man had predicted his own death and his own resurrection and pulled it off. And a lot of times we tend to think that the pinnacle, the climax, the uniqueness of our faith, it's found in the crucifixion. And while that's absolutely true because of what it bought us for, what it paid for, for what it did the crucifixion in and of itself would not have been unique because thousands of Jewish men were crucified on Roman crosses. What made the difference was the empty tomb. Somewhere in the ancient city of Jerusalem, a man walked out of a grave and it changed everything. These people gathered not around a set of mental ideas, not even around a set of shared moral code. They gathered around the idea that the resurrection had happened and if the resurrection had happened, then nothing was impossible. Are we a people who are gripped by the message of Jesus and galvanized by this idea that resurrection happened and resurrection is happening still? Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell will not conquer it.

Can I invite you this weekend, If you have never made a decision to follow Jesus, would you do it? Look, if somebody predicted their own death and resurrection, I'm going to go with that and they pull it off. I'm going to go with that. Would you consider following Jesus this weekend? And here's what I want to encourage you to do, in a few weekends we're going to have a baptism celebration on Easter Saturday we're going to celebrate baptisms. I can't think of a better time to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and celebrate the resurrection of our own lives into the abundant life that he's created for us. Would you consider doing that?

Next weekend I'm super excited Pastor Mark is going to be back preaching and he's starting a new series titled Yes and Amen and he's going to be talking about the future of this local

Ekklesia of this local movement of where the Holy Spirit is moving us in the next few years. I'm super excited about it. We're going to be praying for you this week, and we'll look forward to seeing you next weekend.

Let me pray for you. God, thank you so much that you did not call us to hold down the fort or maintain a status quo that you called us to be on movement with you. We thank you that you didn't just come to earth and then leave and call it done, but you are still moving. You are still present. You are still bringing dead things back to life, and you've called us to get to be a part of that. God, I pray that we would be a people on move with you, that we will be gripped by your teaching, that we would be committed to obedience, that we would be committed to one another as family, that we would rediscover our table is holy ground, that we would be a praying people, God, that we would be all in. In Jesus' name. Amen.