



# “The Power of Authenticity”

Text: Acts 2:42-47

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

**Sunday, May 7, 2017**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

With an amazing regularity, a host of opportunities to attend conferences and seminars on how to increase the membership of the church, comes across my desk. Most of them I dismiss, simply because I know the work of the various speakers and leaders through their writings and public statements, and I wouldn't consider spending your money that you give to my continuing education, on those people. Some of them, I write off because they are too far away. But, some of them are really good – and sound really interesting – and I will take advantage of the opportunity.

And then, when you get to the conference or the seminar, there is usually someone who has a growing congregation who begins to tell their story. They start with a handful of people, meeting in a home, and then you fast forward five years and they have 5,000 people and are building their first Sanctinasion in which to worship, run youth programming, young adult basketball leagues, and hot yoga and Bible study. Along the way, in telling their story, they mention the quirky things that worked for them.

And then, the best part comes. At the conference are usually people from churches that are about to enter hospice care. They are looking for the miracle drug that will prevent their untimely death. They hear that the explosively growing church used couches instead of pews or chairs, and they huddle up and start thinking about where they could get couches. The fast-growing church talks about how important it is to have really great coffee, and another church with a bad cough huddles up and decides that it's time to move from 8 O'Clock coffee to Folgers. The seminar leader mentions that they have a car mechanics group that fixes old clunkers after Bible study to give to people who don't have cars, and another church group huddles up and begins talking about how to turn the Pastor's study into a garage.

My hunch is that when they get home one of two things happens. My first hunch is that they get home and trot out to other church members the life-saving idea from the conference, in full anticipation of a rousing round of applause and accolades, only to be met, at best, with blank stares or, at worst, the invitation to join another congregation. My second hunch is that they get home, try everything they heard at the conference, and nothing changes. They don't see new people, they don't grow, and they slip further into their rapidly increasing decline.

And we wonder why so many churches are failing.

When we read the story of the early church, from the Acts of the Apostles, we are reminded of why the early church was successful and why it grew.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... [they] 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. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

Those early Christians realized that they lived in a dangerous and hostile environment. They had seen their leader killed by the powers and authorities of their world. There was no time and no money for programs and web sites and all the rest - even if they had existed.

Still, we are reminded, "[that] day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." Every day, their numbers grew. Day by day the Church of Jesus Christ became more effective.

Why? How?

I could play a game of homiletical hide-and-seek with you, but we really don't have the time today. So, let me give it to you flat out. The reason the early church grew and prospered and succeeded in sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ is because it was authentic – it was genuine – it was real. They gathered together with amazing regularity, which may not have been as difficult or required as much commitment as today, but was still a challenge. They shared in times of worship. They took care of each other, meeting the needs and necessities of their community. They grew in joy and generosity as they embodied the faith and brought that faith to life.

No one called the early Christians “hypocrites.” They were probably called other things, but their authenticity was on open and public display. They lived what they proclaimed. They put their faith into action. They practiced what they preached. They knew that Jesus taught that in the Kingdom of God, there would be no one who would be poor, suffer injustice, go hungry, experience thirst, be unclothed, or be forgotten and alone. By their lives and by their living, the early Christians began building that Kingdom of God right where they were.

This was so true, that by the time of Tertullian (at the end of the second century A.D.) he could write the words of those outside the church, when they said, “Look,” they say, “how they love one another” (for they themselves hate one another); “and how they are ready to die for each other” (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).

The Easter people of God have the greatest news the world has ever heard. We have the good news of God's love that surrounds and indwells and infuses all things – and, from which, we can never be separated. We have the commission from Jesus Christ to take this good news into all the world. And we have seen, in fleeting moments and in those “thin places” where the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world are not so separated that the Kingdom of God brings hope and peace and love and joy and justice and fulfillment to all people.

All we have to do is live that out in our individual lives and in our life together. All we have to do is to be authentically Christian – welcoming all people, accepting all people, empowering all people. All we have to do is to discover exciting and unadulterated ways of bringing the good news of God love to life in our world, beginning on this downtown corner and moving out across the region. All we have to do is:

...devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... to be together and hold things in common; even selling our possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need... spending much time together in the temple, breaking bread at home and eating our food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

We don't need fog machines, computer-controlled lighting, and a sound system that would support a heavy metal band. We don't need an LED, computer controlled sign to flash pictures and pithy sayings to those passing by. We don't need big screens to offer you a close up of my mug as I preach. And, truth be told, the world has grown weary and suspicious of all that.

But show them an authentic church where the hungry are fed, the sick are cared for, the homeless are welcomed in, the oppressed are set free, and where injustice is overcome with love and all people are treated as children of God – and they will want to be a part of that. Authenticity, not gimmicks, is the vehicle for the good news of God's love.

And, who knows? They may just find themselves saying, "Look how these Presbyterians love one another." That would really shake things up. For now and evermore. Amen.



First  
Presbyterian  
Church

609 South East Second Street  
Evansville, IN 47713  
(812) 423-6297  
[www.firstpresevansville.com](http://www.firstpresevansville.com)

First Presbyterian Church  
is a partner congregation with  
the Covenant Network  
of Presbyterians.

