

If we're honest, the entire passage makes us a bit nervous. Ascension followed by Pentecost. The miracle of tongues or if you prefer, the miracle of hearing. 3000 saved in one day. Everyone aglow with enthusiasm. Some of it, of course, is beyond our experience, but other aspects—well, we've been there before. We've witnessed so-called revivals. We've seen outbreaks of religious fervor; and we've come to expect them to be the end of the story rather than, as in the case of Acts, the beginning. We have seen far too many times when religious highs are short lived and fail to take root in long term commitment. We are frankly suspicious, and we pride ourselves on being so.

But let's look again, for Luke in opening the book of Acts is saying to us just the opposite. He relates the highs—yes—but more. God's Spirit, he seems to be saying, is about more than a momentary experience. It births an ongoing community that lives out that moment in continuing loving, caring, profound relationship.

True. There are the highs in Acts—the twin “peaks,” preacher-teacher Thomas Long calls them. But notice that there's also something in-between. Long speaks of it as a valley. The Ascension of Christ forty days after Easter is followed by Pentecost fifty days after Easter and in-between, a church business meeting. The Twelve have been diminished by the desertion and death of Judas, and the symbolic number must be restored. Peter stands up in the midst of one hundred and twenty believers—itsself a symbolic number, signifying in the Jewish faith a number adequate for a whole, a complete community of faith. By casting lots, Matthias is selected as Judas's replacement. Devoting themselves, Luke says, to constant prayer, the community takes up the ordinary tasks of being church. They hold an election.

That we can understand. We've been there, done that. Sandwiched in-between the high moments of Ascension and Pentecost, however, it's a moment we tend to overlook. It's plugged into the gap between these two great events, Long suggests, “like a ukelele player sent onstage to entertain the audience between the New York Philharmonic and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir” [*Journal for Preachers*, January 1, 1991]. But in a real way it expresses a deep truth about being together as a church community. We move from Ascension to Pentecost, from vision into mission. We hold elections, struggle with balancing budgets, order curriculum, set up service ministries, enlist volunteers—all in the hope and expectation that we are not just left on our own, that somehow God's Spirit is still with us, blessing us and calling us into the future, one day, one step at a time.

We may become tempted, however, to get lost in the everydayness of it all. We may become so preoccupied with the maintenance chores that we lose the joy and vision or what we are all about. Long shares a conversation with a seminary preaching class in which the “hyperbole” of Luke's description of the early church's experience seemed contradictory to the church experience into which the students would be moving on graduation. 3000 baptisms in one day? A church body in which everyone was deeply involved in Christian education and worship and with everyone around speaking well of them? Faith growing by leaps and bounds and no one in need because of the community's common sharing? Luke's description over against the reality that stretched out before the students seemed overwhelming. They would be stepping into churches where even three baptisms a year would be startling; where, “to put it politely,” people often greet the apostle's (and the preacher's) great teachings and words of wisdom with less than electric enthusiasm; where the Sunday school has been on a respirator for twenty years; where most of the homes have a Bible “around here somewhere;” and where fellowship has shaken down to twenty minutes following the Sunday morning service and a pot luck meal every now and then.

Pondering Luke's glowing description, a student observed that it sounded like the small mimeographed pamphlet pulled together by an aging member of her home church, detailing the church history. Reading it, she commented, “you'd think that our church was the most loyal and faithful congregation in the world. Every minister was wonderful, and there was never a troubled moment.”

That's it! Long responds. What if instead of reading Acts as if it were a treatise penned with modern journalistic precision, we read it as the memoir of a loving member of the congregation? Rather than seeking to whittle it down to size as mere nostalgia or the product of rose-colored glasses, what if we consider there might be something more at work? Luke will, of course, go on to speak to other realities encountered by the church. He will acknowledge that just as happened in Jesus' ministry, outside observers, who at first responded in awe and wonder, will eventually become divided in their assessment of this fledgling community. And this community that initially gathered “in one accord” will eventually have

disagreements that seem to threaten its continued existence.

This new little community, which gathered first around Jesus and then around its grief upon his death, gathers now, Luke is telling us, around the hope of his resurrection and commissioning. True, it will proceed over the course of time much on the order of an old lawnmower—by fits and starts. Luke is convinced, however, that because God’s Spirit is with the church there is always more to the life of the church than meets the naked eye. “The Spirit,” Long affirms, “makes the promise of a community of peace and justice felt even today and in the almost laughable locales of real Christian congregations.” Despite our sometimes painfully human proceedings, the community of faith, viewed in light of God’s presence among us and beyond us, bids us to a lifetime of hope and personal investment. What we do and who we are matters. More than a flash in the pan, more than a momentary high, it is about living our lives to God and each other and toward the world that bids us to love and mission in Christ’s name.

So gather now at Christ’s Table. It is the place where Jesus gathered during his ministry with a whole array of saints and sinners. It is a Table that is set around the world on this very day. It is a place of diversity and inclusion. It is a place where bread is very important. It is a place where God’s grace is dispensed among us and through us as we go to share grace with the hungry and thirsty people who surround us. Set at the center of our hearts and lives, it is a Table that sustains and keeps us even as it opens us to realities yet unseen.

Thanks be to God for this place. Thanks be to God for this community of faith whom God loves and sends. Amen!