

Breaking Bread at Home

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

So today's sermon is entitled "Breaking Bread at Home", which hits home for us, because we have been taking a virtual communion all along during the time that we've been doing these remote services. But, today, we're going to do a special focus on communion, and, so, if you don't already have something nearby to take communion with—so bread and wine, or the closest thing that you have to that—I do encourage you to go and get some in the next few minutes, so that you can have it at hand when the time comes for us to take communion together.

So, this is the season of Easter, we call it Eastertide. And as I mentioned a few weeks ago, the official season of Easter in the church actually comes after the week of Easter Sunday. And this is just like Christmas, in that respect, where everything in culture and society places the season before the day but the church places the season after the day. Anyway, the season of Easter is always an inspiring time of year for me, as someone who cares a lot about the church, because when we're following the lectionary, the schedule of Bible readings in the season of Easter always includes the early chapters of the book of Acts. And this is the book of the Bible that tells the story of what happened after Jesus's resurrection and the church began to form. And so in these early chapters from the book of Acts we get to see the Christian Church in its infancy, when everything was still fresh, and new, and surprising, when the people of God were experiencing the reality of the resurrection, kind of like, up close. The church was growing explosively; it was reaching new people and new groups of people. And it sort of seems like the beginning parts of a relationship, you know, where everything is still really good and before some of the tension, that is bound to happen when people get close to each other, has started to happen. Now, at the same time, many of the followers of Jesus' way were about to undergo great suffering and persecution, sometimes for their beliefs. We saw hints of that in the reading from 1st Peter earlier in our service. Any way you slice it, it was an intense time in Christian history. And yet, some of the descriptions of the early Christians show us a way of life that is

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really quite simple: it's just a group of people who are deeply committed to this new understanding of the world.

And it is my belief, and my great hope, that the Holy Spirit doesn't just do fresh and new and surprising things at the very beginning of the story but that the Holy Spirit is still willing to and interested in wanting to do things in our story today that are fresh and new and surprising. It's my belief and great hope that the reality of the resurrection is still close to us, that the church can still grow and reach new people and new groups of people. It's still my belief and great hope that even though this is an intense time in our own history, that we can dedicate ourselves to the simple way of Jesus and that that would have the potential to be world changing. And so, I wonder if perhaps we might be able to put ourselves in position to see the work of God more clearly in our world by following along with what we see here in the book of Acts about the early days of the Christian church. And I think as we look at this passage we're going to see that the physical distancing that we are experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic might be an opportunity for us to think about all of these things in a different way. And sometimes when you start thinking about things in a different way, that's like the door cracking open for the Holy Spirit to come in and do that new work.

So, the passage from Acts, as you heard earlier, is a short passage today and I thought we could just look at some of it a little bit more closely and maybe see what we can find. So, you can follow along in your own Bibles, if you have them with you, we are in Acts 2, starting in verse 42. We also will put the words on the screen and so if you prefer to follow along on your screen and you can see it well enough, you can follow along that way as well. So, why don't we start with those first couple of verses, starting in verse 42:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.”

You know, most years when I read that text, those 2 verses together, the thing that stands out for me as the “wow I wish that would happen in our day” is the wonders and signs part of it, but this year, for me, the one word that stood out from those lines and made me go “wow I wish we could experience that now in our day” is the word fellowship. That word fellowship almost hits like a wound for us today, for me at least, and I suspect for some of you as well. Because fellowship is exactly the thing that we're missing right now, isn't it. I mean we're doing the best that we can with Zoom and Facebook and it's really, it's working out better than I would have guessed. But, it's still not the same as being together in the way that we're used to being together. And we want that more than anything, I think, sometimes. And not just in

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church, but everywhere. I mean we want to be together in school and in our sports leagues and in bars and restaurants and at work and in the park and on the street. I mean, we're a church full of introverts and even the introverts are starting to say, "Ok that's probably enough alone time for now." We're really missing out on fellowship all the time. And so, we're left trying to figure out new ways to experience something like fellowship from a distance.

By the way, that gives me an opportunity to talk about something that I know is on a lot of people's minds, which is the question of when and how we are going to resume worshipping together. I think we're seeing hints around our country of more and more things opening up; some states have started to open up, even in our own state, which has been hit hard by this virus, some restrictions on businesses I think are going to be starting to lift before too long. And so, the question is on everybody's mind: what does that mean for church services? What does it mean for Artisan? So the leadership team discussed this idea together last week and the short answer is: we still don't know. The plan is the same as it's been all along, which is to do our best to follow guidance from medical officials, the people who truly know what they're doing nationally and especially here in our county. And that's not just because it's the right and safe thing to do, it's also because we believe that part of Artisan's job as a church, right now, is to model good citizenship and to model loving our neighbors. And right now that means not rushing to return to holding public events before we're told that it's safe to do so. And so we want to be leaders in that way in our community, if you will. Believe me, there is no one who doesn't want to be together again soon and I'm probably close to the top of that list. So, we will keep you posted and we are watching the situation closely, and I hope that it will be before too much longer, but we just don't know.

So, ok let's move on in our passage we're going to look now at verses 44 and 45:

"All who believed 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."

Now this verse often ends up at the center of some religious debates about what would be the most Christian way to structure our politics and our government. You'll be delighted to know that I'm not going there today. I will say, instead, that this picture of the church, I think, irrespective of how things are structured, you know, governmentally, it ought to inspire all of us to be extremely generous in how we care for each other and how we reach out to anybody who is in need.

And I'm really pleased that our church has been trying to do more of that during this time. And you know, by now, if you've been visiting with us, or worshipping with us, or following our social media and online presence, that our community care ministry has been up and running

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since the first week of this social distancing and quarantining situation that we've been in. And it's a, perhaps a small way, but, I think it's a significant way for us to live this out. And so, people who have needs have gone to that website, that page on our website, to submit their requests for needs and people who have the means to meet the needs of others have used that same page to indicate that they're able and willing to do so. And those needs get matched up with the people who can meet them. And it's not on the scale that we're seeing in Acts chapter 2 where everybody had everything in common, but I think it's a small picture of that and it is a really meaningful way that we are being the church; we're living out the calling that was placed on us and the model that was offered to us by the early Christians. And by the way that the Holy Spirit worked in their world. And so, I'm really proud of all of the people at Artisan who put that together and who have been participating in making it happen. And this is one of those situations where, I mean this stuff, this kind of thing happens all the time, where we get a picture of something good and right and beautiful in scripture but it's a very high bar, right? Selling all of our possessions and distributing to everybody, that's a very high bar. And I think that we sometimes believe the lie that if you're not going to do all of that, that you shouldn't bother doing any of it. And that lie makes its way into almost every area of life for Christian people. And I urge you not to believe that lie, I urge you instead to say, "what if I was able to do one small thing in that category that looks so big in scripture?" I really think that would be the key to unlocking so much of the work that God wants to do in the world through us: if we were just willing to do the small piece.

Okay, now let's look at the final 2 verses of today's reading because this is where I really want to settle in for our communion service today. So: Acts 2:46 and 47. "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. And day by day the Lord added to their number of those who were being saved." So once again this verse has an ouch in it, doesn't it? They spent much time together in the temple. We wish we could spend more time together in our church building in the structure where we worship usually. But it also has this really wonderful little bit of reassurance—of comfort—for us now because it says they broke bread at home. I took so much encouragement from that when I read it. So. I don't know if this comes across—I hope that it does, but I don't know if it always does—when we're worshipping together in our normal way at the Artisan building. But, our worship liturgy—in other words, the way that we structure the various things that happen when we worship together—it has always been designed so that celebrating Communion is the pinnacle moment of the service. I think this is actually one of the things that I hope anyway that gives our church, Artisan Church, its unique identity. So I know for many of you that even though you went to church a lot when you were younger, or at some other time in your life, taking communion

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every single week was a new thing for you when you came to Artisan. Unless you came from a Roman Catholic tradition, or similar, where it was normal for you and the other stuff that we did was new for you. So that combination of things that we do is, I think, what I find special about Artisan, anyway. Suffice it to say, it's somewhat unusual for a church in our tradition to celebrate communion every single week but we have always regarded that as the central moment of Christian worship. It's not just one of the things we do; it's the central thing that we do. Again, I don't know if that comes across when we're together but I hope that it does. The mystery of it. The sacredness of it. And most importantly, probably, the communal nature of it. And so missing out on Holy Communion is in some ways the hardest part of being forced away from each other by this disease. Because the reality is that it's our presence together that gives this sacrament its meaning and power.

So the reason that some churches are choosing not to celebrate communion virtually? It's not that there's some magical thing that only the pastor can do that gives communion its power. It's because in those churches that their view is that the bread in the wine can only be properly consecrated that can only be made holy in the presence of the gathered fellowship. Right? So for the same reason that's why nobody really recommends communion as part of your, like, daily private devotion. Right? Now, so—Artisan obviously hasn't taken the view that communion can't be done virtually, as I said earlier. We've done this every week since we've been worshipping remotely. But I will say that the meaning behind the argument against it—it does ring true for me because it really is the presence of the entire community together that gives this sacrament its meaning and its power. And I think that's why the phrase with the verse that says, “they broke bread at home” sunk in so deeply for me this week.

And it's with that in mind that I want to do a slightly more official sounding communion service with you now. So perhaps I'm going to be using words that are a little bit more ritualized to introduce and offer communion. And perhaps that will help us remember that the sacred act is something that derives its meaning from the fact that we do it together. And for me, that just means we have a different definition of what “together” looks like for the time being. So if you are at home and if you have bread, or grape juice, or a little red wine, or whatever communion elements you have at your disposal, I want you to gather those for this communion service at home and what will bless them through this virtual service. So each person should have their own cup and piece of bread, if possible. You can...everybody can have their own. So we're going to do this a little differently today, and for that reason we won't be able to do the thing that we have usually done during communion, which is to take our videos on. Turn our videos on for the moment that we take communion. But given all that I've said about how being together is what gives this sacrament its meaning it seems like it would be missing the point somewhat not to take a moment to try to be in each other's presence as much as we can before we celebrate

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communion. So here's what we'll do: you can set your communion elements aside for now and when I say “go” all of you who are worshipping on Zoom can start your videos and offer a silent but visual greeting of gesture. Or gesture of peace. And if you're on Facebook you can't see each other but you can—maybe in the chat— offer a sign of peace. So that might just be a wave. And if you have Zoom on with gallery view everybody will get to see waving. Or a peace sign. Or you know, kind of the prayer hands. Whatever works for you. I want us, as much as possible, to be able to see each other, or at least see each other's words in the chat. And so I when I say “go” you can all start your videos, and after maybe 20 seconds of that I'll ask you to turn your videos back off for the communion service. Okay? All right. So go ahead and start your videos. And maybe we can take the screen share off for a moment so that everybody can see each other really well. And you probably want to put it on gallery view if you aren't already. [silent pause ... Scott chuckles lightly] Alright. Wonderful. How beautiful to see you all. All right, you can go ahead and stop your videos again. Oops, I stopped mine. I guess I shouldn't stop mine. [laughs]

Alright. So do you have your communion elements ready to go? I have mine here with me. Presumably they are on a table or something like that. This is the table—wherever and whatever table you have—this is the table not of the church but of the Lord. It is to be made ready for those who love him and who want to love him more. So come, to these simple elements. You who have much faith and you who have little. You who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time. You who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come, not because it is I who invite you, it is our Lord. It is His will that those who want him should meet him in these elements no matter where they are laid out. This is the Lord's table. Your table is the Lord's table. And our Savior invites those who trust him to share the feast which he has prepared. So come to this sacred table—your sacred table—not because you must but because you may. Come to testify not that you are righteous, but that you sincerely love our Lord Jesus Christ, and that you desire to be one of his true disciples. Come not because you are strong but because you are weak. Not because you have any claim on the grace of God, but because in our frailty and sin we stand in constant need of his mercy and help. Come, not to express an opinion but to seek his presence and power.

So I'm going to invite all of you at home to hold your bread and your cup—whatever you're going to eat and drink—hold it in your hands, or maybe you can hold your hands over the elements if that's a more comfortable posture for you—as I pray to consecrate these elements, all of them, wherever you are. Gracious God: Each time we approach the table we are reminded that you are the giver of great gifts. And that life loses its wonder and purpose without your gifts. May we receive this bread as a gift for the redemption of our lives. And may we receive this cup as a gift for freedom from our fears. And may we receive your grace as a gift of light

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from our world's darkness. We give you thanks for these holy gifts, and for the gift of this sacred meal. Bless and be known to us again through it. So I invite you to take the bread in your hands. 1st Corinthians 10:17 says “Because there is one bread we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” And you can break that bread. And partake. And invite you to lift your cup. This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ. Drink of it in remembrance of him.

Loving God, you have graciously accepted us as living members of the Body of Christ and you have fed us with spiritual food in the sacrament of his body and blood. Give us now your peace and grant all of us your healing strength and sustaining power through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).