

Acts 2:42-47

“Do You Look Like Your Picture, Church?”

September 18, 2011 Maple Grove UMC

“If I asked you to draw a picture to communicate this word—
“Church”—what would you draw? A building with a steeple on top?”
asks Fred Craddock. “A sanctuary with pews of worshipers, a small
group in a circle studying the Bible, a pulpit and an altar?”¹

That’s a wonderful question. If you were to draw a picture to
communicate “Church,” what would *you* draw? And it’s the perfect
question for today, as we begin this series called “Focus on the
Vision.” Vision—having a picture of the church not just as it is but as
it ought to be, the church as God wants it to be—is critical. The book
of Proverbs teaches, “Without vision the people perish” (29:18).

In *Alice in Wonderland* Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, “Cheshire
Cat, would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?”

“That depends,” says the Cat, “a good deal on where you want
to get to.”

“I don’t know where . . .” says Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you walk,” respond the Cat.

“So long as I get *somewhere*,” says Alice.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that if you only walk long enough.”

Yes, sure enough the church will get *somewhere*. But will it be where we ought to get? Will it be where God would have us go? The answer to that depends on vision.

Here, then, is my answer to the question. If I were to draw a picture to communicate the word “Church,” here’s what I would draw: Acts 2:42-47. Yeah, I know, that’s cheating a little. But I can’t draw, so I’ll let the Bible draw for me. What we have in these verses is a picture of the early church. Now, many scholars suggest that what Acts gives us may not be historical, that it’s an idealized picture of the church, that things were never quite as hunky-dory as that. But even if that’s true, what we have in Acts is a picture of how Luke wanted the early church to be remembered. When we read these verses, we are receiving from the Bible a picture of how the church is supposed to be.

Zan Holmes, a United Methodist pastor and one of the leading Black preachers in the country, once told about traveling to Charlotte,

NC, to preach a revival. The host pastor called to tell him that an emergency had come up and he wouldn't be able to meet him at the airport. But he would send someone else to pick him up and give him Rev. Holmes' picture so he'd know whom to look for.

But when Rev. Holmes got to the airport, no one stepped up to meet him, so he found a place to stand and wait. Pretty soon a young man walked up, looked Rev. Holmes over, and walked to another part of the airport. Several minutes later this same young man came by again, looked Rev. Holmes over, and walked away to yet another part of the airport. A while later, the young man came back a third time and looked Rev. Holmes over. Finally the young man stepped up and asked, "Are you Zan Holmes?"

"Yes."

"Well," the young man responded, "you don't look like your picture. Oh," he said, "there's a small resemblance, but you don't really look like your picture."

So, if Acts 2 is what the church looks like, the question for today is this: Do you look like your picture, Church? Turn to someone in a

pew near you and ask them, “Do you look like your picture, Church?” Here’s my answer: Yes! . . . and well, sometimes no.

The scripture from Acts paints a picture of a people who were eager and expectant. Awe came upon everyone, because amazing and miraculous things were going on. They couldn’t wait to see what God would do next. In the verse just before today’s reading, Peter preached his great Pentecost sermon and the crowd asked, “Brothers, what should we do?” They were eager not only to hear the gospel but to respond to it with action. They actually expected Jesus to do something, to change their lives and the world.

So the question is this: Do we look like our picture? Are we eager and expectant? Are we hungry for the gospel, and when we hear it, do we demand to know: What should we do? Hey, church, do you look like your picture? Yes! . . . and well, sometimes no.

The picture of the church in Acts shows a people engaged in generous, actually radical sharing. Verse 44 says that they held all their property in common. When people joined the church, they sold their possessions and gave the money to any who were in need.

Later on in Acts (4:34) we learn that there weren't any needy people in the church because of the way they shared with each other. These people thought of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. They had a new family, and they took care of each other as family.

Well, it wouldn't fly in today's political climate, would it? Suggest something like that and you'd be labeled the S-Word—Socialist—and be deemed unelectable. And maybe that's okay. The question is: would it fly in the *church* today? Do we share generously and radically, or partially and hesitantly? Are there needs left unmet because we have not shared enough?

Hey, church, do you look like your picture? Yes! . . . and well, sometimes no.

Acts draws a picture of the church not as a collection of individuals, but as a unified community. Verse 42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." And verse 46 says, "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread in their homes and ate their food with glad and generous hearts."

In short, they were *not alone* in their religion. They didn't try to serve God and be spiritual by themselves. If you ever wonder why the church has so many activities—dinners and fellowship times, committee meetings and Bible studies, worship services and mission projects, youth group and softball games—it's really not to try to wear you out. It's because being together is the very essence of our religion.

The negative way of talking about this sounds like this: You'd better be at church this Sunday. . . Why don't you get your lazy self up for Sunday school? But that doesn't sound either glad or generous. The positive way is more like this, "Hey, Christians, you aren't alone. You've got each other to learn from and lean on, to pray and rejoice with. You aren't alone; we're in this life together."

Hey, church, do you look like your picture? Yes, for the most part. But, well, sometimes a little bit no.

Just one more: Acts' picture shows a growing church. On the day of Pentecost alone, three thousand people were baptized. And the last verse of the story says, "And day by day the Lord added to

their number those who were being saved.” I mean, that’s growing!
They needed a new member class every single day!

Do you look like that picture, Church? Well, from recent membership and attendance records, I’d have to say there may be a small resemblance, but we don’t really look very much like that picture. So what should we do about that? What needs to happen so the Lord adds to our number day by day? The first thing people think of is, “We need us a better preacher.” Probably true! You already know that I’m big on invitation--inviting people to know Christ and inviting them to Church. People suggest all kinds of things for church growth—publicity campaigns, different kinds of worship services, more activities for children and families. And we’ll try some of those things. But here’s what the people in Acts did: they were really excited about being together, they prayed, they had food a lot, and they took care of each other spiritually and financially. I mean, if there’s a group of people who treat each other like that, who *wouldn’t* want to be in it? The more we look like our picture, the more people will want to get in that picture.

One reason to come to church is to have our picture touched up, like spiritual Photo-shop. Sometimes we forget what the church is supposed to look like. We forget that we are meant to be eager and expectant; we forget that we are called to share generously, that we are Christians not alone but together. So we come to learn again, to be reminded of what we're supposed to look like.

More often, though, I think we know what the picture is supposed to look like; we just aren't doing it. How easy it is to grow weary and discouraged rather than eager and expectant. How easy it is to get so wrapped up in my own needs that it's hard for me to give to others. How easy it is to allow conflicts and tensions, busy-ness and just sheer laziness to keep us from being with one another. And how easy it is to get used to membership decline and become complacent: "Hey, attendance only went down 3% last year. That's not bad." How easy it is.

But we do know what God wants the church to look like. And we know what our own hearts long for the church to look like. And we have come to have our picture touched up in the name and spirit of Christ.

So, church, do you look like your picture? Well, yes, thanks be to God. And well, no, not altogether. And that is why we're here—to have our picture touched up. Let us pray:

God of power and vision, in the holy scriptures you have given us a picture of how the church should look

- eager faces, people expecting you to show up to do something in our lives, today
- a community where no one is hungry or homeless or in need because of the way we share our money
- a people eating and laughing and crying and praying together, and no one is alone
- a community so vital, so exciting that every day new people ask if they can come to.

God of power and vision, we want to look more like our picture.

Touch us up, Lord, starting today. Lead us and guide us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 216.