

To Hear the Voice

Acts 2:42-47 & John 10:1-10
May 11, 2014 ~ Rev. Jo Ramsey

This week was a big week for East Union Church. On Thursday, we welcomed hundreds of pastors, elders and guests from Pittsburgh Presbytery to our beautiful campus for our quarterly presbytery meeting. Many of you helped to plan, prepare and host our guests. The spread of food was bountiful and delicious. The campus lawn and gardens were perfectly manicured. The EUCC and sanctuary were bright and welcoming. Parking attendants and guides helped our guests navigate our campus. The kitchen ladies even



prepared to-go bags of snacks and drink to pass out for the ride home. There was actually an audible gasp of delight when James announced this to our guests. Never before has any church provided such a treat. Throughout the day, many people stopped us to share how lovely everything was, how relaxed and welcome they felt on our campus. East Union has the spiritual gift of hospitality, we would tell people. So, thanks for making East Union look good – and not just look good, but “live” good.

It's not unusual for people to approach us when we're out in the community to tell us what a great church East Union is. Perhaps they've attended a Santa Breakfast. Or they've been to one of our worship services. In the months following



Jen Loper's funeral, which more than 500 people attended, strangers would stop us to say what an amazing service it was. Some people come to East Union for aerobics, basketball, or a support group. Others have children who attend Deer Lakes Nursery School or Scouts or Vacation Bible School here. Maybe they've received a meal through the Meals To Go program. Even folks from as far away as West Virginia, Haiti and Malawi have felt the outpouring of our love and work.



priorities on Sunday morning – sports practice, activities, and for many families, Sunday morning is the only time they have together all week. Changing families and work life have made the traditional weekend a thing of the past. The place of the church in our culture has changed radically. Remember when it seemed like everyone went to church? Children went to Sunday School with such regularity that we had attendance pins? It used to be that our culture considered the institutional church a key player in social dialogue. Boy, have things changed!

For good or for bad, we aren't going back. The church universal, and particular, are in transition. We need to redefine what makes us a vital, faithful church. What are the essentials we need to retain and enhance? What are the non-essentials that we need to let go of, that distract us and keep us from moving forward? What do we need to add that will propel us into God's hope-filled future?



This morning's reading from Acts spells out an amazingly succinct description of what makes for a vital church. These very first believers were left to carry on after Jesus ascended into

heaven – Now these people really needed a strategic plan! Luke tells us that they devoted themselves to 4 things:



1. The Apostle's Teaching;
2. Fellowship;
3. Breaking of Bread;
4. Prayers;



Luke also says they shared and gave generously, so that everyone had enough. They met in the Temple and in each other's homes. Luke says they inspired people, and cared for them. They had glad and generous hearts and people were drawn to them.



So now we know the essential activities and qualities of a faithful church--- learning and growing together, praying and worshipping together, sharing meals and everyday life together, giving generously and providing for one another. Funny there's no mention of pews or hymnals, praise songs or power point. What makes for an amazing, appealing, effective church? It doesn't seem to have much to do with worship style. It has everything to do with living gracefully in community and faithfully with God.

This emphasis on the communal aspect of faith reminds us that personal commitment does not lead us to individual Christianity. There is no such thing. We are part of a flock, and Jesus is our Good Shepherd. This is the common thread that binds us...we hear His voice. He calls to us and we follow. We join the flock of God who guides us together, protects us together and provides for us together. It is our faith in Jesus that unites us, and calls us to live and serve together as a church family.



Today is Mother's Day, so it seems especially meaningful that we will baptize Jeff and Sarah Marks' twins, and welcome them to our family of faith. All of us will make promises to Declan and Delilah. We will vow to nurture them in the faith, to teach them the statues and help them to know all that God's commands. We will promise to be their church family. But no amount of teaching or explaining will give them faith or make them have a relationship with God. They will need to hear God's voice for themselves, to experience God, to feel His love, to sense His presence, to receive His grace.

That means one of our jobs as Christian mothers and fathers, grandparents and teachers is to provide our kids with opportunities to experience God. We need to put them in places – Sunday School and Children's Worship,



Faithful Followers or Youth Group or VBS, summer camp at Crestfield or New Wilmington Missionary Conference, Christian retreats and concerts -- where they can hear the Shepherd for themselves.



Of course, we grown-ups need to keep listening too. For when we hear the shepherd, we will feel his great love for us. And when we feel his great love for us, we will desire to



know him better. And when we come to know him better, we will worship him. And when we worship him, we will respond with grateful hearts. And when we respond with grateful hearts, we will share God's abundance. And when we share God's abundance, we will overflow with grace and our flock will thrive.

As we assess and discuss, reflect and plan here at East Union church and in our own faith journeys, let us look to the earliest believers who teach us what a great church is and does. It's actually pretty simple – **learn, love, eat, and pray together with glad and grateful hearts.** So, wherever you are, find yourself a faithful flock, listen for the shepherd's voice, trust in his faithful care and follow him into pastures of abundance!



In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.