During my recent trip out in California the past couple of weeks, I was able to spend two Sundays at two different Presbyterian congregations and participated in their Sunday worship services. Even though they are both Presbyterian churches, the demographic and their history are quite different from each other, but their mission is the same.

What began in 1853 as a missionary outpost to the Chinese community in the heart of the San Francisco Chinatown, the *Presbyterian Church in Chinatown*, as you see here, is THE oldest Asian church in North America….that’s right, not just in San Francisco or in the US, but in all of North America. That includes all denominations as well, not just Presbyterians serving the Asian community. The congregation has been serving that SF Chinese-American community for more than 165 years while expanding its ministry with worship services in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese, serving those who are from newly arrived - *Fresh Off The Boat,* to 2nd, 3rd, or even 5th generation Chinese-American. Their ministry is very much mission minded as they stay involved with the various needs of their ever-evolving community through social services such as after-school programs, summer camp for children, English and Naturalization classes for adults…just to name a few. Many of the members who grew up in this church feel that this is right where they belong, and where God has called them to be, even though many of them DON’T even live in Chinatown any longer. For the past 165 years, they have embraced the spirit and the calling of Micah 6:8, as they seek ***to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.***

The 2nd congregation that I visited during my trip is quite different demographically but share similar missional focus. Located in outskirt of the city of San Jose in a neighborhood that has demographically shifted over the year to a Hispanic/Latino community. They have recently called two of my former classmates from seminary as their co-pastors. *Foothill Presbyterian Church* in San Jose has been around for about 75 years and is seeking a new vision and with a renewal passion! Many of its long-standing members are NOT getting any younger and many have faithfully served for years and they are getting tired physically and spiritually. Through an intentional mission study that this church underwent a few years ago, they prayerfully discerned about their future. They began to ask themselves questions such as, *“what is it that God wants them to do going forward? What is the Holy Spirit leading them to do next?”* These are all valid questions.

The outcome of their mission study was that they are willing to put aside some of the traditional practices and are willing to engage in trying something new, something different by taking a leap of faith with boldness and courage, despite changes in its membership and the aging population over the years. This by no means, means that they will succeed, but at least they were willing to dream dreams and let the Spirit lead them. Over the years, *Foothill* has had their shares of internal conflicts, divisions and other “personnel” issues, **nevertheless it was by the grace of God that their ministry is seeking to thrive once again and not just to maintain and “survive”.**

During the announcement portion of the service, I was impressed by one of the women who stood up and invited the rest of the congregation to come to her home on Friday nights for fellowship and meal, or simply talk and share whatever is on one another’s lives. She was willing to let a bunch of hardly known “friends” in her home while seeking fellowship and friendship, in the name of Christ. This woman wasn’t even a deacon, an elder or anything, BUT she simply had a big heart for others and is willing to share whatever she has (including her precious time) with others. This woman demonstrated great passion, enthusiasm and love of Christ as she extended her invitation. She kept her humility and humbleness to herself, as she yearns to grow in faith with others and with Christ.

This woman’s faith and the missional witnesses of these two congregations resonate the sentiments of the early church as we read in our passage in the book of Acts today.

Luke the gospel writer was describing what life was like for the early Christian community. The early church back then was not what it is today. They had their share of challenges, just like we do today. Back then, the church was not even as we know it today. There was no church as an institution or an organization, or a denomination. There was no building to maintain, as many of them simply met in people’s homes. There were no endowment funds or bank accounts to manage. Church was simply a place where fellow believers gathered for worship. Proclamation of the good news was essential, as it should be.

As a matter of fact, the early church was simply referred to as an “assembly of people” – group of people who gather with a common interest, purpose, and faith in Jesus Christ, let’s just start from there. Many of them come from different regions, speak different languages, raised in different cultures and traditions, but they did share ONE common faith, ONE Lord, and ONE baptism.

Many of the early Christians in the first century somehow were able to thrive in the midst of adversities and even persecution because of their faith. Our text today invites us to examine a little deeper into **how life was like in the early church** and we could see how different or similar are they to the churches today. More importantly, **what lessons can we learn today from the early church that would propel us in living up to our calling in God’s ministry going forward?** Even though times have changed and the context might be different, but the overall mission remains the same. Let’s take a closer look:

**The early church was a Spirit-filled community.** Their lives were inspired by the teaching of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Many of the disciples received special power through the Holy Spirit to speak boldly and to do things that they had never imagined before. Bear in mind that none of these disciples received any training whatsoever. But yet they were able to speak with conviction as the Spirit enabled them to do. They were inspired to proclaim what they experienced through their testimony. **They were outward focused (mission minded) instead of being inward focused and self-serving. Their actions are driven by their prayers as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and not upon their own personal interests and desires.**

Even in the midst of adversities and challenges, as there were plenty of with the Jews and Gentiles both proclaim their common faith in Christ, they sought to adapt and relate to one another interculturally, in spite of their differences. It’s not about YOU have to do things OUR ways, it’s about learning to co-inhabit with one another through mutual edification and forbearance. Christ’s mission has been passed on to us as his ambassadors. We are simply taking part of God’s on-going mission and activities here on earth.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity of attending a seminar hosted by a post-modern theologian and author - Leonard Sweet, who is an ordained United Methodist Church pastor and an advocate for the Emerging Church movement. One of the key points that Leonard Sweet emphasized during his talk and in many of his writings was that **the church need to wake up and pay attention to our signs of time.** In other word, we must stay ahead, keep pace, and not fall behind with the rest of society. He called this a **“semiotic awareness”**. The word “semion” in Greek means “sign”.

Evolved around the key theme of the post-modern thinking, he challenged many of the audience and the church today that **we need to keep our eyes and our ears opened, so that we can recognize these signs and “movements” of the changing time, while upholding the integrity of the gospel and the teaching of Christ. The gospel and the teaching of Christ is contextual and transcending through generations and cultures.** Furthermore, he argued that through these signs and movements, only may we then come to the discernment of **what God is actively doing or what God is about to do in our world today.**

I think there’s a lot of truth to this claim, especially among many mainline churches that have a long-standing tradition and history that often weigh us down in terms of progress. Furthermore, Leonard Sweet also emphasized the correlation between the “We” as a community and the “Me” as individuals. They must go hand-in-hand and play a vital role in terms of one’s understanding of our society and our church today.

Invariably this is just one of many challenges that the church (whether it’s catholic or protestant) in the western world must confront with today in the 21st century. Where do we see ourselves when it comes to the community of faith at large? The skeptics among us would say, *“Why should I care to be a part of the organized faith community, if ultimately it’s about my own personal relationship with God?”*  But I would argue that there IS this inter-connectional aspect of our personal faith and the corporate faith that we demonstrate. It’s NOT enough that we worship God and study our own Bible or to pray on our own….we need one another and we must work with one another as a community, even we disagree with our ideas and how we would like things to be. We are called to be IN community together in spite of our differences, as we strive to seek this “koinonia” (this fellowship or communion) moment with Christ and with one another. **The Holy Spirit acts as the current and the wind that steer where the boat would turn and where the people need to be.**

Furthermore, in the post-modern era, **the community of faith as we know it, is going to be VERY different from what it used to be**. People are not as religious or as “churchy” as they used to be…however, many still hold on to the truth that there is still some higher form of supreme being who oversees all things (or the sovereignty of God). This has an impact upon how one relates to one another and also with God.

Many of the current generation yearn for more genuine personal relationship rather than superficiality of words and promises. We must strive to build deeper relationship, much like that woman who opened her home and her lives in seeking new friendship and fellowship with one another. This also affects how we conduct various church practices with one another. One example of that is how we interact and connect with one another through modern technology and social media. The mission remains the same, but our methodology may be different in seeking the same result in building relationship and fostering disciples. The church of Jesus Christ is living in a “semiotic moment”, as we allow the Holy Spirit to lead the way.

In light of all of this, I think our text today in Acts does offer us some key “signs” or **“semiotic moments” for the church that we can still learn from and remind ourselves of in this changing world and in the challenging time.**

Let us look at a few of these characteristics of the Early Church in the first century:

A) First of all, the Early Church was a **Learning Church**. Many gathered together to learn and to study the scripture. The early church disciplined themselves to learn from one another’s testimony and bear witness upon Jesus’s teaching, His death, and His resurrection….one person at a time, by the word of mouth!!!

Today, we reap the benefit of the Gospel texts and the letters that were recorded and exchanged by the apostles. We can help one another learn and grow in faith through our personal and group bible studies.

B) Second of all, the Early Church was a **Fellowship Church**. The Greek term for “koinonia” (which means fellowship) implies a close bond and a mutual relationship, a sharing or partnership with one other.

It is appropriate for a church to call themselves a fellowship because the church is comprised of people who **share what they have in common**, and in this case, their common faith in Christ.

As we read in our passage today in Acts, the early church gathered together and literally shared things that they have in common. They sold off their possessions and they share them with the poor, the orphans, the widows, or anyone who has needs of them. They looked upon one another’s needs in a charitable way at the expense of their personal needs and sacrifices.

The early Christians did many things together, they ate together, and they prayed together. They drew mutual strength, support, and encouragement upon the community of God’s extended families, as Jesus said *“for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”* (Matthew 18:20)

C) Thirdly, the Early Church was a **Praying Church.** Prayer is an integral part to our Christian life…not only shall we pray for ourselves but pray for one another. When we pray, we come to acknowledge the presence of God in the midst of our human relationships. We recognize that God is at the center (and not on the margins) of our lives. As the saying goes that ***“Couples who pray together, Stay together*”**, I believe that is also true for churches as well. **Churches that pray together, also stay together**. There will be less division among the church if we seek God in earnest prayer.

D) Fourthly, the Early Church was an **Active Church**. The early church was a church where things happen. There’s a buzz to the church when the Holy Spirit is actively working within the church. Everyone wants to be a part of it. Church is not just another activity that we do on Sundays. It is a part of our livelihood, it is part of who we are during all the other days of the week. **Through many signs and wonders, God’s presence was revealed through the lives of the people.** When we gather together as a church on Sundays, we gather to share with one another about what God has been doing in our lives during the week….and that we are eager to share our lives with one another, just like that woman who wanted to start a small fellowship group at her own home. We trust and pray that the Spirit will continue to show us signs and work miracles and wonders in our lives. We are simply agents of God’s handiwork in this world.

E) The Early Church was a **Worshiping Church** - Personal and corporate worship is an act of our obedience to God. It is not an act that we put on display before God or others but rather a formal expression acknowledging God’s work in our lives. Our worship reflects our attitudes as well as our priorities and focus in our lives. **If the church fails to seek God at the center of our worship, we have failed to be the church and failed to embark on God’s mission for us.**

F) Finally, the Early Church was a **Growing Church** – the faith of a healthy Christian community attracts and leads others to Christ. A healthy and a vibrant community will grow not only in number, but more importantly in Spirit as well. God’s plan is for the church to grow in fulfilling God’s mission on this earth.

We often hear the phrase “**when we build it, they will come**.” I think the same can be said for ministry today, “**when we honor God’s will in our ministries, the people will notice and want to be a part of it**” where **Christ is the head and we are only the individual members of the body.**

**These are the tell-tale signs and characteristics of the early Christian community in the 1st century. They serve as reminders to us all today that all things are possible and that God has not given up on His people yet, if we simply place our trust and faith in Jesus Christ and subject ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit.**

Friends, as a *fellowship of believers*, let us continue to proclaim God’s love to one another, in all that we say and do. Let us keep our eyes and ears opened and look out for God’s happening all around us. Ask God of how we may participate in what God is actively doing in our lives. Pay attention to those signs and visions that will lead us into the future in fulfilling God’s mission here on earth.

Through our mutual **encouragement**, **unity**, and **support** of one another, let us strive to live up to the billing of being God’s church. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.