

LESSON 1

Church: Where it's at!

So – first thing's first! Let's figure out where we are for this Confirmation journey and what's going to go on here the next few months. As you've already heard, Confirmation is all about God and people. What better place to talk about these things than the church? From now until the end of Confirmation, you're going to be meeting here at First Methodist McKinney to find out what Christian belief is all about. You'll learn things like "Who is God? Who am I?" and "What is my life supposed to be about?" all in the context of a loving family - your church.

In this lesson, we're going to learn about what makes a church, a church. From the beginning, the Church has been a Christian family that gets together to worship God and live out God's love to each other and to the world. The Bible refers to the Church as "the body of Christ" (Romans 12:5) because it is God's way of continuing Jesus' ministry on earth. The Church is made up of many people, like one's body is made up of many parts. It can't function properly without all of the people in it (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). The Church is not perfect because people are not perfect, but God has blessed the Church because His Word is preached and lived out in it. In the book of Acts in the Bible, we learn about the first Christian Church. It can be a model for our church today.

PENTECOST

First, the sound of a violent wind filled the room. Yahweh's breath blew as it had blown on the ancient chaos to bring forth creation, as it had blown on the womb of Mary to form the New Creation.



Cool picture, huh? The Church started on a day you may have heard of – the *Day of Pentecost*. Jesus had died on the cross and risen from the dead; at this point, he was hanging out with God in heaven. Meanwhile, all of his disciples and the people around them were hanging out on earth. On this Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down on these people. Peter preached to the people and told them about the love and power of Jesus, and by the end of the day, 3,000 people converted to Christianity! You can read this story for yourself in Acts, chapter 2. After these people became Christians, they became committed to God and to each other and formed the first churches.

Peter, later a saint (Saint Peter), is known as the “rock” on which the early Church was built. He was the preacher on that powerful day of Pentecost!!



The churches were not without problems, though. A lot of people didn't like others' excitement over the new Christian faith because it was a threat to their government and every day life. After all, the way of Jesus was love and forgiveness, not rules and law. The Romans came in 70 AD and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, which was where the Christians called home. This forced the Christians to separate and find homes in other places. This was tough for them to do, but God used the tragedy to grow the church and connect more people to Jesus. Because they all had to move, they could start churches wherever they went. The result? The number of churches grew!

Life was still hard for the Christians, though. Romans went around persecuting them because they would not worship Caesar, the ruler at the time. Being a Christian became a very dangerous thing. The people still believed, though, and they wanted their churches and their faith to grow. Lots of letters in the New Testament were written during this time. These letters were encouraging to the people. They were kind of like “How To” books for the Christian faith (Ex: “How to love others” or “How to make the right decisions”). The letters (also called “epistles”) talked really openly about the Christian faith and problems that the Church was facing, and they also reminded the people of the teachings of Christ so they would continue to live out their faith every day. A lot of them were written by a guy named Paul, and they were passed along from one church to another. Before long, not only were there *more* churches, but there were more *faithful* churches!

You may wonder, “So what?” “What does the history of church have to do with Confirmation or with me?” Good question! The first churches are super important to your Confirmation

experience and to your life because they are the model for our churches today. If you're going to be a member of First Methodist McKinney by the end of these next few months, knowing more about the early church will help you be a responsible member of *today's* Church and enjoy your Christian community!

Read Acts 2:42-47 below... it describes what Christians call the "early church":

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... 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. 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 people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (NRSV)

From the Scripture, notice the characteristics of the early church:

They learned: The Scripture says that the new believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." The apostles (you may know them as disciples) were Jesus' best friends, so they knew him really well! These men had spent a ton of time with Jesus, so whatever they had to say helped the people learn more about Jesus' life and how he wanted them to live. They probably told stories about when Jesus was with them, what he was like, and what he had to say about God, his Father. Hearing from Jesus' disciples taught the people the basics of the Christian faith and encouraged them as they changed their lives for Christ.

They took part in fellowship: Fellowship (*koinonia* in Greek, the language the New Testament was written in) is basically Christian friendship. It was really important in the early church. Fellowship meant that the people gathered together and enjoyed their time with each other. They were interested in each other's lives, they loved and cared for each other deeply, and they had fun together as Christians!

They had their meals together: Believe it or not, *eating* was an important part of the early church! Obviously, the early Christians had communion together (think "Last Supper"), but they also ate other meals too. They ate together because it was fun and because it was a great way for them to spend time together in fellowship. Having meals with friends strengthened their relationships and allowed them the chance to sit and talk about their lives and their faith. Think about how many times Jesus ate with people! At the home of Simon, feeding the five thousand, going to Zaccheus's house, the Last Supper... Jesus obviously placed great value on mealtime, so the early Christians did too!



They prayed: The early Christians knew how important prayer was. How could they survive the daily struggles and hard times of life if they didn't communicate with God? Likewise, how could they express their thanks to God and praise God without praying? Jesus was the perfect model for prayer. In the midst of all he did on earth, he always took time to be alone with God in prayer and to tell others about the importance of prayer (See Matthew 26:36-44; Mark 6:45-46; Luke 11:1-13.).

They served and shared: This means that the people in the early Church always did things for each other and for those outside their churches. The Scripture above says that they shared their belongings with each other, and they gave to those who were in need.

They loved God, and they loved each other: The early Christians loved God so much that they got together *every day* to talk about God and praise God! In the same way, they loved their friends so much that they ate with them "*with glad and sincere hearts.*" Now, read the Scripture above again. Do you notice the result of the people's great love for God and for each other? "*And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*" That's powerful love!

COSMIC KOINONIA!



The Bible shows us that these early Christians were really happy and joyful people after they heard the Good News of Jesus on that Day of Pentecost. Their lives were literally changed! No longer did they care only about themselves – they cared about others. No longer were they alone - they had found a friend in God and in their new Christian brothers and sisters. The same is true for us today. No matter what denomination we are, we are supposed to do the same things in *our* churches as the early Christians did in *their* churches. Let's see how the early church is the model for our church today.

We learn: Well, obviously, Jesus' twelve disciples do not talk to us today in our churches! Great ministers, teachers, friends, and role models do, though. All of these people know God through their experiences with God, so we can learn from their stories and lives. We can also learn from the Bible, which is God's #1 tool for us in the church and in our lives. It tells us all about God and how God wants us to live. There are a million other ways we can learn about God and our faith in the church – small groups, sermons, Student Life, Bible studies... *the list is endless!*

We are in fellowship: It's a blast to enjoy life with other Christians in the church! We can all hang out in fellowship in Confirmation, at Youth Group, on mission trips, during worship, in Sunday School, in small groups, and doing other fun stuff. When we get together, it's important that we share our lives with each other and listen to each other. God calls us to be happy when our friends are happy and sad when they are sad: *"If one part of the body (church) suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share in its happiness,"* (1 Corinthians 12:26). It is fun and rewarding to share our lives and faith with our Christian friends!

We eat! You'll see that food is a part of many church gatherings! We *love* to eat together! From donuts on Sunday morning to Youth Group meals, food is one thing that brings folks together.

We know Jesus did great ministry during mealtime, so we follow his example. Let mealtime be a chance for you to hang out with friends and feel at home in the church!

We pray: As Christians, we are called to follow the example of Christ. Prayer is one of the best things we can do to be like him. Prayer in the church joins us together in communication with God. It allows us to praise God for who God is, confess our sins, give God thanks, and express to God what we need. Praying grows us individually and as a church, so it is vital that we do it every time we meet!

We serve and share: As the body of Christ, we should feel responsible for each other and for our church. God has given us each other to take care of one another, so we must show love and concern to everyone in our church. We must also care for our church and its ministries. Instead of putting ourselves first, we should put God first by giving our money, time, and service to God's work in the church. Finally, God calls us to care for those outside the church. This is why the United Methodist Church does so much for those who are in need. We feed the hungry, care for the sick, and welcome the stranger (See Matthew 25:31-46). By looking after others, we show the world how much God loves us all and how much we love God and God's people!

We love God, and we love each other: Just like the people of the early church, we are supposed to get excited about God and the difference God's made in our lives! We should worship God with happy hearts and love our friends in the church. God's love is HUGE, and God wants us to experience it as much as possible. The best thing we can do in the church today is love God completely and then love everyone around us. The more we love God and others in the church, the more people outside the church will come to know Christ! How exciting!!

*** Go The Extra Mile!**

If you're pumped about the early church and want to know more, research the Day of Pentecost. When did it start? What is its history? How has it changed since?

