

One of the things we notice in the book of Acts is how the early church grew...

In Acts 1:15 we discover that there are about 120 believers—this is before the Holy Spirit came
In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) ... Acts 1:15 NRSV

The story continues with more people joining the emerging community after the Spirit came
So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added... And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. Acts 2:41 and 47 NRSV

But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand. Acts 4:4 NRSV

The record of these numbers comes right after Peter preaches a sermon

We're tempted to think that once Peter and others were filled with the Holy Spirit
That their words had power—that their preaching was the cause of growth
Much of the evangelical church has put emphasis on preaching as a result
Preaching is seen as the persuasive teaching about how to become a believer
And often becomes the center of worship gatherings

But I want to pause and look a bit more closely...

Acts 2—Holy Spirit comes on Pentecost—with a sound like wind, tongues of fire, speaking in languages
And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked [questions.] Acts 2:6-7 NRSV

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" Acts 2:12 NRSV

It was then that Peter stood and named the mystery of what was happening
And as a result, 3000 people were added to the 120 we found in Acts 1

Acts 3—Peter and John see a man begging at the temple and in the name of Jesus, he is healed
All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. Acts 3:9-11 NRSV

Again, it was then that Peter spoke and named the mystery of what was happening
As a result, 5000 were added to this group of believers

We begin to see the pattern—it isn't the words Peter spoke that drew the crowds
Crowds gathered as they saw the wonder of God manifest before them
Peter simply named what was happening—he gave it context

I, for one, am tempted to forget this and think that my words are persuasive and create the wonder
However, it isn't my words that creates the miracle of wonder—but God
Rather my task is to simply name the wonder and name the source as from God

The wonder of God is all around us—whether in creation or in the myriad of God stories we see
I think it is important to name it—first of all for ourselves
If not named, it is easy for it to pass as ordinary and be forgotten
We need to remind ourselves of how God works in our lives and all around us—name it
We also name it so that we can bear witness to others of the miracles we see
We all need to hear the stories of others as they provide encouragement for us
I need others to remind me that God truly does care about us and help me see it as true
When tempted not to notice, others call me back to the truth and invite me to notice
I intentionally named the wonder of worship last Sunday in an email to all of you
It was a profound Sunday in our time together and we must not miss the wonder of it!

Notice what happened as God gathered 12 disciples, then 120, then 3000, then 5000, and more...
Jesus chose 12 men as disciples that spent time with him
Other women and men joined the 12 and followed Jesus (e.g. Luke 8:1-3)
At the end of Acts 2 and 4, we see that God gathered them into a community—
These weren't isolated believers...
People who saw the wonder of God and believed, then went home by themselves
The American spirit of individualism—standing strong and independent
Rather God gathered them into these amazing communities
The hallmark of these communities was love for one another
Why do you think the church grew so fast in the first century?
It wasn't the sermons or the Bible studies—it wasn't the worship or home fellowships
It was the way they loved each other
Remember Jesus' command to love one another? —they are doing it!
Also the way they responded in love to people around them—meeting needs of people

They didn't always get it right—some struggled, others lied—they had to figure it out
But the overarching way of being together was to love and care for one another

There is no prescription for doing community—a certain way of organizing ourselves
What matters is that we gather with each other—loving each other
Naming and following the wonder of God
Finding our own way of expressing what it means to be a community of God people

There were no experts in creating the church that told them how to do this
In fact, the “experts in the synagogue” were doing it wrong according to Jesus
They were simply folks who were faithful to the next thing as it rose among them
They Listened for God's Leading and followed step by step
They were enough to do this work of establishing Christianity and the early church

As the Holy Spirit broke out among people—the miracle of God was evident
People saw the wonder of the miracles, seeing the power of God at work, yet not understanding
Peter and the other disciples named that God had come
People were drawn to God and joined this gathering of the early church
The gathering of folks rapidly became a community of folks that loved each other
And met the needs of folks both inside and outside of their community
This same Spirit is present today and works in the same way
—inviting us to respond as the early Christians did, both in naming the wonder and in love