



No Strings Attached Acts 2:43-47

Do you love your church?

I love church! I love church now. But I can't even believe I am saying that. Because I did NOT always love church, oh no, no, no, no.

My first encounter with a church was when I was fifteen. And my friend Ann invited me to be the pitcher on her churches' Women's Softball Team.

Ann's team needed a pitcher. And Ann knew I could pitch. Sorta. And Ann and her sisters didn't care that I didn't go to their church. Cuz I asked if that was a problem? But they didn't care.

They picked me up Tuesday evenings for practice and Thursdays evenings to play the games. We had fun. There were no high-pressure evangelism pitches, pardon the pun. They loved me freely like they had been freely loved by God.

I was only 15 but I could tell they were being genuine. No underlying agenda or expectations. No strings attached to guilt me or force me to start going to their church.

The next summer, Ann invited me to Bible camp. And I immediately said, "Yes!" because Ann was my friend. She even told me that I didn't have to worry about paying for camp.

What?! Really?! Because her church sponsored kids, outside of their church, to be able to go to camp for free.

That was surprising to me. I didn't know anyone from that church, had never attended a single Sunday there, and frankly wasn't planning on it.

Why would they pay my way? Another, no strings attached moment with that church.

That week at camp, something stood out. I had never spent so much time around so many Christians. They were having fun and everyone seemed to like each other. They loved and accepted each other AND me. Their love was free.

That week at camp, also radically changed my life. I learned where this love "with no strings attached" all comes from. I learned about God and grace and Jesus.

Grace as unearned favor of God, of God's unconditional love for me made real and available to me through the Lord Jesus.

I experienced God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit as real. God gave me life, wanted to be a part of my daily life, and renewed my soul. I felt forgiven and free from sins that I didn't know I had even committed.

God loved me unconditionally and lavishly, without end and without strings attached. There was no, "I gotta be a good Christian now!" hype or pressure.

I did start attending the church Ann was a part of. But I went sporadically and then kind of not so much at all when I was in college.

Which made this part all the more surprising.

During that time, my mother's cancer returned and she had multiple surgeries and chemo. It was a hard time.

Somehow the church knew and sent cards, made meals, stopped by at work to encourage me, called to let me know they were praying for my mom and me and our family.

It was amazing to me. I hadn't earned that kind of response from them. And I had never experienced that kind of gracious, no expectations kind of love, poured out on me or on my family before.

Do you love your church?

I do.

I have been loved and loved and loved by that church and later all the churches I was a part of, even here.

Those churches extended unconditional love, poured out love just cuz that's what a church does and just cuz that's who God is.

The love all the churches poured out; that kind of love began to melt my hard heart and change my life. Changed my opinion of church. Church is still changing me and helping me grow spiritually, especially the kids.

I love THIS church!

And the more I follow Jesus, I'm learning it is time for me to give back to the church in gratitude. To make sure it is still vibrant, active and dynamic, effective and missional...still standing strong a 100 years from now.

Cuz I know there are other "Amys" just like me in this community who need Jesus.

Now I am trusting you have had some similar experiences. That as I shared my stories, you were reflecting on your own experiences of church. That they were positive experiences.

And that you've chosen this church because it was welcoming, and kind, and genuine in their care for each person who walks in our doors.

We notice people, we say "hi", we are present to one another. We like to laugh. Our hearts are full of joy, a genuine God joy. It really is one of our strengths as a church.

And then going a tad deeper, I'm trusting you know, personally, what the difference a loving and welcoming church community can make in your life.

How a good church helps soften your heart, helps you grow spiritually, offers belonging, support in tough times, connection and purpose, healing, and love.

Because when that is all said and done, as we reflect and remember God's goodness and faithfulness expressed to us over the years, through the church...

I believe our hearts, even now...are beginning to swell with warmth and overflow with awe and gratitude.

Awe and gratitude to God and for this church. Thank you, God!

And with that awe and gratitude, we are tasting, experiencing a bit of what it was like to be in that first church over 2,000 years ago.

It's from today's scripture, we get a picture of the earliest church. How it stood out in contrast to others, and the ways it blessed the broader community. How it drew in people just like me and you; over and over, generation after generation.

And yet sometimes, I wonder if things have changed a bit, from back then. That our perspective has shifted a bit, missing the mark.

That maybe we have become accustomed to thinking of our churches as places we go to get our fill on religion, spirituality, or inspiration. Like the same way we go to the grocery store for food or the movie theatre for entertainment.

We just see our involvement and offerings to the church as a way to keep it up and running - "open for business" and "let's keep the lights on". As long as the customers (members) are happy, that is what matters. In part, this is a byproduct of the way our society works. I get that.

But that is not God's plan or vision for the church.

Our text in Acts gives us a detailed description of how the very first church was radically different. Their core values were different. And those values became like the North Star, guiding them, keeping them on track.

Being devoted to scripture, committed to fellowship, communion, caring deeply, giving generously and praying.

Their core values can be a North Star to us too, guiding us individually and corporately. A way to stay on track.

The people's faith was not a small part of their lives. Their faith was vibrant, active, and strong...every day. The text says, "Every day they did these things". They were "all in." And it gave them joy to do so.

This is clear in the way they lived. They devoted themselves to the church community - to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers as we see in the 42nd verse.

In verses 44 and 45, we notice, they lived differently by living together, and sharing what they had, and providing for everyone's needs. We get a picture of a community that found joy in generosity.

Because of the way the Christians lived their faith, people in the community witnessed the power of the Spirit working through them. They were a blessing not only to one another but to the wider community – the passage says they had **“the goodwill of all the people.”**

I witnessed this goodwill firsthand yesterday at the Community meal. Our church staffed and served that meal. People were grateful.

I got to see you in action. Your hearts were shining bright, you were shining a light for Jesus. It was beautiful to see!

The church in Acts was not just tolerated in the community, it was well-liked. To the extent that people were drawn to become part of it: **“day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”**

They modeled how God's people are called to be present in and to their communities, to focus not only on their own sustainability, but also on serving others.

We did that yesterday, made me proud to be a Methodist.

Our text gives us qualities to aim for in being a healthy church...devoted to the Bible, fellowship, caring for others, giving generously and prayer.

Let's keep that vision ever before us.

To stay focused on our strengths in church and our strength in reaching our community, we need to talk briefly about our finances.

We are running a good race, doing good ministry. But I am concerned we might get tripped up. Meaning without taking a moment to talk about things, we might continue to let our budget slide a bit which makes starting strong in 2024 harder.

For 2023, we are slightly off our budget. Our year to date actual giving is down by almost 6,000. About 6,000 behind in our expenses.

But our giving for the whole year to our budget is down approximately 16,000. For some perspective, looking at pre-Pandemic years of giving, we are pretty close in our giving.

All said, it would be nice to bring up our giving and end the year in the black. The last quarter of our fiscal year is usually a strong giving quarter. We usually catch up in our giving.

But let's make sure we do finish strong. If you have missed giving your tithe a few times over this year...please consider getting it all in this year, 2023.

Let's finish well, so that we can plan appropriately for 2024, free and clear.

You received a stewardship letter and commitment card for 2024 at the beginning of this month. Next Sunday is Commitment Sunday. Please complete the card and bring it back next week.

If you haven't filled out your card yet, I encourage you not to push that card aside. Instead, let us take this opportunity to plan for 2024 before God.

Consider starting to give something if you haven't been giving. Every little bit helps.

Or consider increasing your giving this year. Our biblical benchmark is to give 10% of our finances back to God. Statistically people in church give only 3 or 4% of their money. We can let God's standard stretch and inspire us.

We also realize some of you may not be able to give much financially. We understand that. Giving includes the giving of yourself, your time, your energy, your service here, your prayers.

Rest assured all of that is precious, and cherish and considered giving too.

Our God has been so good to us, let's not let our giving trip us up.

Our church is such a gift to us too, worth investing in; let's continue to be generous in our giving. Amen.

Time of reflection: In your mind's eye, reverently hold your All In Stewardship Card in your hands before God, and ask...**How would you like me to go All In? and commit to You?**