

**Augusta First Baptist Church**  
**Acts 2:41-47**  
***“Every Good and Perfect Gift: The Gift of Each Other”***  
**September 10, 2006**  
**Stewardship 2006**

Acts 2:41 *“So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 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, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”*

This morning marks the beginning of a great journey. For the next four weeks we will be focusing on the Celebration of Stewardship. Now I know what you are thinking: this is going to be a month of focusing on giving to the budget. Well, you are half right. It is about giving, but the budget is nothing more than a tool of the church for our vision of ministry. In fact, this month-long celebration is not about setting a budget, raising a budget or pledging a budget. If your hand is on your wallet, you can relax. I am not making a slick pitch for it!

This month is about celebrating God's gifts and what it means to give back to God. Our inspiration comes from James 1:17 *–Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly light...* Each week we are going to look at a specific aspect of God's gifts: the gift of each other; the gift of growing; the gift of sharing; and the gift of missions.

Maybe you have noticed that every Sunday you hear me speak of these gifts when someone comes forward to join with our church family. The first thing I say to each new member, “As a member of this church you are expected to be in church when you are in town.” This is what I mean when I say “the gift of each other.” Another way to state this is the gift of presence.

Our Biblical text this morning comes from a book in the New Testament that most scholars attribute to Luke as the author. Luke is of course the same author as the Gospel that bears his name. It is basically a “part 2” of the Gospel of Luke. While the Gospel of Luke tells us about the life and teachings of Jesus, the book of Acts, or Acts of the Apostles, tells us about the life and teachings of the early church.

By the time we get to the second chapter of Acts, we have already read of Jesus' appearance to the followers, his commission to them to be witnesses all around the world, and then his ascension into heaven. Have you ever thought about what Jesus did not leave with those followers? He did not leave them with a policy and procedure manual. He did not leave them with a set of bylaws. He did not form a committee or appoint a chair. He did not call a pastor for them. He did not leave them with a budget to do the work.

The only thing Jesus gave to them was the gift of each other. And that gift would be empowered with the presence of the Holy Spirit. This gift was and still is today one of the most precious gifts and so every time we gather together we both celebrate that gift and treasure that gift.

Do you remember a gift that you really cherished? I remember my first car. I went with my father to the bank and he cosigned a loan for me to the amount of \$1000. I used that money to buy a 1969 Mustang fastback. The car was very much used, dented in places, no air-conditioning and only an AM radio (I personally installed an 8-track system soon after buying the car!). This old first car was mine and I treasured it and cherished it.

Stewardship is celebrating that gift and taking care of that gift. We are drawn together because of God's gift. It has been said that there are certain things that draw people together. One is a common danger; in part

that can be said of all the first century followers of Jesus. This was no easy time for the followers of Jesus. In the minds of many, what they were doing by meeting together was illegal and offensive. Legend has it that all but one of the remaining disciples of Jesus died a martyr's death. There is no question that for the early believers and followers of Jesus common dangers drew them together.

When we take time to reflect, we too are drawn together by common dangers. I am so honored to be here with you to share in our experiences together, because the dangers are prevalent, invasive and dangerous. We need each other to be here together.

I am so grateful for the many times in my life when the church has been there for me. I think about the time nearly three years ago when my grandmother died how my own church surrounded us with love and comfort. The same could also be said of my father's church and other communities of faith.

The danger there was death and our own grief. The danger of mortality, finality and our own sorrow drew us together to weep but also to confess our faith in the hope of the resurrection.

If this church fails you or has ever failed you when danger has threatened you, let me personally ask for forgiveness. Not only do we need each other, but we need you.

The dangers that draw us together are not always so clearly defined. The disciples could point to an oppressive government and hostile foes. Our dangers are less conspicuous but just as insidious. There are the dangers associated with loss of faith and belief; the dangers of destructive ideologies; and the dangers of losing our identity as God's community to the surrounding culture. It was Jesus who prayed in John chapter 17 to keep us safe because while we are in the world we are not of the world.

Just as the disciples needed each other because of the common dangers, so we need each other. We need each other when the world as we know collapses into a rubble of grief and disillusionment. We need each other when there are those who seek to define us, commodify us or otherwise compromise us. We need each other because we can only do so much on our own, but together we can face anything. And I mean anything.

Nations rise and fall, but the body of Christ lives on. Principalities and power brokers come and go, but the body of Christ lives on. Friends, families and even our own bodies will fail us in time, but the body of Christ lives on.

In those early days of the Christian faith the Bible tells us that the remaining disciples, plus other followers numbered only 120 (Acts 1:15). The danger of persecution and compromise drew them together. Even as they grew to more than three thousand, they knew how important it was to mutually and completely invest in each other's life. We read again in verse 44: *All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

It was a radical investment in each other. What a beautiful picture of what the church is to be. When you or I are not here we are less than who we could be.

It is not just the common dangers that draw us together, but also the common devotion. Again we hear from Luke telling the story in Acts 2:42: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

Their common devotion drew them together and defined them. I fear, however, that we have allowed our differences to define us. This has happened on the political spectrum in a major way. Instead of political discourse and dialogue we find ourselves rallying around political parties and sound bytes. Is it any wonder that churches have followed suit?

In fact, it can be argued that Baptists have taken it to a higher level. The question I sometimes get about our church is: “What kind of Baptist church are you? Are you Southern Baptist, Cooperative Baptist, or Baptist World Alliance? Are you conservative, moderate, liberal, or fundamentalist? Do you have women deacons, women preachers or divorced persons serving in leadership? Are you evangelical, traditional, liturgical, hymn-singing with a pipe organ or do you have a praise band with choruses projected on a screen?” Do you want to know my answer to those whose focus is on the differences that divide? We are here to follow Jesus, plain and simple. Women and men lead us in that endeavor and while we do so with a Baptist distinctive, we recognize that God is bigger than our denominational schisms and political alliances. It is by God’s grace that we are here and that is a most precious gift in each other.

Today we are drawn together by a common devotion not a common divide. The gift of each other is God’s gift.

May we treasure that gift; nurture it; and share that gift with others. To refuse to participate in the public worship and be a part of the decisions of this church is to renounce God’s gift. It is pretty much saying to God, “Gee, thanks, but this is not what I am looking for.”

Many of you are watching by way of broadcast because you can no longer be with us in person, but we thank you for sharing in this gift of worship together. Others of you are watching by way of television because you are not sure if this gift is for you. Let me assure you it is. Here at First Baptist it does not matter who you are, or your gender, or the color of your skin, or what kind of job you hold or how much money you earn or what kind of clothes you wear or where you have been. God has extended a gift for us to share in, to take care of and to give to others.

We are drawn together not by our divisions but by our devotion in whom God is in Jesus Christ and unified by God’s Holy Spirit.

That is why we come around this table. In those early days of the faith it is thought the Christians celebrated what we call the Lord’s Supper every time they gathered. It was that important. In celebrating this meal, communion, we are reminded time and again that we are drawn together out of danger and devotion.

As you know, as part of our Stewardship Celebration, we are looking closely at the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian martyr during the Nazi regime. In one of his books, *Life Together*, he wrote: “Christian community at the table...is *our* daily bread that we eat, not my own. We share our bread. Thus we are firmly bound to one another not only in the Spirit, but with our whole physical being.” (*A Testament to Freedom*, p. 331)

### **Lord’s Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.