

The disciples, we are told in the beginning of the book of Acts, did several things **to help them listen to the Voice of the Shepherd.**

They devoted themselves to “the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers”. These four things seemed of particular importance to them, and they gave themselves to all four. **And it transformed them.** As the story goes on, we can see how they were transformed-

from a group that was heartbroken and terrified and defeated,

hiding behind locked doors and blinded by their grief,

to a group that was fearless,

full of life and courage,

with a joy and an energy that drew people like a magnet.

The Spirit was at work among them, and they became the Church.

Two thousand years later, we are still in their debt.

How, then, do we take a page out of their book?

Well, I think we learn that faith is best formed through living life together.

I saw a man not long ago who has been transformed. I first really met him when his father was dying and he was in his early 30’s. His wife, who was active in church, asked me to come and pay him a visit.

He was courteous enough, but had no use for God and no desire for prayer. His grief was profound, in some ways he felt his dad had let him down. His exposure to God as a kid had not been convincing and that faith was not helping him in his pain.

Not long after that, however, his kid signed up for a program we were running at the church. It’s structure was based on this Bible verse: each week every kid had a class to learn the **teachings** of Christian faith, a game time with kids their age for **fellowship**, a table group with whom they were **breaking bread** and eating dinner each week, and a worship class where they learned to lead the community in **prayer** and song.

The thing is, that in order for a kid to participate, a parent had to sign up to help with some aspect of this ambitious program. And so he found himself hanging out with us, week after week.

Learning, Laughing, Eating, Praying.

Teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayers.

That was a dozen years ago.

When we were together recently, he gathered us in a circle to say a prayer before dinner. As he acknowledged God’s presence with us, and gave thanks for our gathering and what we would share, I found my eyes full of tears at the confidence, depth, and beauty of his faith; at the freedom and unself-consciousness of his conversation with God, and **at the transformation that had taken place since the first conversation he and I had had in that living room.**

If you are longing for more freedom or transformation, this is not a bad recipe. You can be **learning** in 9:30 classes or in PW bible studies, in FOC or in confirmation. You can be in **fellowship** at Family Camp, or Circle or a Mariner's group. You can be **breaking bread** when we have the hoe-down, or a BBQ, or even donuts. And You can be at **prayer** with us here on Sunday, at a healing service, on Tuesdays in silence, or in your own private conversation with God.

All these things make it easier to hear the voice of the Shepherd.

“My sheep hear my voice” says Jesus. When I first read this passage, as a teenager, I thought, “**well, that counts me out.** I’ve *never* heard His voice. I mean, I hear other people talking about what God said to them, but I have never see visions or hear voices when I pray. I’ve never heard the Voice of the Shepherd. Not that I wouldn’t like to...”

Now I look back on that time, and can see with clarity that **Jesus was speaking to me constantly:**

- through the voice of particular youth directors who cared about my questions when they were **teaching,**
- through the voice of other teenage friends who invited me to trust & to let myself be really known in **fellowship,**
- through a congregation that told me I was beloved, and valued my gifts, **when we broke bread** together at barbecues and at potlucks and at youth group,
- through worship where ordinary water and bread became holy, where I stood in the midst of the faithful and sang to our God, where we made sacred space together **in prayer.**

Jesus spoke to me again and again during that time, but I hadn’t learned to recognize that Voice. The voice of Jesus, like any other voice, is one we *learn* to recognize, one that becomes familiar over time, and with practice. Now I look back on that time and say to the Shepherd, “**It was YOU! It was you all along!**” It was you, reaching out to me, making me welcome, calling me by name, and inviting me to follow.

We want to teach Maddie and Joseph, whom we baptize today, and every kid in this congregation to recognize the voice of the Shepherd.

And as you grow older, you who are kids now, or who are beginning confirmation, or who are in Fellowship of the Carpenter, or even in college- we want you to look over your shoulder and **know that as we lived life together, we were transformed.**

- to remember our ordinary faces
 - or hear the words we spoke over you at baptism,
 - or recall the way you **learned** and **laughed** and **ate** and **prayed** here
- and to say to the Shepherd, “**It was YOU! It was You all along.**”

Because, of course, it is.