

West Valley Church
1/29/12

Awkward Family Photos, Part Two
The Picture Around the Table
Acts 2:42-47

We've all seen them, and many of us have them hanging in our homes or our parents' homes: awkward family photos. The photographer arranged us by height, tilted our heads, placed our hand on someone's shoulder, and made us stare into blinding lights in front of a screen painted to look like a bookshelf, and then told us to "look natural" and smile. Too often the result was an awkward staged photo that looked anything but natural.

Today we are in part two of our series called "Awkward Family Photos." Let me give you some examples of family photos that are awkward. These are from a website called awkwardfamilyphotos.com. There are all kinds of reasons a photo can be awkward, but most of us know it when we see it. For instance, here's a picture of a big family that maybe needs a bigger backdrop . Here's another big family that appears to be, well, busy . This picture isn't a big family, so you wonder what's going on here . What kind of message is junior getting? It's the same message Grandma is getting in this one . Then there's the family vacation—you know what that's like: it's been a long day and the kids are tired. The Kodak photo spot didn't quite work out for this family . Can't you just hear dad from behind the camera: "Stand there and act like you're enjoy this!"

Finally, I had to show you this one. Who can forget the mall photos with Santa or the Easter Bunny? I'm sure this little girl won't forget—it probably haunts her dreams .

We can all relate; these photos, intended to display our families, end up feeling more awkward than natural. But I wonder if sometimes, to those outside the church, the picture they see of us is similar. Instead of a natural image of a healthy family of God, they see people posing, trying to act natural when they're not. How can we move from being posed in an awkward photo to the real thing? What would that "look" like? Are we presenting a natural picture of the church as a family, or are we trying to look like something we're really not?

The Bible gives us a family portrait of the church that is anything but awkward – it's the very picture of health. It is in Acts, chapter two, verse 42-47. We're going to use this series to challenge ourselves to avoid posing. We want the picture of West Valley Church to be natural and not awkward. So look at what the passage says:

"All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship,

and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47,nlt)

Last week we saw that a natural picture of the church is of believers who are unified, passionately committed together to God’s Word. Today we want to see the next picture. But remember that we said that there are two places that these pictures are taken in: one is taken at the Temple – which was the formal place for worship to happen. The other was in their homes. “Day after day they met together in the temple. They broke bread together in different homes.” (vs. 46, cev)

That’s important to notice—they worshipped together as a large group in the Temple, and then they met together in small groups in each other’s homes. That’s why at West Valley Church, it’s important that we practice being the church in our formal place of worship in this building, but also that we gather together smaller groups in homes, which is why we have our Growth Groups. Information for our groups is at the ministry station, it’s on our web page, and in the weekly information guide. I’d strongly encourage you to pick a group and sign up.

But the next portrait of the church is repeated in three verses: “All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to *sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper)*, and to prayer.” (verse 42)

They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity” (verse 46)

“All the while praising God” (verse 47)

First of all, isn’t it interesting that sharing a meal together is so closely associated to worship? Yes, they shared together in the Lord’s Supper, and we will talk about that and do that today, but they also frequently sat down for meals together. There is something that happens when you eat together; it can literally be a spiritual thing when believers share a meal. That’s why our Wednesday night dinners are important—they are about so much more than food. That’s why the coffee and cookies are so important, and why we need the foyer renovation so much—so that we have opportunity to share a meal or a cup of coffee. It is a spiritual form of fellowship that is the picture of a healthy church!

But there were three things that they did together, that we want to learn from. One is

1. Worship

This is a vital part of the individual life of the believer, and a top priority for us as a church as we all come together. We desire to be a worshipping people. Glorifying the Lord and giving him praise is the greatest privilege God has given to every person. We seek to foster a lifestyle of worship, service, and obedience through both personal and corporate worship. (Ephesians 5:19; Psalm 150; John 4:23-24; Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 13:15)

We tend to associate worship with music and singing, and that's often the strongest expression we have. But worship is about *spirit* more than singing. It's about authentically expressing our praise to God.

Jesus had a discussion with a Samaritan woman that he met, and he started up a conversation with her about God. But she had a lot of personal spiritual issues that she didn't want to talk about, so she tried to divert the topic away from herself by bringing up a contentious argument about what the most spiritual location of worship is. She was trying to avoid dealing with the real issue; her own distance from God. She kept saying that appropriate worship happens on this mountain instead of that one; in this place, instead of that place. So Jesus got straight to the point. He said: "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he." (John 4:21-26, niv)

Jesus said "I'm the authority on this – I am the Messiah, sent from God. And I'm telling you, worship is not about 'here' and it's not 'there' - it's not 'this way' and it's not 'that way.' It is SPIRIT. And it is TRUTH. It is about authentically praising God from deep within ourselves – not the phoniness and the pretense, not the image we like to make of ourselves, not through some pose or appearance – it's through genuinely giving praise to the one true God. It's a response of love and deep respect. That's what the church did in Acts, and that's what we strive to do together here in the church. And by the way, the original language in Acts indicates that they were not always dignified in expressing the gladness that filled their hearts. Their joy overflowed—it burst out—they praised God from sincere hearts.

Worship is part of the real picture of the church. The next is

2. Prayer

Prayer is our communication with the God of the universe. It is our vital connection to the source of all we need through Jesus Christ, the One who opened the lines of communication between us and God. God has multiple ways of talking to us; we have one way of conversing with him: prayer. We desire to be a praying people. God hears and answers prayer; so we are committed to earnest prayer in the church, in the family, and by the individual believer. (Psalm 95:6; Matthew 6:9-15, 7:7-8; 1Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6-7; James 5:16)

Jesus said something very important about prayer: "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." (Luke 11:9-10, niv)

In the original language, this is what's called an imperative. It's telling us something important to do. There are two types of imperatives or demands in the original language that Jesus was speaking. One is called "aorist," which is a one-time demand, like the phrase, "shut the door behind you." The other kind is called the "present" imperative, which means it is always present, or something you should keep doing, like the phrase "always shut doors behind you." When Jesus tells us to ask, seek, and knock, he's not using the aorist imperative; he's using the second kind—the present imperative. So what he is really saying is, "keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking." Don't ever stop—prayer is to be consistent and constant. That's why the Bible says in Ephesians 6:18 that we are to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." (niv) and in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 we are told to "pray continually." (niv)

How can you do this? Picture it this way: it's sort of like talking on the phone when you have call waiting. You start out the day's conversation with God. A friend calls, you talk, but you know you've got to get back to God. Another incoming call: the dog is sick. Click—back to God. Another call: your toddlers just ran out of the house. Without their clothes. (Two of our boys did that. I won't say if it was Sean, Ryan or Brenden. But in all fairness, Sean never did that). So you deal with it while God's on the line. Another incoming call—the mechanic says your car will need a \$500 repair. You'd better get back to God on the other line! I know it's not the best analogy, because we never really change lines when we are in prayer—he remains connected through it all. But the point is, communication is a constant open line; you keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking, knowing that God is always there and always hears, always answers. By the way—here's a good phone number to call God on—Jeremiah 33:3—"Call to me and I will answer you. I'll tell you marvelous and wondrous things that you could never figure out on your own." (Jeremiah 33:3, the message) Call God on

Jeremiah 33:3!

When others look at our church, we want them to see a natural picture, not a posed picture of something we're not. And worship and prayer is part of our picture.

Finally, we see a picture that includes

3. Communion

Whenever we share together in communion, as we are about to do today, we are participating in a picture of the church that was in the very beginning. It is a part of worship that Jesus instructed us to do: “Jesus said, ‘I have been very eager to eat this Passover meal with you before My suffering begins. For I tell you now that I won't eat this meal again until its meaning is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.’ Then He took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. Then He said, ‘Take this and share it among yourselves. For I will not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God has come.’ He took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then He broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, ‘This is My body, which is given for you. Do this to remember Me.’ After supper He took another cup of wine and said, ‘This cup is the new covenant between God and His people—an agreement confirmed with My blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you.’” (Luke 22:15-20, nlt)

Whenever we do this, we are looking backward to the table that the first believers shared with Jesus. We are also doing so knowing that he is present with us at the table today by his Spirit. He is here with us now! And then we look forward to the feast we will share that Jesus promises for us who believe. This is a powerful, spiritual moment that is happening in the past, present, and future.

There is nothing posed or awkward in what we are about to do. Listen: you do not have to be a member of this church to share with us today. If you wish to come and acknowledge what Jesus has done for you personally, together with all of us as his family, then you are welcome.

Explain how we will do so.

The Lord himself ordained this holy sacrament. He commanded His disciples to partake of the bread and wine, emblems of His broken body and shed blood. This is His table. The feast is for His disciples. Let all those who have with true repentance forsaken their sins, and have believed in Christ for their salvation, draw near and take these emblems, and, by faith, partake of the life of Jesus Christ, to your soul's comfort and joy. Let us remember that it is the memorial of the death and passion of our Lord; also a token of His coming again. Let us not forget that we are one, at one table with the Lord.

Pray: Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, who out of

Your tender mercy gave Your only Son, Jesus Christ, to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption: hear us, we most humbly beg of You. Grant that, as we receive this bread and this wine according to the holy institution of Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, in remembrance of His passion and death, we may be made partakers of the benefits of His atoning sacrifice.

We are reminded that in the same night that our Lord was betrayed, He took bread and, when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Likewise, after supper, He took the cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

May we come before You in true humility and faith as we partake of this holy sacrament. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Come and receive the bread and the cup, take it back to your place of worship, and wait for all of us so that we can all eat it together.

The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was broken for you, preserve you blameless, from now through everlasting life. Take and eat this, in remembrance that Christ died for you.

Eat the bread.

The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for you, preserve you blameless from now through everlasting life. Drink this, in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for you, and be thankful.

Drink the cup.

pray