

Fellowship: More than a Club

(The following message is the first in a series called 'Shark Month: What the Church Can Learn from Sharks'.)

Acts 2:42-47

I grew up with big family meals, and then I married into a family that loves to throw great dinners. My Italian Grandma's table would sag under all the great food she made...it was amazing. Every holiday we'd fill up on our favorites while we talked and laughed and enjoyed being together. My mom and mother-in-law both throw great parties built around eating and talking and loving our time together. As the date gets closer I've been looking forward to our visit back home for meals with friends. Tom Barlow and I are taking a class together at Fuller Seminary in February. I told him to come hungry, because we're going to hit all my favorite places.

Food and fellowship go together—that's the origin and the continuing meaning of Communion: a meal that represents who we are together in Christ.

42They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Now a lot of you may be wondering about the picture [of a shark] on the front of the bulletin. There's a point to that, which we'll get to in a minute.

On the Discovery Channel each year they have something called 'Shark Week,' a celebration of all things sharkish. The programs have these great, dramatic names. Here are some of the titles: Shark Quest, Day of the Shark, How Not to Become Shark Bait, Anatomy of a Shark Bite, Ocean of Fear, and Blood in the Water. The DVD collection is called Shark Week's Greatest Bites.

You get the idea.

My nephew Garrett loves that week—it used to be his favorite week on TV. He knows more about sharks than any kid I know, so I asked him to share some shark facts with me. Here are some of his favorites.

Some sharks lose up to 30,000 teeth in their lifetime.

The largest living shark in the world, the whale shark, can grow up to 50ft. long.

A shark can smell a few drops of blood from a mile away.

Some fisherman say the mako shark can swim up to 60mph.

If you rub the skin of a shark from head to tail, it feels smooth. But when you rub their skin from tail to head, the denticles ("little teeth") can cut your hand.

A shark is an amazing natural machine. It's basically a muscle with teeth—it rarely gets tired or takes any rest. In fact, a shark spends its entire life doing three things:

It swims, it eats, and it reproduces. A shark that is true to its nature simply swims, eats, and makes baby sharks.

Over the past three years, to start the year, we've talked about what it means to be the church. The point each time has been that a healthy church—or a thriving church—or a contagious church—and now this year a faithful church—a faithful church, a church that is true to its nature, is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

If you're going to memorize one sentence over the next four Sundays, make it this one:

A faithful church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ, and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission.

So that brings us to the edge of our theme for the next few Sundays: Faithful churches are like sharks.

I'll say that again: A church that is true to its nature—a church that is faithful to its calling—is like a shark.

It never stops moving. It seeks out nourishment. And it makes new disciples.

Think back on our text. The disciples are confused and terrified after Christ's death and resurrection and departure. The Holy Spirit comes and empowers them. Peter preaches the first Christian sermon and 3000 people, people from all over the world, came to faith in Jesus Christ. By the time we get to our text we see what these thousands of people were doing together—how they lived together and began to flesh out what it meant to be a community of faith.

What we see in our text is an image of what true Christian fellowship looks like. The church in Acts was a church like a shark: it never stopped moving, it fed itself physically and spiritually, and it reproduced. Let's see how that looks in the text.

'All the believers were together and had everything in common...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.' The church in Acts was a church on the move. Of course it needed to create some structure for itself eventually, but at its core the church was designed to be a community that never sits still—that moves and shares and loves and serves.

But the church didn't just move for the sake of moving.

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.' The church in Acts was conscious of its need for nourishment. They were hungry to learn—they listened and studied and questioned and tested. They allowed themselves to be fed—and they fed themselves—so that they could

worship God with passion and with a sense of his will for them and for the world. They also made a priority of learning so that they could serve more effectively—so that they were prepared to meet the challenges of the world around them.

But one of the things I love about this picture of the early church is how much focus there was on eating real food. They were devoted to breaking bread as a community, and when they went home they ate some more. This is a church I would fit into pretty easily. ‘They ate together with glad and sincere hearts.’ When I read that I think back on how much I loved big family meals when I was growing up—how much I still love getting a group of people together for a meal we can share ‘with glad and sincere hearts.’

But it’s important to notice that this community was partly focused on the people who weren’t there yet. All this activity and nourishment caused something special—something attractive—to happen. This was a church that knew how to reproduce—to procreate—this was a church that drew people into their life of growing together and serving together.

‘The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.’ People were flocking to this noisy crowd of happy, growing, loving Christians. In the middle of a country occupied by the strongest military the world had ever known—in the middle of a city defined by a faith that was waiting for the Messiah to appear and didn’t believe that Jesus was the one—in that dangerous setting this happy, curious, loving group of powerless people drew new men and women and kids into their fellowship, every single day.

The church was designed to be a magnetic fellowship like that one—a church like a shark—a gathering that never settled for the status quo, that hungered for real understanding of the nature of God, and that multiplied by welcoming new people into Christian community.

A church that is true to its nature—a church that is faithful to its calling—is a lot like a shark.

It never stops moving ahead. It constantly seeks nourishment. And it makes new disciples.

Join that with the idea that a faithful church is built on a foundation of Jesus Christ and expressed through fellowship, worship, discipleship and mission—join that with the image of a shark, and you get an idea of where we’re headed over the next month.

So what about our need for fellowship?

I think I’ve shared this quote with you before, but Bruce Larson wrote this about our need for fellowship.

“The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is for the fellowship Christ wants to give his Church. It’s an imitation dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it is a permissive, accepting and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic... The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers.”

But God created us for a kind of fellowship that’s more than just a place where everybody knows our name. He made us for community that can withstand disaster, whether it comes from outside or it’s self-inflicted. This is more than a club. The fellowship Christ makes

possible is more than just a set of by-laws and a secret handshake.

That's where we come back to the image of the shark, that amazing creature that swims, eats and procreates. God made us to be a community that moves through life together without ever getting stuck or thinking we've arrived at some kind of perfection. He made us to seek him through the study of his Scriptures and the experience of his presence in the world. He made us to go out into all the earth and make new disciples in his name.

Our fellowship together is something that is deeply meaningful and important. It gives us a place where we can grow and test our gifts—where we can be supported in hard times and where we can share our joys when they come to us. It's a place where we deepen our understanding of who God is and who we are. And it's a place not where we hide from the rest of the world—it's a place we leave to go out and draw new people into faith in Christ and a sense of belonging in this community.

This is more than a club. This is the church of Jesus Christ. And the more we follow the example of the shark, the closer we come to being the place God calls us to be. That's what we're going to talk about between now and the end of the month.

One last shark fact.

Did you know that a shark never stops growing during its entire life? That's amazing to me. As long as a shark is alive, it continues to grow.

Think about that for a moment. That may be one of the most challenging lessons from sharks that we can learn as a church. When we keep moving, keep being fed on God's word, and work to bring new people into the faith, we'll keep growing in depth and in numbers.

Welcome to Shark Month at the American Church. We'll pick this up again next week as we talk about worship.

Let's pray together.