Our reading from Acts today takes place immediately after the reading we had from Acts last week. Which, if you don’t remember was about baptism. But don’t worry you are not going to get another sermon on the theology of baptism – I got it out of my system. However, I do want to want to continue with the book of Acts, which almost makes this a sermon series. The reason I want to look at it is because it contains a great one sentence summation of what we are to be about as Christians. It says this, “Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” I am not one who usually gives three-point sermons, but this one seems all teed up and ready, even though it might technically be a four-point sermon: Apostle’s teaching, fellowship, breaking of the bread and the prayers.

These four things, in many ways, answer the question of what you are supposed to do once you become a Christian. And I think it might be a timely reminder because our society struggles with what Christianity is. This struggle is not for lack of opinions, but rather just the opposite, it is because of a superabundance of opinions. Everyone seems to be in the business of telling you what “real Christianity” is like. It is kind of a cottage industry in the publishing world. If you don’t believe me, just put “Christian Books” into Amazon and see how many of those books contain the following two themes: 1) Christianity has lost its way 2) Christianity needs to follow my plan to find its way again. And, of course, this like much else was made worse by covid. So, what I am intending in this sermon is not meant to be the four simple steps the church needs to follow to reinvigorate itself. It is really meant to be just a reflection on what the early church believed Christianity was and you can do with that what you will.

So, what do we hear? Well first we are told that they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teachings. And while it is rather obvious that we are talking about teaching done by the Apostles what exactly would those teachings be? We need to remember that the time frame this passage references was a time when there were probably not the Gospels, at least not in the form we think of today. That is there were not the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But this does not mean that they would not be telling people about the information contained in these Gospels. Some of what they would be doing in their teachings is telling people about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But there is also another part of the teachings which would be more of a commentary on the events that occur in the Gospels. Some of this would be akin to things we find elsewhere in the New Testament or what we call the Epistle lessons on Sunday morning and some of this would be what happens in the sermon. These both serve as a sort of analysis of the Gospel narrative -- this is what happened and this is what it means. Those early believers listened to the Apostles and they told them the Gospel message and its impact on their lives. Which is hopefully what I do every Sunday. The Apostle’s teachings would be something that we would expect to hear in church, something about Jesus and an explanation about what that something means.

So now onto the second part and this part might seem slightly at odds with how church was viewed during the time of covid and still is in this period of the covid hangover. This is of course the part about fellowship. The passage tells us that the newly baptized spent time together. It does not say that they had Bible Study or they set up a soup kitchen. It just says they got together. Now this does not mean that churches should not have Bible Studies or do charitable actions but simply that there is something good in and of itself in simply getting together. If we are thinking about this list, the first item can be done from the comfort of our own home with an internet connection. We can watch a sermon or read a passage from the Bible without leaving home, but fellowship requires us to get out, to be around fellow believers. I think too often in Christianity we want a cause and effect understanding – we do this we get that. But with fellowship it’s not quite as clear. We most likely enjoy it, we might pick up some useful information, but it can be a little hard to try and justify it if we are expected to show tangible results. Still, here it is. And I think just because it cannot be explained in an airtight argument there is something to coming together that is essential in our walk of faith. But just in case you are going to feel shortchanged if I do not present an argument let me give you one justification for fellowship. We worship a triune God, one God, three persons -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What this means in reality is that there is fellowship baked into our understanding of God as an entity. Hopefully this doesn’t come off as irreverent, but God is kind of always just hanging out with himself. And so, it would seem natural that if we are made in the image of God that we would have that relational aspect sort of baked into our nature and the way we express this is through fellowship.

Okay so now on to the third thing we are told that those early Christians did which is the breaking of the bread. I am going to go with Occam’s Razor on this one and say the breaking of the bread means something akin to what we hear in Luke 22:19, “And [Jesus] took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” Since Luke wrote Luke and also Acts, I think he would be aware of this language and what he was saying. The breaking of the bread that Jesus did during the last supper would have been repeated in the early Church, just as Jesus had told them to do. I will not go into the theology of what we believe happens in doing this, just leave you the fact that this breaking of bread would have been very much a piece of what early Christians did -- they came to church and they had eucharist, just like we do.

Now let’s move to the last bit, the part about the prayers. I don’t want to speculate about which prayers they said but do want to focus a bit on the word “the,” because what is more fun than a sermon on definite articles. I just want to point out that when we use a definite article like “the” we are referring to something specific. If a I ask you if you got “the job” I am thinking of a very specific job as opposed to asking if you go “a job.” And so by the fact that it says the prayers and not a prayer or that they were praying, it signifies that there is something specific and permanent about these prayers; meaning they were probably either written down or memorized. In other words, there were customary prayers that they repeated. Now I assume that you know where I am going with this, but just in case we could almost say they had common prayers amongst themselves. Since books were hard to come by, they might not have had a book of common prayer, but something like it. There was a structure to what they did.

So, if you want to know what early Christians did, it is all there. They listened to the Gospel message, they gathered, they celebrated Eucharist and they said prayers. It sounds kind of familiar to me and hopefully it will do for us what it did for them and make us God’s own this day and forevermore.