

Staying Close, Staying Connected

JUNE / JULY 2021



FROM THE PASTOR

The Supernatural Amidst the Struggle

Doesn't your heart burn when you read about the early days of the Church? "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles" (Ac. 2:42).

Jon Bloom writes, "That young seedling of a church burst out of holy ground in the garden of God with joyful, beautiful vibrancy as the young Christians met, worshiped, prayed, witnessed, and cared for one another." Don't you long for that experience? I do. I pray for it, and I expect I will continue to pray for it during this earthly sojourn.

We often attempt to capture this kind of experience by trying various ways of "doing church" together. And I think this is a healthy, Spirit-inspired longing and pursuit (keeping in mind that no methodology has the power to produce what only the Holy Spirit can do). But there was a factor at play in the early church's vital life that we tend to overlook. It's a factor we might not think to pray for, but one that helped provide the fertile environment in which the first-generation church flourished. That factor was a hostile culture and the desperate situations of many saints.

When we pray for revival and robust churches, we may expect God to give us answers that look like Acts 2. But we become discouraged when we experience difficulties, not recognizing these as important parts of a spiritually fertile environment. When we take a careful look at the account of these seemingly sublime early church days, a more complex picture emerges. We begin to see it in this description of generosity: "All the believers were together and had all things in common. They sold possessions and belongings to give to anyone who had need." (Acts 2:44-45)

What was happening that prompted this outbreak of possession-sharing? A significant number of Christians were experiencing significant material needs. Why? Because not everybody was looking upon them with favor. Luke reports that these Christians had “favor with all the people” (v. 47). But let’s remember that this “favor” was fickle, was by no means universal, and did not last long. There was a brief window of favor with the same people who had also favored the miracle-working Jesus, until he said hard things, or was arrested, condemned, and executed. They likely favored the church in large measure due to the apostles’ awe-inspiring miracles. But we see this favor-window close as soon as we get to Acts 4 – when the persecution really begins.

The remarkable generosity of Christians was drawn out because of necessity. It’s likely that most, if not all, of the new converts, were being kicked out of their synagogues — the hub of spiritual and social life in Jewish communities – for becoming followers of Jesus. This was already taking place during Jesus’s lifetime. Surely it was happening in the months after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection, when the religious leaders were doing their best to snuff out this new “sect.”

And that being the case, it’s also likely many new Christians were being disowned and disinherited by their families. It’s easy to have uninvested favor toward a group until your child or your sibling or your spouse joins, and the social and economic costs become personal. Then painful disruptions begin. And these disruptions would have created immediate housing needs and resulted in many Christians suddenly finding themselves unemployed, since so many businesses were family-based.

In other words, the wonderful generosity did not happen in a vacuum. It was a response to sudden, painful, and desperate needs. Christians possessing this world’s goods saw their brothers and sisters in need and could not close their hearts against them because they were filled with God’s love. Their desperate need and acute suffering contributed to the remarkable fellowship the believers experienced. Think of the times you’ve experienced the most intense and precious fellowship with others. How many of those occurred in difficult times in your or someone else’s life?

-2-

Yes, the Holy Spirit was moving powerfully in the early church. But like the Spirit often does, he was moving in response to people’s faith, which was heightened because of the overwhelming needs and adversity they were facing. Again, when have you experienced the Spirit most powerfully in your life? I imagine it’s typically happened when desperation drove you to need and seek him.

We should not romanticize persecution or affliction. They are evils. However, throughout biblical and church history, we find a consistent pattern: “glad and generous hearts” (v. 46) tend to grow best when adversity is part of the church’s life. Affliction provides sanctifying opportunities for us to experience the love of Christ in very personal ways, as we

extend it to and receive it from one another – opportunities to demonstrate the gospel visibly to a watching world. In other words ... the gospel becomes more real to us the more we feel our need of it.

So let's keep seeking the Spirit for guidance ... for strength ... for revival! And let's keep longing to be like that radically loving, generously giving, passionately praying, boldly witnessing community of first-generation saints! But let's remember the hostile, painful, desperate context in which the church was born. And as we pray, let us remember Peter's words that came from personal experience: "Do not be surprised at the trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." (1 Peter 4:12). It is quite likely we are experiencing God's unexpected answers to our prayers.

Pastor Chris

News From the Deacons

The Riverlawn deacons met on May 23rd. We are working on plans to do **Hero Baskets** to let our local heroes know that we appreciate them and all they have done for our community during the pandemic! More information will be coming in July on how the congregation can help connect with our community through the Hero Baskets. The next deacons meeting will be held on Sunday, August 8th after church.



-3-

GUIDELINES FROM THE SESSION

The Doors Are Open! Come On In!

By now I'm sure many of you have already heard the exciting news. On May 30th we returned to the sanctuary for our services of worship!

A few things to note:

Now that we are back inside we ask that you please review the previously sent Informational Letter regarding Sanctuary Worship – including the health and safety procedures that will be in effect now that we are worshipping inside. The updated Informational Letter can be found on our website at www.RiverlawnChurch.org.

- At this time, while indoors, masks are to be worn, including during worship, and physical distancing observed (family units may sit together).

- There will be singing! Come ready to lift your voices to the Lord!
- There will be Jr. Church in the gym! (For the time being, Jr. Church will be in the same format as when the worship services were outdoors. At 10:25 AM, the children will enter the gym wearing masks and Jr. Church will take place for the duration of the worship service.
- There will be a Nursery! Parents/guardians of children in kindergarten or younger can bring their children to the “toddler nursery” across the hall from the sanctuary prior to the start of the worship service.
- Virtual worship will continue to be offered and shared through the posted recorded worship services.
- The Informational Letter may answer other questions you may have; if not, please contact Pastor Chris or our Elder over Worship, Bill Michael at (304) 741-1736 or bmichael47@gmail.com.
- We are hopeful, prayerful and thankful for the improving health of our communities. In light of advancements, health and safety protocols pertaining to sanctuary worship and indoor activities may be loosened in the near future.

We hope you will join us for worship as we celebrate God’s faithfulness and rejoice in his presence as we gather in the house of the Lord!

Pastor Chris and your Riverlawn Session



Dates to Remember

June 7 Church-wide time of prayer & fasting – Noon

June 27 Session Meeting – 4:00 pm

July 5 Church-wide time of prayer & fasting - Noon

July 25 Special Offering for our 2 Hospital Ministries

August 2 Church-wide time of prayer & fasting - Noon

August 8 Deacons Meeting - Following worship

-4-

An invitation from First Presbyterian in St. Albans

Riverlawn members are invited to join First Church’s VBS program: “Treasured: Discovering You’re Priceless to God.” The dates are June 24 through 27 --- Thursday & Friday evening, Saturday morning & outdoor worship on Sunday. All ages are invited. Call their church office for more information (304.727.2241).



CONGRATS TO OUR GRADUATES

Maryssa Rogers from St. Albans High School

Sarai Cook from West Virginia State University

JUNE BIRTHDAYS

1st Shelby Sherman

6th Yilmar Moreno

Janet Young

Courtney Keller

9th June Paxton

Sandra Cottle

12th Maryssa Rogers

16th Randy Dodrill

17th Janet Wehrle

20th Pam Johnson

Lakyn Kilbert

21st Dennis Emmett

Barb Hughes

28th Brody Sneed



JULY BIRTHDAYS

9th Hannah Marcum

11th Nikole Kilbert

16th Jason Barnes

18th Sarai Cook

19th Ron Nestor

22nd Joyce Ryan

23rd Mary Lee Dehart

24th Bill Bryan

25th Emily Wandling

26th Jamie Albert

30th Dustin Campbell

A word from Emma Rose Cavender.....To my dear friends of Riverlawn and to the new friends I look forward to knowing. I have been back since the first of the year; well, as much as the COVID would allow. I have never stopped missing you and so pleased to have kept in touch with many. I cannot express what joy it has given me to be so graciously welcomed back into the Riverlawn family. I have enjoyed the "online" services and the parking lot services but so look forward to the time we can be really together; back in our beautiful sanctuary. With love in Christ Jesus to each of you.

Thanks from Pastor Chris & Nikole.....Dear Riverlawn family: We want to express our gratitude for the housewarming gift that was presented during worship a couple weeks ago. I can tell you, it was indeed a surprise – I didn't know what to say! It was indeed unexpected! Our Riverlawn family continues to touch our hearts and bless our lives with your graciousness, love, and generosity. Thank you so very much!

Choir update.....the choir was able to gather on Thursday, May 26 for an outside rehearsal. What a joy it was to be able to lift our voices together. Making the evening even more special was our celebration of Ernie's 90th birthday. Hoping to have another outside rehearsal in the near future.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Please remember Charlie Kellam, Janet Young & Linda Means.

OUR SYMPATHY EXTENDED

The Reverend Lang Montgomery, former pastor at Riverlawn, passed peacefully into the arms of His Savior on May 19th. Many of our members also know Gayle Ackerman, who let us know of his passing. Lang was living in Suffolk, VA and for the last several years he served as a hospice chaplain for local hospitals. Besides serving as pastor for several churches (WV & VA) Lang was also an accomplished drummer, pianist and guitarist. He is survived by his wife Helen and children Dr. Brett Montgomery, Mr. James Montgomery & Ms. Allison Montgomery. A celebration of his life was held on May 23 in Suffolk. Donations in his memory can be sent to Mid-Atlantic Teen Challenge, 9302 Warwick Blvd., Newport News, VA 23608.



The **next issue** of our newsletter will be prepared and sent out mid-August. We hope to be able to announce what activities will begin for the fall at that time. The August birthdays will be sent out in an email blast at the end of July. If you have anything to share in the August/September issue please email to Pam Johnson (pampianowv@aol.com) by **August 13th**.