

“Taking Care of One Another”

Acts 2:42-47

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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We sat in a board meeting in that little country church. They didn't set an annual budget or invite people to make pledges. People just gave and the bills just got paid. And occasionally there was what they understood as too much money. That was the case at this board meeting. So, when it came time for the Treasurer to make her report, she said, “We have money in the bank and it isn't doing anyone any good there. Who needs it more than we do?” The answer this time was a neighbor who was going through cancer treatments. The Treasurer put a check in the mail the very next day.

It was a Sunday morning nearly a decade later at another church. A young couple in the congregation was nearing the end of their pregnancy. They had gone to the hospital that morning because something didn't seem right. Halfway through worship we received a call. There was no heartbeat. After worship, as soon as I could, I headed to the hospital. There I found a waiting room full of church members, there to offer their prayers and support and to grieve together.

Fast forward another fourteen years, in another congregation, where I witnessed time and time again as they created safe space for those who needed it. A food pantry in the building...a meeting space for NA and AA groups...an open & affirming commitment...a willingness to stand strong at the statehouse when laws were being considered that took away rights of various groups of people who were already struggling.

Community happens in different ways. It doesn't always look the same. The details vary from situation to situation. But at its best community happens when we gather around each other, paying special attention to those in need, and say, “We will take care of each other.”

That is the power of the witness in today's text.

And sadly, too often when we read this passage, we get so caught up in conversations about what *really* happened in the early church...about whether this passage is descriptive or prescriptive...about how long this kind of community could have lasted...about the long list of reasons why we can't live that way, we get so caught up there that we miss the invitation to live in caring community.

In fact, if we were to read this passage in Greek, we would find that one of the words used in the phrase that says they had all things in common, is the word we hear as *koinonia*. Most often this is translated as “fellowship.” But we shouldn't hear that in a passing way. After all, we use “fellowship” broadly to mean anything from a quick and easy conversation over a cookie after worship to a deeper sense of connection.

Here, in the early church that Acts tells us of, it is definitely about that deeper sense of connection. If we are to live in “koinonia” as the early church modeled it, then we will share ourselves and be willing to receive the gifts and stories of others. If we are to live in true koinonia we will move from surface relationships to something deeper, realizing that we truly are responsible for the care of the other.

This idea is similar to the idea represented in the African word, “Ubuntu,” a word that many of us spent time with a few years ago at church camp. Ubuntu means, “I am because you are.” Ubuntu reminds us that we cannot be separated, that we are of the same stuff, that ultimately we are connected.

That is the model of the early church.

That is the challenge for us today.

So, how do we create true community? How do we live in ways that tell another that our very being is dependent on them, that our existence cannot be separated from them, that we value them as much as we value ourselves?

Think about the times when you have experienced true, life giving community. What elements were present? What makes for good community?

When I asked this question at Bible Study recently these were the answers that were shared:

- Understanding each other
- Cooperation
- Trust
- Commonality
- Compromise
- Willingness to help
- Commitment
- Intentionality
- Willingness to take time for the other.

You might have other ideas you would add to that list. By no means is it all inclusive. But let those ideas get you thinking...where have you experienced true community? What was happening there that caused you to feel valued and cared for?

Verses 44 and 45 in today’s reading said, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (NRSV).

We read this and we get stuck. Because we love our stuff. We get stuck because we have definite understandings and opinions about ownership. We get stuck because we have been raised on concepts of self-made people and pulling ourselves up by our own

bootstraps. We get stuck because we have convinced ourselves that we have earned everything we have and that others should do the same.

And yet, if we can get past all this and hear these verses in the context of this community of Jesus' followers who were trying to find their way together in a world that had been hostile toward Jesus, who were trying to figure out how to be a community for each other across differences of language and culture, of economics and background - if we can get there, then perhaps we can learn something about being community, too.

The early Christians found their way together not because it was easy, not because they were exactly the same, but because they lived with intentional relationships. They learned together. They ate together. They prayed together. They listened to one another's stories. When one had need, the others stepped up and said, "How can we help?" And, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that, upon seeing this kind of community, others were attracted to it.

So, how can we be community together?

In some ways it is a difficult task and a long-term commitment. In other ways it is simple.

We can pause with one another. We can listen to one another. We can believe each other. And having done so, we can ask what each of us has to give that can make that day or that experience or the world a little kinder and more manageable for someone who is struggling.

This is something we are working to do intentionally through our capital campaign. Today as we bring our pledges, we are saying, "I have resources that can make being part of this community better for you and so I will share them." We are saying, "I am because you are, so your need matters to me."

A few months ago I had someone tell me that he hadn't really thought we needed a push button door opener on the downstairs east door. We had them upstairs...that was sufficient. Then, one day when he was in the building as the Scouts began to gather, he watched a parent with a child in a wheelchair and saw the struggle as she maneuvered her child through the door. "We need that opener downstairs," he said to me the moment he saw me.

We can choose to only think of ourselves. We can say things like:

"The sound system is struggling yet I hear just fine."

"I am a cis-gendered person who doesn't not have responsibility for young children or an adult needing assistance. The bathrooms work just fine for me."

“I don’t work on our tech here, the screens look fine to me. I don’t have to worry about the difficulty the staff has getting the color just right.”

“I’m comfortable in the seats the way they are. Why would we change them?”

Or we can listen to one another; we can hear each other’s stories and believe what people tell us; we can choose to use what we have for the good of another.

And this isn’t only about our capital campaign.

Rather, this is about how we live in community with each other always. This is about how we pause, how we listen, how we learn, how we share, how we care. And this is about how we live in the world, with those we know and those we only briefly encounter. For we are called to live in ways that remind others that we all connected, that we are in fact, each other other’s keeper, that we are made to take care of each other. May it be so.