

Resurrection Living: Generosity
Acts 2:42-47
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Young people go to church camp. They find welcome and acceptance. They notice that while there *are* personalities that mesh better with certain personalities, it's different than the cliques that form at school. At camp they experience that everyone actually can be and usually is nice to everyone else. Over the course of the week this allows them to open up to other people and to God in ways they never have before. They return home, they are different.

A professional, perhaps a pastor, goes to a conference, perhaps the Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis. Over the course of the week she hears speaker after speaker. She takes notes as she listens, jots down phrases and ideas she wants to carry home with her. She has challenging conversations with her clergy colleagues as they unpack what they have heard. She is inspired. She is convicted. She is reminded of why she loves what she does, why she feels called to this vocation. She goes home full of so much to share...so much to be changed by.

A man signs up to participate in a small group in his church. It's only been his church for a short time; he doesn't really know many people. But it seems like this will help. He goes, cautiously at first, to the group. He mostly listens but then week by week he opens up. He finds he can engage the conversation, he can ask questions, he can share thoughts, he can even tell others truths about himself. By the end he is amazed with how open he has become.

These experiences are real. They are powerful. The question becomes: are they lasting?

The passage we read today from the book of Acts comes right after Pentecost. If we remember the course of events, Jesus was crucified but did not stay dead. The gospel writers tell us that he was resurrected and that for several weeks he stayed among his friend...he kept

showing up in various ways and places, answering some questions and sometimes feeding them. Finally, the time came for him to depart, so he left them but did so with the promise that they would not be alone for long, but that the Holy Spirit would be with them.

And so, they waited. And as they waited they got a few things in order. After all, by this time they were realizing that it *really was* going to be up to them to keep things going. So they took care of a few organizational tasks as they waited, hoping they would know when the Spirit showed up.

And, by golly, they did! In fact, earlier in Acts we hear the story of Pentecost day. It was a Jewish holy day so Jewish people from all around the known world were in Jerusalem and in wind and fire, languages and connections, the Spirit showed up. Not only did the Spirit show up, but an inspired Peter preached, he helped people understand, and thousands were so convicted by this experience that they chose to be part of the Way, to call themselves followers of Jesus.

After all they, like young people coming home from camp, like professionals who have been inspired by some of the best voices in their field, like people who have found a group where they are comfortable enough to open up, just like these situations we are more familiar with, the people who were around that Pentecost day became enthusiastic. The events of the moment made an impression. But the danger was, as Will Willimon points out, that all they would experience was “a short-term high that does not take root in long-term commitment.”¹ The danger was that all they would experience was “enthusiasm” that would not become “embodiment”.²

And yet that brings us to today’s text. And we are given a glimpse of the early Christian community...this growing community that has embraced the message of Jesus and received the

¹ William Willimon, “Acts” in the *Interpretation* series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 39.

² Willimon, 39.

Holy Spirit. And did you hear what they were doing? “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.”³ But then Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, goes on and tells us not only were they doing these things, things that *we* hear as more routine acts of the faith community but that, “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 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.* Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”⁴

In other words, Luke tells us that this was a community not only of enthusiasm, but of embodiment. This was a community that moved beyond the first moment of enthusiasm. This was a community that moved beyond the good feelings, and committed to live in ways that wouldn’t always feel good or be rewarded by the values of this world.

See, it’s easy for us to read verse 42. Teaching and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. Frankly we can just show up for worship on Sunday and claim that we’ve accomplished all of those things. We can make the commitment to be in a community like that...at least most of the time. So, that’s often where we want to leave it.

Well, we also like to read verse 47. After all it says that because of the way they were in community together people were being added to their number. We hear that and we see a growing church. And which one of us doesn’t want a growing church?

But, what do we do with the stuff in between?

³ Acts 2:42, NRSV.

⁴ Acts 2:43-47, NRSV, emphasis is the author’s.

The reality is that we often ignore it. We often read past it. We often point out that it was clearly not a lasting model and then we talk about the other communities in more modern history, those that have tried to live as utopias but have failed. We often point out that even in the Bible we don't see every early Christian community living this way. But we rarely stop to ask what we can learn from it and we rarely stop to wonder what might happen if we embodied the love of God in this way.

For us it is easier to romanticize that first attempt as young love, as the voice of inexperience. Or it is easier to point out the places and reasons it didn't work. Or it is easier to just ignore it. Because if we really spend time with it then we might be asked to embody the love of God in such ways that our entire lives are changed...because, friends, that's what happened here.

And let's be honest, it's that sentence in the middle that scares us the most. When Luke writes, "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,"⁵ we get nervous. After all, isn't that communism or socialism or one of those systems we are told to be scared of? The reality is that most of us are so far removed from high school government class that we often don't even remember the definitions of these different systems, but what we do know is that we are supposed to be made nervous by things like holding possessions in common or selling what is ours and then simply sharing.

Because we are a people who are taught that ownership is important...that we *deserve* everything we have and more...that we should have more and more, bigger and better...that we

⁵ Acts 2:44-45, NRSV.

should protect what we have and keep it for ourselves...that if someone else wants something they should just work hard until they can get it.

But what we forget to say is that these values too often make us love money and stuff more than we love people. These values too often make us protect things while we neglect people. These values too often make us consider only our individual perspective while we neglect the community.

See, what we forget to teach each other or to be honest about is that there are really some big conflicts between capitalism and Christianity. Maybe not in our lived experience in the United States of America today, because the common Christianity of our time has entered a deep and sinful relationship with our culture. But if we look at the Judeo-Christian tradition...if we look at the faith of Jesus...if we look at the model of the early church, and if we are willing to be honest about things we would rather ignore, then we see this reality.

Friends, our preference to ignore or explain away these verses about how the early Christian community lived together reminds us that following Jesus isn't easy. And if we are honest most of us know that we're never going to live in a community that could quite be described in these words from Acts. But rather than that being an excuse to ignore them or write them off as a pipe dream, what if we allowed this model to challenge us to be better?

Because remember what was happening here. They were taking time to be together and to be with God. They were listening to each other and to the teachings of old that had shaped Jesus. They were learning from the life of Jesus. They were sitting together at the table and, as Brian McLaren reminded a roomful of pastors this week, eating with someone makes them your

equal.⁶ Because of all of this they were building relationships with each other where they couldn't help but care for each other.

How many of you have given something up for your child, your grandchild, or a close friend? How many of you have cashed out some retirement, sold a valuable item or paid rent that wasn't yours because the person who needed it mattered so much to you that you could see no reason to do any different? Isn't that really what was happening here?

The early church came to understand that they were all part of the same family, that they were siblings in Christ, that the good of the other led to good for the whole community. They learned to value the other as they valued their own self.

And when this happens, generosity is the result.

So, what would happen if we took seriously this text. I don't mean we have to all run out and sell everything we own. But what would happen if we took seriously the challenge to live in community generously? What would happen if we took seriously the challenge to look others in the eye and value their lives in such ways that we couldn't stand to see them hurt? What would happen if we took seriously the challenge to remember that it costs the same thing for a CEO or a janitor to secure basic housing and if we quit living in ways that connected our value so deeply with the size of our homes or the number of stalls on our garage and instead lived in ways that both simplified our own lives while also working for justice for the other? What would happen if we lived with what we need and were willing to share the rest?

We like to pretend that following Jesus is easy...that it is exciting...that it can be convenient or occasional. But we are reminded that what is asked of us is the embodiment of the one who gave not only stuff but his life because of love that had no end. May we do the same.

⁶ Brian McLaren, May 15, 2019 sermon at Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis, MN.