April 8, 2018

Acts 4:32-35

Living Together: Generosity

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Acts 4:32-35 Common English Bible

The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, “This is mine!” about any of their possessions, but held everything in common. The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

For the next few weeks we are going to be hearing the story of the early church from the book of Acts. It is a big, bold story that celebrates the new possibilities as the people of God start coming to grips with the wonder of an empty tomb and the prophetic initiative of God’s Spirit. Acts tells us the story about a community of faith that is led by the Holy Spirit. It is a community of people that open themselves up to live together differently than they have lived before.

In our scripture we get a glimpse of believers in action, responding to their understanding of what God has called them to do and to be. The book of Acts begins with Jesus’ last words before he ascends to heaven. Jesus declares “You will be my witnesses” to “the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). What we find in our scripture is the people of God acting as Jesus’ witnesses. We are witnesses through our words, our actions, and how we live together in community with one another. Let’s hear how they did it after Jesus.

READ SCRIPTURE.

Generosity and service characterize the community of faith. I went to a meeting Thursday about public schools in Dallas and the meeting began by saying that serving others is in our DNA as Methodists, it is in our DNA as Christians. It is who we are. People gave to the church in Acts to help with the needs of their neighbor. In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy 15:4, it says, “there should not be any poor among you.” One of my favorite miracle stories with Jesus is with the little boy who gives his 2 fish and 5 loaves (John 6:9). There is a huge crowd, the Bible says 5,000 men (which might be a preacher estimate), gathered and Jesus tells the crowd to sit in groups. Everyone ate and was satisfied and there were twelve baskets of leftovers. To me the miracle is that everyone shared what they had. The Bible doesn’t say, but I can just imagine people acting like they only had enough food for their family. They couldn’t give any food to the cause because they needed it for themselves. They couldn’t, until they saw the little boy give everything that he had and then they realized that they could, too.

When we are generous with what we have, it is more than being nice. When we stop holding on to what is ours, and we give it away, we are expressing the wholeness and dignity that we believe all people possess. When you give money to Greenland Hills, you are saying that you think that your life, your security, your pleasure, is not worth more than the person who comes every night at 8 pm to the Narcotics Anonymous meeting that meets here. When you give money to Greenland Hills, you are saying that you think that your joy is not worth more than the joy of the children and youth of this church who find life and welcome in this place as they learn they are a blessing. I was helping a little boy open his Easter eggs after the egg hunt last Sunday and someone here had put in their eggs a slip of paper that said, “You are a blessing!” This little boy opened that read, read what it said, and broke into the biggest smile. He heard the affirmation that God loved him, that we treasure him here at Greenland Hills, and that he is a gift to all of us here in this place. For him, it was better than candy!

We are Easter people because our identity is shaped by the idea that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death. We are people of hope whose lives are changed because of what happens on Easter. The resurrection changed the lives of the early Christian community in Acts. They were “one in heart and mind.” Unity like that is hard to comprehend. This was a group of people from different ethnic backgrounds, different understandings and perspectives, but their generosity is what they had in common. These weren’t rich people. These were poor and working class folks. But they shared what they had. Their faith impacted their wallets because those with resources sold them and gave them so that others could have what they needed.

If you have a need and I have resources to help fill that need, I will share what I have with you. If I have a need and you are able, you will share with me. Mutual generosity. For the writer of Acts, a community without a single needy person was the sign of the power of resurrection, of new life. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he goes to the synagogue and reads from the scroll of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me… to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:16-18). The year of the Lord’s favor means debts are forgiven. It means there is enough for everyone and no one is in need any longer. It means that the broken are restored to life in community.

“And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll love we are Christians by our love.” It is hard to imagine us practicing that type of economics today. Instead of saying whatever I earn belongs to me, we would say, whatever I have belongs to the entire community. Instead of trying to earn more, we would sell our possessions to support others. We would trust that when we were in need, others will care for us.

There was a clip making the rounds this week of Martin Luther King Jr. being interviewed by NBC News and he talked about black Americans pulling themselves up by their own boot straps. Dr. King said, “It’s alright to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.”[[1]](#footnote-1) As Christians we believe that there is this imperative that we are to care for one another above all else. We gladly let go of our prized possessions to benefit others so that no one will go hungry or be homeless or be unable to get an education. This is our radical witness of love.

Churches today don’t look much like the early church in Acts. We believe we are supposed to take care of ourselves and others should take care of themselves. We may come to worship and not feel connected to anyone else here. Many of us are lonely, and we feel as though no one cares about us. We don’t want to be honest about how we are really doing and it is taboo to talk about how we are doing financially. Instead of being honest with one another, we keep things just between “me and Jesus”.

Yet, we are Easter people who believe goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death. We find meaning not in what we own or what we earn, but in how we reach out to one another in love and in service. A very wise person once shared some marriage advice with me. They said to wake up each morning and ask yourself how you can serve your spouse today. For all of us, how can we serve another person today?

We are Easter people when we are generous. Generosity changes us. We were created to be generous and our generosity can be a great blessing in our lives. We work for justice for all so that no one is hungry or homeless or enslaved by poverty. We work for justice for all so every child receives a good education. The resurrection is about God’s victory over the powers of sin, and death, and destruction in our world. We are Easter people who work to close the ever-increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. This gap between rich and poor is said to be the most serious problem we face today. It is embarrassing, shameful to me, that 1 in 5 children in Dallas live in poverty.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is embarrassing, shameful to me, that almost half the world, over three billion people, live on less than $2.50 a day? At least 80% of humanity lives on less than $10 a day.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is embarrassing, shameful to me, that an average of 25,000 children die every day from causes preventable with low-cost, proven interventions.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The United Methodist Church has four areas of focus to express the vision and yearnings of the people of the United Methodist Church. The first focus is engaging in ministry with the poor. Christ calls us to be in ministry with the poor and the marginalized and we stand with those who are regarded as the “least of these,” listening to them, understanding their needs and aspirations, and working with them to achieve their goals. It means addressing the causes of poverty and responding in ways that lift up individuals and communities. The second focus is improving global health because poverty and health are intertwined. As a Church we have focused on malaria and AIDS. The United Methodist Church has raised nearly $75 million to provide education, infrastructure, communication and prevention measures to defeat malaria. As a result, the death rate from malaria in Africa has been cut in half.[[5]](#footnote-5)

How do we live together? It starts with having greater generosity with our personal resources. Being Easter people means we love one another as God has loved us. Through our generosity we help all people thrive and we say that life is stronger than death. Our witness as Christians is about what we do with our money. May the power of the risen Christ transform us and increase our generosity. What we do with our money is a sign to us of our transformation into Easter people. Amen.

1. https://www.nbcnews.com/video/martin-luther-king-jr-speaks-with-nbc-news-11-months-before-assassination-1202163779741?v=a [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2017/11/14/one-five-dallas-area-children-live-poverty-report-finds [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.unicef.org/factoftheweek/index\_53356.html [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/four-areas-of-focus-overview [↑](#footnote-ref-5)