

Glad and Generous Hearts

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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Scripture

Acts 2:41-47

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through 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.

Sermon

Is this for real? Is this what the early church was like? A congregation devoted to the teaching of its pastors, attentive to every word—every word? A congregation filled with awe as it looks upon a leadership—elders and deacons—that regularly performs “wonders and signs” (Acts 2:43)? A community where people share a common life together, where true fellowship was a common occurrence, daily, weekly. A church that pools its resources, selling property and possessions and goods and then sharing them freely, “as any has need” (Acts 2:45). A church without budget problems and deficits. A church without conflict. A church with a clear vision and mission. A church that eats together regularly, at worship and home. Praising God and seeking the common good of all people, a church so amazing that it grows exponentially daily, forever and ever. Amen!

I've never seen such a church. And my guess is, neither have you.

Catonsville Presbyterian Church is an amazing congregation. We are not perfect, but neither are we called to be perfect. We have a remarkable staff and gifted leadership, but, together, we're not yielding an increase in membership that Acts describes. We've increased our giving levels as a church over the years, discovering what faithful stewardship is all about. This congregation is blessed with many gifts and strives to be generous. We do great things through mission and advocacy, but there's always room to grow. It's nothing like what we see in Acts 2. Membership rolls increasing *daily*? Performing wonders and signs? A congregation filled with awe, all the time, 24/7?

Is that what the early church was like? Did such a church ever exist? At some level, we're all jaded and cynical and skeptical. It seems too good to be true.

Some think Luke was telling us what the early church was really like, "back in the day," in the Golden Age of the church. Perhaps. Christians are often seduced by nostalgia, thinking that an earlier time was better. This appears to be the default mode of psyches shaped by the Garden-Fall narrative of the Bible. The former days are often viewed as the better days. It's all downhill from there.

Perhaps those were the "glory days" of the Church. I don't know. What I do know is that way of thinking, that the past was better, is not always helpful because it sets us up for failure (and it might be false). When we compare the present time with former times, somehow, this time never seems to measure up. So we become disappointed, depressed, and discouraged about the state of the church and its future, and worry about the Presbyterian Church. This way of thinking just isn't helpful because it rarely fires our imaginations enough to respond to the present crisis and the opportunity of the moment, for what is required of us—today. Why do we keep looking back? We're already east of Eden (Gen. 4:16), so why do we want to return there?

This past week, I came across these words of Augustine (354-430), from a sermon on prayer: "'Bad times! Hard times!' That is what men are saying. But let us live well, and the times will be good. We are the times. Such as we are, such are the times."

Should we instead look forward? Others see Acts 2 as an *ideal*, given that we have something to strive for. Some view Acts 2 as the goal, offering a vision of what the Church is supposed to look like, describing what we should be doing, working toward that time when all things will be held in common when resources and gifts are shared, as any has need. What we have here is an ideal because it's too good to be true. It's a vision.

And as visions go, it's not a bad one. It informed the social and economic reform movements of the nineteenth century, including the thought of Karl Marx (1818-1883). Some forms of communism and socialism have their origin here in Acts 2. [i]

However, viewing Acts 2 as an ideal is equally unhelpful. An ideal always remains an ideal. Always striving for the ideal, the ideal never realized, sets us up for failure, always being disappointed by the real. It's, then, easy for the church to become discouraged because we're not measuring up to the ideal, to that vision of a perfect church. It's a total waste of time and energy reaching for the ideal, searching for *utopia*—which, by the way, is Latin for "no place." Utopia doesn't exist. [ii] Sure, it's good to have goals and visions. However, if they're so unrealistic and out of reach, in time, we lose steam and collapse or, worse, go to the other extreme, consigning ourselves to narratives of *dystopia*, reflected today in many novels, such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006).

What we find here in Acts 2 is not really nostalgia for the good ol' days (although it might look that way), neither is it an ideal. Neither nostalgia nor ideal. What is the church to do with a text like this?

Maybe it's not about the church. Because we find here Luke's description of what the early church looked like or could look like one day, it's easy to assume that the text is about the church. Yes, it has to do with the church. The church matters, of course. But as a surface reading of Acts will show, the protagonist of Luke's story is not the church but the *Holy Spirit*. The one who makes everything happen, the character driving Luke's narrative, is not the church but the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who stands behind and beside the church, below and above and *in* the church, writing the narrative, who causes everything to happen. Acts 2 recounts the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Everything going that follows, in the church, the *ekklesia*, in this association of people who have encountered the Spirit of the Risen Christ, is the result of the presence of God *in their midst*—within them and around them.

Luke is not describing an ideal, that is, what we should strive for. He's describing what happens when the Spirit of the Risen Christ shows up. He's describing what happens when the Spirit is flowing through our lives. You can see it most profoundly when people come together and form a community, an *ekklesia*, comprised of individuals who have been similarly moved by the Spirit and live differently because of it. We come together and are formed into a fellowship, a *koinōnia*—one of the most significant New Testament words, which describes what life is like *in* the *ekklesia*, in the church.

Koinōnia, fellowship, refers to what life looks like in the *ekklesia* when the Spirit is present. [iii] In the *koinōnia*, things are shared and held in common, when the Spirit is present. In the *koinōnia* we mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15), because the Spirit is present. In the *koinōnia* we are attentive to the needs of the people who share our lives with us (Romans 12:13) because the Spirit is present. [iv] We break bread, share our lives, and learn to love one another.

What Luke is describing here is not a church program that farms out charity or takes a collection. He's not talking about the church as an institution—and we have to stop thinking of the church as an institution (!). He's not talking about an organization. What Luke is describing here—such as the sharing of possessions—is “a spontaneous outgrowth of the Spirit.” [v] It's a natural, spontaneous response in people who are alive in the Spirit of God and know that the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ is within us.

And when this happens, and every time it happens, we know the grace of gladness, *agalliasis*. They broke bread and ate their food. They shared meals together, and remembered the One who shared a meal with them, knowing the One who is always known *in the breaking* of the bread (Luke 24:35)—always, always (!) known *in the breaking*. They broke bread and lived out their day-to-day ordinary lives “with glad and generous hearts”—*en agalliasis kai apheloteti*

kardias. *Agalliasis* means gladness, but gladness of a special kind. It describes the joy we find in the presence of the Lord. It's used four other times, all in Luke's Gospel. It's used more than 12 times in the Greek version of the Psalms (Septuagint), including Psalm 100:2: "Serve the LORD with gladness." *Apheloteti* (from *aphelotes*) is used only here in the Bible and refers to *generosity*. When the Spirit moves our hearts, we are changed.

When we're close to the presence of the Lord, there is gladness and joy *in* the church. Not in some glorified past, not one day. Here and now. But remember, it's not about the church. It's about you and me, individually and then together, in our experience of the Resurrected Lord—along with everyone else the Spirit adds to the *koinōnia*. When the Spirit moves, we find ourselves becoming more and more generous—it's one of the signs that the Spirit is at work within us when we become more generous—giving of ourselves in love, sharing our lives, giving—*forgiving*. Being glad, being generous is not a program or ethical ideal or a project or some goal that we wish to pursue in our lives. It's what happens when our lives are touched by the Spirit; it's the outflow from an encounter with the Spirit.

Luke offers us here a description of what can happen (and does happen) when the Spirit breaks open the closed doors of our lives, enters into the places where we live, and gathers us in; when the Spirit forms and transforms the center of our lives, the heart of our lives, transforms our hearts. *This is what is true*.

We are changed when Christ's love flows toward us and through us. Willie James Jennings, one of the great theologians of our day, said it beautifully: "People caught up in the love of God not only began to give thanks for their daily bread, but daily offered to God whatever they had that might speak that gracious love to others. What is far more dangerous than any plan of shared wealth or fair distribution of goods and services is a God who dares impose on us divine love. Such a love does not play fair. [vi] Then *we'll* see "wonders and signs" all around us. Then, we'll see what God's love can do.

When this happens, I believe, we'll look on, we'll look at ourselves—with *awe*. And the world will look at us with awe. Not because of us but because of the Spirit at work in us. With awe. Awe and gratitude—for the ongoing work of the Spirit in us, the church, and the world. *Amen*.

Sources

- [i] See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The Radical Kingdom: The Western Experience of Messianic Hope* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 185ff. Especially chapter 11, "Christian-Marxist Dialogue,"
- [ii] "Utopia" was first coined by Thomas More (1478-1535) for the title of his book *Utopia* (1516), describing a fictional island society in the Atlantic Ocean.
- [iii] On the dialectic between *koinōnia* and *ekklesia*, see Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 163ff.

- [iv] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 59-62.
- [v] Johnson, 59
- [vi] Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 40.