

Acts 4 – Our church story of Abundance

This is an extremely well known text within the church, and especially around stewardship time it tends to emerge again. So here we are...now this is not to say that it is not a really good text, it is! It offers us great insight into the early church and a quality that they tried and sometimes managed to live up too, that of generosity, compassion, and of a sharing economy.

Yet, I think, we also tend to focus on the wrong set of words. The memory phrase that stands out each time we read and discuss this text is that they shared all things in common, but much like we do with many other verses. Like John 3:16 for instance, we forget to keep reading (at least with the same degree of focus).

The next few verses of our text this morning draw something into the clear that we often miss about this early church's sharing. That sharing itself wasn't the goal!

Now that may seem odd to you, and counter to the idea that you've often heard lifted up about this text. But it's not, it's not enough to share what you have with others, this text encourages us to share until there are no needs among us.

This text intrinsically links sharing with need, not selling with giving.

Their focus, as ours should be, is not one of strict generosity or giving, it isn't about giving only of what you have, but it is about giving to those that have need. This is about correcting inequality and being a part of a divine economy that allows all to thrive.

This speaks to how we as Christians need to know and listen to the need. It doesn't take long to scroll through your social media feed, turn on the tv, or even open one of those old fangled newspapers, to see that need still exists in our community. Stagnant wages, while basic needs like housing, health care and education continue to rise, voters rights are being suppressed, our failing infrastructure, things like did you know that nearly 12 percent of US households face unaffordable water bills?

There is a tremendous amount of need that exists around us today, and we as the church can do even more to meet it.

Too often in today's world's view, when the believers began to sell their belongings and share with one another, they were becoming a bunch of wackos. Visions of hippie communes come to mind. But that was not exactly what was happening. This is not an endorsement of a governmental style, it's those believers were seeing the divine spark of Jesus in one another and then wanted to serve the other.

This text is not an endorsement of a governmental style, it's those believers were seeing the divine spark of Jesus in one another and then wanted to serve the other. Sharing all they had in common is not communism.

The key here is...what they had; they shared, so that all needs would be met.

They acknowledged that each and every thing they owned was not theirs, but belonged to God. God had entrusted it to their care. So instead of governmental socialism or some form of possession-based uniformity, controlled by a central body or the government, they practiced stewardship, led by their devotion to and love for Jesus they took action and they met needs.

The focus of this text is not on selling things; it's on sacrificial love for the other. Giving of what you have been given to ensure that all have what they need. It's not selling your house so that you too can be homeless, but working towards a world where there is no longer an imbalance between people who have 2, 3, even 10 houses to one where all have a safe, affordable, individual shelter to call home.

As it says in Acts, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." (4:34-35)

This is a voluntary, loving, and selfless act by those followers of Jesus to ensure that each had, as they needed. This is not necessarily some Christian communism or socialist system. It has a much higher purpose than a human system of government. Just a few verses later in Acts this point is spoken by Peter and the other Apostles when they are arguing with the temple priests claiming that "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

We need to be reminded each and every day that what we have is in fact not our own, but all belongs to God. So it should remind us, as I remind my 3-year-old son Ian, that sharing follows the Daniel-tiger song is "They take a turn, then you get it back."

The basic idea is this; the manifest love of the early beloved Resurrection community meant it was never impoverished. There is abundance to care for one another, but only if they ask for what they need and offer what they have. This is what gave the early gospel community their authority to preach. It is the works that help the world see that our faith is real.

They took the time to build relationship to listen to the poor and impoverished among them and then to respond to their need not by rejecting their story or invalidating their humanity but by giving sacrificially until those needs were met.

What greater witness to the gospel than that! How that news must have spread in the early years, there was a group of people out there who called themselves the beloved community of God who actually practiced loving relationships above all things, including their individual resources!

Is that the reputations of the church community today?

There is another biblical example of this concept that I was thinking about that reflects this ideal. I've been writing and talking about biblical texts that we'll be using in this summer's Vacation Bible School. Our theme is *More than a House*, and it's based off an idea from the letter to the Hebrews that says, "for every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God." And I was considering what texts in the Hebrews scriptures themselves lends power and emphasis to this great saying.

That's when I was reminded about the building of the Tabernacle among the people of Israel who were wandering in the wilderness for those long 40 years.

In the book of Exodus we find the story of the building of the Tabernacle of God, which is where God resided among the people, in the Tabernacle, which was a large traveling tent. This was God's dwelling place among God's people and in the text we are given the very specific direction on how it was built and what it looked like, exactly after the pattern that God showed them.

We are even told how the Israelites got the materials to build it, Scripture tells us all whose hearts were moved, made an offering, bringing brooches, earrings, rings, pendants – gold objects of all kinds. God designed the Tabernacle but the people built it and paid for it from the fiancés God provided them.

In fact there is a point in the story, where Moses has to turn away the generosity of the people because there were too many resources to manage in the building of the tabernacle.

When love, and recognition of how God wishes to dwell among God's people meet blessing abounds!

Generosity begets generosity.

This is especially so when generosity is rooted in the rich soil of relatedness. If we have an open and spirit-filled attitude, always seeking points of relatedness with people, your sense of compassion and generosity grows.

This is the lesson of Acts chapter 2, not that believers need to sell all they have so that they might establish some specific form of community or governance, but that we have the opportunity to form genuine relationships stirring our desire in others, and so experiencing people through generous time, generous concern, and in many ways generous gifts.

The great teacher Henri Nouwen has a book on the spirituality of fundraising in which he begins recalling the a vision of fundraising that he started his career in

ministry with, that fundraising was a 'necessary but unpleasant activity to support spiritual things.'

Yet, as he grew in his own faith and his experience of Christian leadership, he saw and began to teach that the goal of a Christian community (of our church community) has to go beyond the idea of stewardship being just an unpleasant activity. Because stewardship is first and foremost a form of ministry, stewardship overflows as a part of the work that we are called to be a part of doing.

He's famous in pastor circles for saying 'fundraising is as spiritual as giving a sermon, entering a time of prayer, visiting the sick, or feeding the hungry!'

Stewardship is about proclaiming what we believe in such a way that we offer other people an opportunity to participate with us in our vision and mission. Stewardship is not a response to a crisis. It is an outpouring of love.

As much as it sometimes does not feel like it, stewardship is not about someone standing up before you begging for financial contributions. Rather, we are declaring that we believe in something, in something very tangible and concrete; something as concrete as that tent in the wilderness all those years ago; something as concrete as that first fledgling community of followers of Christ who sold things to meet the needs in their community; something as concrete as paying for health insurance for staff members, or keeping lights on in the nursery, or heating the sanctuary so the organ pipes don't warp, or the \$8,000 this church contributes to disaster relief every year or paying for youth sponsors on trips so that those giving of their vacation time don't also have to pay to volunteer.

Stewardship isn't really about the large number at the end of the budget sheet. It is about the ministry that happens with and around every dollar invested in this cause. It is about the leadership of this place that carefully and respectfully crafts a budget, it's about the fact that individuals can tell you exactly where the budget goes not in terms of your return on investment or some other economic strategy, but in terms of lives lived and how the gospel is shared.

We can and will do more to make sure that needs are met, through dollars, or even blood sweat and tears when necessary. We are committed to our collective mission to serve a living God, disclosed in Christ, in an ever-changing society. And we can do that even more if we try our best to live up our first century brothers and sisters who sold what they had to meet the needs among them. We can do more to meet the needs of our society, of our members and neighbors.

This is a time and place where the message of the gospel community must be proclaimed loudly and clearly for all to hear. We must be ready to stand and say that hatred in all its forms has no place here, in this beloved community.

We must not back down, to not as actively as we know how to build together with God this beloved community. The community of paradise from Genesis chapter 1, the community of resistance of the prophets, the cohort of the twelve apostles, the faithfulness of the early church martyrs, the beloved community described in Acts chapter 2.

We must join with movements that are seeking to fight against policies and ideas that keep people in poverty, injustices that penalize people for where they come from or the color of their skin. We must seek to restore God's beautiful creation, and tend to its needs. We must seek peace, not through war tactics or bombs, but the end of war and violence.

We must continue to be challenged by these ancient stories to not just wish them away or to let them lay fallow in their black and white on the page, but to embellish them with our own tales. To fill them with our own stories of generosity, to make them concrete in our own time and place.

To rise to the challenges that surrounds this community. To make sure that low and middle income families have high quality food through food assistance programs, to make sure that kids have school supplies, that those experience homelessness in our town have a bottle of water and a few supplies and all the while also advocating through legislatures and proper channels to provide safe affordable housing for them. To raise up little-Christ's to move through the world living the unbridle love of Jesus.

You are invited into this spiritual communion that will manifest it concretely through relationship, our common yearning, our vision of a peaceable kingdom, the biblical vision shared to us from the Prophet Isaiah who said *"If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom by like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, who waters never fail. Your ancient ruin shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in. (Isaiah 58)*

Let us join into that legacy of the beloved community from Acts and let us work to make sure that there is not a needy person among us, let us be repairers of the breach.