

God invites us to be plotting goodness everywhere.

We cannot read very far into the letters of Paul and his co-conspirators without learning about their concern about the internal life of the Christian groups in each city that he was corresponding. In fact, it was their lives together that prompted the writing of pretty much every letter we have.

And their internal and external relationships are what we are going to turn our attention to today. In the midst of our celebration on stewardship, what more appropriate place to look than at biblical examples of being compassionate community together.

In the early years of the Christian community, we have many stories resulting from the community, we have letters, we have guidebooks like the didache (which was sort of a Christian treatise), and we have the account of the book of Acts which tells of the early church, mostly following the Apostle Paul through some of his missionary journeys. And yet, we don't have a lot about the actual on the ground stuff about local congregations and how they gathered.

In our quest to understand them more one of the most helpful things is to compare these communities with those models that existed in the culture around them.

The first, being the **Household**. This was often the meeting place in Pauline groups, and probably most early Christian communities. Now in our modern era households consists of a Mom, Dad, and 2.5 children, as well as possibly a dog or cat. But the Roman household was much broader including not only immediate relatives like grandparents, but also slaves, freed people, hired workers, and sometimes tenants or partners in trade or craft.

Unlike the early Christian communities, household didn't always express the same faith, and didn't often share relationships with those outside their tribe.

The second model, was one of **voluntary association**. This is perhaps easier for us to imagine, as the early Roman Empire witnessed a luxuriant growth of clubs, guilds, and associations of all sorts. In the second century, Roman officials were recorded referring to the church as one of these groups, especially because at that time they were meeting in secret and were seen as uncontrolled gatherings. These groups functioned much more similar to our own congregation in that membership or association was established by the free decision to do so, rather than by birth, rank, or office. These might have been similar to trade unions, or were like social clubs aka the local hotspot.

There were also important differences between Christian groups and typical roman voluntary associations. First of all, the Christian affiliation was expected to supersede other groups or clubs. Often Roman citizens were members of several associations. These Christian groups were also more inclusive in terms of social

stratification and other social categories. While there were others that crossed social boundaries, rarely, was there evidence of equality in roles among those categories. You might have seen philosophical clubs, that did consist of people across socio-economics, and yet they might be exclusively male. Or there were mixed gendered cults where women played significant roles, and yet they welcomed only the rich. Most associations, included communal eating and drinking as a fairly constant feature of life. In fact, many of Greco-Roman associations were notorious for their drunken excesses.

Additionally, scholars have compared early Christian communities to the **Synagogue** model. Because Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism, the urban Christian groups obviously had the diaspora synagogue as the nearest and most natural model. They functioned with much of the same structure and purpose, and in fact, unlike the associations or the household model contained the sense of belonging to a larger entity: Israel, concretely represented by the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, the comparisons continue in that the Pauline Christian communities featured scripture reading and interpretation, prayers and common meals. We might assume that this was the primary model followed, if not for the little direct evidence in any Pauline letters to any specifics of that of a synagogue.

There was a fourth model from antiquity with which early Christian communities, and particularly Pauline ones, have been compared: **the school**. The comparison was made already by the second century, when Justin Martyr presented Christianity as 'the true philosophy.' But rather than participants in the early church communities being treated as students of Paul, more often they are referred to as fellow workers or leaders. It is certain that Paul and others did carry on teaching activities, and converts were instructed in the beliefs and norms of the new movement, and yet, there did not seem to be the rigidity of thought associated with Greco-Roman schools.

None of these four models captures the whole of the Pauline *ekklesia*, or early Christian community, the element that all lacked was **compassion**.

The early church's, perhaps strongest quality, was not its social structure, or its meeting place, or its leadership factors, or allocation of power, or the differentiation of roles, or the management of conflict. All these topics were dwarfed by its compassion.

This is one reason why I believe Paul is so obsessed with the offering for the church in Jerusalem that he talks about in our passage this morning, and why his focus of it in each instance doesn't seem to be about a specific need or even its usage, but more specifically about those giving to be a part of it.

Here in Romans Paul is addressing a community of Christ that he has never been too (yet plans to visit) and he tells them about giving as a foundational identity of the Christian communities in both Macedonia and Achaia, mentioning that they were

“pleased” to do this, to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.

In fact, Paul seems to be more interested in this redistribution of wealth within the global body of the church than with many other topics in his letters. In nearly ½ his letters, Paul talks about the redistribution of wealth across the global church.

This offering starts in Acts chapter 11, where a prophet named Agabus stood up and foretold of a famine, and in response to the famine, the disciples determined, everyone according to their ability, to send relief to the brothers and sisters by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Sometime between Acts 12 and 15, Paul met with Peter, James and John (leaders of the Jerusalem church) to talk about Paul’s future ministry to the Gentiles. At the end of the day, the one thing these leaders told Paul was “remember the poor” which by his accounts in his letters he was more than eager to do.

We know this because he tells us that the church at Corinth too was eager to participate (1 Cor. 16:1-4), as were the churches through Galatia (1 Cor 16:1), Philippi (2 Cor. 8-9), and probably Cenchrea, Berea, Derbe, and Thessalonica.

This was so important that Paul spends an entire two chapters talking about it in his second letter to the house churches in Corinth. According to New Testament scholar Moy Hubbard, “It is true that Paul’s primary mission was to spread the message of the death and resurrection of the Messiah. It is equally true, however, that along with being a missionary and a theologian, Paul was a relief worker trying to make a difference in one corner of a poverty-stricken world, Jerusalem (Christianity in the Greco-Roman World, 157).”

So what do we do with this? I believe this Paul claiming something about true Christian communities that doesn’t exist in other contexts, and while it is something that the large “C” Church often fails to live up to, is in fact critical to the DNA of Christian community.

Our foundational identifier should be that of compassionate giving. We as the church must be a place where we giving matters. Not just in the sense that we need your resources here, or that congregations should be storing up their wealth, but ones that use it. It isn’t about accumulating resources so that we can serve ourselves better, but so that we can be the church and work to transform our wider community and the world.

It like Terry and I shared at children’s moment, about the need to give and share prayer shawls for those in our community who are often separated from our gatherings. That is us making tangible our compassion that we can carry to those who need it. And as being one privileged with the task of delivering them, I can tell

you something as straightforward as knitted yarn, can bring infinite warmth to one who is fearful or full of worry.

You've also heard this morning from Colleen, and the stewardship committee, which wanted you to know how we care for one another, through the generous and compassionate acts of Carelink. You've heard about people visiting those who are homebound and shut in nursing facilities; you've heard about cards being sent to those whom deserve recognition or are ill or recovering; you've heard of those who dutifully transform our sanctuary flowers into arrangements that brighten others days; and you've heard about how we lend a helping hand to change a light bulb or clean out a gutter for those who can't do it for themselves. And how we seek, with your help, to do even more in sharing our compassion.

And those are just a few of the ways we at Broadway seek to be the compassionate community.

Another that you've probably heard about is that we as a congregation tithe, or set aside 10% of our budget to serve as a tangible financial support of Mission and Outreach. This is true, and as Terry said last week is something that we can and should be proud of. If you support this congregation financially in any way, then you sponsor church coaches leading local churches in El Salvador to give away eco-stoves and tilapia ponds. You help support numerous compassionate needs to the most vulnerable through organizations like Voluntary Action Center and Columbia Older Adult Ministry. You provide for vital community supports like Refugee Resettlement, Meals on Wheels, and True North. You reach well beyond our borders through Disciples Mission Fund, and Mobility Worldwide. And as we collectively strive to increase our congregational giving, that total will continue to grow.

And yet still, today, I stand before you, to boast to you about another of our resources that we are pleased to give away.

This morning we will recognize and celebrate 11 high school seniors. Former children whom you, church, have helped raise up, and are preparing to send out to do accomplish good and worthy things.

I am so incredible proud of each of you, in this senior class, who are here despite it being Prom last night, and I can personally attest to the wonder that you will bring both here in Columbia Missouri to far off schools like Virginia Tech. It's hard to believe you were only 6th graders when I arrived to Columbia, yet that means I can attest to the wonderful young people you have flourished into.

You are special young women and men, who have wrestled with your faith, who have given of time and money to work towards the redistributions of wealth in places from New Orleans to Denver through Mission trips; who have served in this community as liturgists, and sound board technicians, and Sunday School teachers,

and musicians...there are just too many to list. Thank you for your service here, we are better from your leadership.

If this stewardship season is all about growing through giving, then you are our seedlings, each and every one of you. Seedlings of this community called Broadway Christian, seedlings of these households of faith, seedlings who have been equipped to teach of God's love, seedlings who know to and how to include the marginalized, seedlings who can organize groups to bring about common good in our world.

You see friends, every dollar that we invest in Children's ministry, in staffing, in youth ministry, in physical spaces like the Loft or the CLC are dollars that we are seeding into good earth.

You, seniors, are a huge part of our Jerusalem offering. You are those we are sending forth to redistribute the wealth, to share from our bountiful harvest, to send you off to other Christian communities and beyond.

At the heart of it all, the Christian community, the compassionate community, is made up of individuals who belong to Christ, who elevate financial generosity, not so that we can boast about our blessings, but so that we can meet the needs, that we can raise up more seedlings to send out, so that we can offer compassion to all, and that we can redistribute wealth across the globe.

Now I don't know about you, but to me that sounds an awful lot like the early church. Thanks be to God.