

Easter 4A (5/7/17)

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

Is church a life together, or a pastime? If the latter, then Christian community is mostly indistinguishable from any other voluntary association. If the former, then faith binds us together in an enduring way. If church is a life together, then we truly "have all things in common," bearing each other's burdens. And in the end, we'll discover that this common life in Christ is more abundant than the self-seeking life we have known.

Christians affirm that **Holy Scripture is not only a narrative or historical account of another time and place, but also a living word proclaimed directly into our context.** In a moment, I'll invite you to hear again our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, a famous depiction of the earliest Christ-following community in Jerusalem. Although we often engage a text like this with our heads, listening primarily for comprehension, this time I encourage you to listen with your heart. This time, receive the passage as a gift, a life-giving word that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us today:

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 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.

This portrayal of the early church naturally leads us to reflect on the character of Christian community in general. We might lament that church today seems a far cry from the portrait we see in Acts. After all, are we regularly struck by “wonders and signs”? How well do we hold “all things in common,” truly providing for anyone in need out of our shared abundance? How much time do we really spend together in church, and how often do we invite each other into our homes to “eat our food with glad and generous hearts”? Do we really “have the goodwill of all the people,” or do we mostly attend to our own interests?

Although we might be discouraged by the disparity we see, we need not dismiss the description of the early church in Acts as an impossible ideal. Instead, we might approach this passage as “a vision of what could be,”¹ as one interpreter puts it, that is, a gift of inspiration. Maybe the Holy Spirit is giving us a fresh opportunity to think about our identity and purpose, to remind ourselves why we’re here in the first place.

Is church a life together, as depicted in the second chapter of Acts, or is it simply a pastime?

If church is a pastime, an aspect of culture, then Christian community is nothing more than a club, or a gathering of individuals and families loosely

¹ Timothy B. Hare, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 427.

connected by affinity and a few shared practices. If church is a pastime, then we are mostly indistinguishable from any other voluntary association.

If, on the other hand, church is a life together, then faith binds us to one another in an enduring way. If church is a life together, then we “have all things in common,” supporting the most vulnerable among us through the practice of radical generosity. Teaching and learning, food, fellowship, and prayer hold us together as a single body, unimpeded by racial or cultural or socioeconomic barriers. And our commonality in Christ is finally a source of genuine gladness.

This arrangement is not easy. **A shared life means that every member of the body is subject to both the celebration and suffering, both the joy and pain of the other members.** Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls this “The Ministry of Bearing”:

[Excerpts from *Life Together*, pp.100-1]

Membership in the body of Christ is a burden. **When it’s genuine, the church is an assembly of friends and visitors who share not only their material abundance, their company, their food, and their prayers, but also their collective suffering.** When it’s genuine, the church doesn’t shy away from a sick member, but dwells with her in sickness. When it’s genuine, the church doesn’t avoid a broken relationship, but reaches out to hold the pieces gently in its hands. When it’s genuine, the church doesn’t keep silent

about injustice, but laments vocally alongside its victims and boldly demands a different world.

Membership in the body of Christ is a burden. But ultimately, it's a joyful one. **When followers of Christ have all things in common – when we bear the burdens of others – we can trust that others will also bear ours. Life together, in other words, is the assurance of mutual love by the lead of Christ.** “I came that they may have life,” he pledges in our Gospel from John today, “and have it abundantly.” Dear church, the world insists that we go it alone. But Jesus gathers us like a flock of sheep, uniting us in one beloved community even in spite of ourselves, yet for our sake. When we “accept and affirm [the created reality of the other],” to repeat Bonhoeffer’s words, “bearing with it, [we] break through to the point where we take joy in it.”² And finally, we discover that this **common life in Christ is more abundant than the self-seeking life we have known.**

² *Life Together*, 101.