

PRACTICE RESURRECTION

Acts 4:32-37

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For the next several weeks, we will be preaching often from the book of Acts, a book which gives us glimpses into what life in the early church was like. Scholars believe that originally Luke and Acts were all one book - part one was the gospel of Luke, and part two was the Acts of the Apostles, with the same author. I don't know the history of why they were eventually separated but I wish that hadn't happened. If we read Luke and Acts as one, we would be reminded that there is just one Christian story - the story that began when Jesus was physically present on earth, and the story that continues after Easter.

In my own mind, I separate the two. I think about the time of Jesus - shared in the gospel stories, and I think about the time of the early church - shared in Acts and the letters of Paul. The continuity is important to remember, because everything that Jesus did in his lifetime AND what happened to Jesus during Holy Week influence the world of the early church enormously.

It's especially confusing, I realize, to jump into life in the early church the very week after Easter, so let's consider a rough timeline, looking at the stories between the Easter story and this one. Luke gives us the beautiful story of Jesus appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus - and them recognizing him as they break bread together. And the story of Jesus ascending into heaven. As the book of Acts begins, the disciples choose a twelfth disciple to replace Judas, but they still seem somewhat confused about their direction. And then, 50 days after Easter, the story of Pentecost,

the day we call the birthday of the church. On Pentecost, God's spirit visits the group of believers. That spirit energizes them, and the church begins to grow, quickly.

Our passage for today comes in the fourth chapter of Acts. The church is still young and new and growing. But it already has a firm identity and a sense of purpose.

"The community of believers was one in heart and mind," Acts reports to us. This is a group that is unified. Here's the same phrase in another version: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul...". That is a beautiful description of the church...I'm guessing a church that we would all want to be a part of. A church that feels like a true community. Even though we know a church will never be perfect, we want to be in a community that is mostly harmonious.

This description of an ideal church is attractive, to be sure, but it doesn't surprise us much. It's idealistic, but it's not shocking. The surprise factor comes in the second half of the sentence. The verse goes on to say: "...and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." No private ownership? Now **that** is something altogether different. How many of us would take vows of church membership if this verse were part of our church constitution?

Luke/Acts presents the earliest church as a model of Christian unity. When tensions do arise later, the community works through them without dividing. The church as presented in Acts is not a cluster of competing groups, but one community of believers sharing a common faith and mission. Everything they owned was held in common. Their unity was not only religious, but economic. This ideal of sharing property was widely admired in the Greek world of this time, and was occasionally put into practice by certain groups. Luke/Acts wants to show that the teaching of Jesus was

not merely an ideal but was concretely practiced, at least by some people in some sectors of the church.

Think of how many of those in the early church would have been in Jesus' physical presence, how many of them had heard him speak and preach. Do you imagine that they had repeated his teachings among themselves? Saying to each other - Remember? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." They had heard Jesus and now they were living out his words. Here's Acts again: "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."

The story of Jesus - from the lessons he taught to the story of the Resurrection itself - proved to be transformational to the early church. It impacted every decision they made. The most dramatic sign of resurrection power was a community where "there was not a needy person among them." Together, they created a church with unity of purpose, mission and values...How much of the creation of that kind of community is a result of human effort, hard work, time spent in difficult conversations...and how much of it is a gift of God's grace? Or does it all work together, so that grace gives us the ability to do the work together?

Here's what inspires me even more about our ancestors in the faith. Not only had they been in Jesus' presence, but many of them had also witnessed the crucifixion.

They knew how risky it was to practice the faith of Jesus. They themselves were persecuted, but they were not deterred. In fact, the church grew by leaps and bounds.

The week before Easter, the Gallup organization released new research showing Americans' membership in houses of worship fell below 50 percent for the first time in the 80 years Gallup has been keeping track.

According to Gallup's data, in 2020, only "47% of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999," continuing a steady decline that started near the turn of the 21st century.

Gallup identifies several different sources of this decline, most notably an increase in the percentage of Americans who do not identify with a specific organized religion. But the change is also a result of more Americans who *do* identify with a religion saying they do not belong to a particular house of worship. Much of the change is generational — 66 percent of U.S. adults born before 1946 belong to a house of worship versus only 36 percent of millennials — yet the last 20 years have also seen a doubling in the percentage of older generations (silent generation, baby boomers, and Generation X) with no religious affiliation.

What is turning Christian people off? They see churches that are judgmental, exclusive, and focused on keeping people out, rather than churches with an outward focused mission that embody the radically inclusive love we see in Jesus.

Some of them want to see a church more like the one described in Acts: a community that shows commitment to one another and to the world. **A church that is practicing resurrection.**

A colleague of mine lived in an urban Christian community during her first year out of seminary. This community had been ministering to the homeless for over 20 years. There was a person who lived next door to this community, who was often enraged by the homeless men. For years he waged war against his neighbors, frequently calling the police, fire inspectors, the health department, and trying every bureaucratic means he could think of to shut the ministry down or push it out. But the community endured these assaults, and eventually there was a cease-fire. The man became quiet. Relations were still tense until one day when a letter arrived from this man. It contained a large check and a message of deep regret. The neighbor asked for the community's forgiveness for his past behavior, and closed with the words, "Peace be with you."

My colleague still reflects on this experience, saying to me, "There was no explanation given for this dramatic change, but I can't help thinking it was the cumulative effect of so many years spent in close proximity to one of God's outposts of peace. In his once-despised neighbors, this man came to see that the promise of reconciliation and a new beginning was not a dream. It was, instead, right next door."*

What if the church lived out the command to love our neighbors in such a humble and authentic way that our own spiritual practice quietly and slowly drew others **towards** the church, rather than causing them to run the other way?

The early church grew because people were attracted to the way Christian men and women treated each other and the way they reacted to those around them. The last paragraph of our passage for today gives us an example of the kind of response that was generated by their resurrection practice: "Joseph, whom the apostles

nicknamed Barnabas, was a Levite from Cyprus.³⁷ He owned a field, sold it, brought the money, and placed it in the care and under the authority of the apostles.” So here’s Barnabas, an outsider, who sees the Christian community, hears about the Christian community - maybe he even picked up the scent of love from the Christian community. It so inspired him that he sold property he owned, and brought the proceeds to the church saying, “Here. Share this. And I want to be a part of you.” Barnabas goes on to become an influential leader in the early church.

Church historians will tell us that not all of the early Christians practiced this kind of radical generosity. We know, in fact, that some of the early Christians did own private property - and used their private homes as meeting places for worship.

What we also know is that those who practiced generosity experienced a joy that is unmatched. It’s a joy I’ve seen in this church many times, especially this past year. Whether it’s a person who sends in a gift of \$25 or the person who donates an entire stimulus check, when we give from the heart to a cause we believe in WITH all of our hearts, the feeling cannot be measured.

I have been carrying this book around for decades. In fact, this week, in my briefcase, the cover fell off for the first time. [With Open Hands](#) is a book about prayer written by Henri Nouwen, who was a seminary professor, a priest, and a remarkable Christian person. He says that the best metaphor for the healthy and fulfilling spiritual life is living with open hands. When we live with open hands, we receive gifts and pass them along. We are free to take the hand of a friend or stranger when our hands are open. With open hands we can be led by God.

The contrast to the open hand is the clenched fist. When our fists are clenched, we are hanging on to everything we have for dear life, afraid to let go, afraid we'll lose something we possess, just afraid in general. He writes this, "When you dare to let go and surrender one of your many fears, your hand relaxes and your palms will spread out in a gesture of receiving. You open your hands and learn to trust, to be less afraid, to be more generous, and to pray. And you begin to suspect that to pray is to live."

Today we read of our ancestors in the church who took great leaps of faith as they cared for one another and the neighborhood around them. They were motivated by the joy of the resurrection, they were strengthened by grace. Thanks be to God for their inspiring example. Let us pray.

God of grace, inspire us to practice resurrection by caring for one another with generosity and compassion. In the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

*Story written by Kristen Barger Grant and printed in the Christian Century, April 19, 2003.