

On the Sunday after Easter, called a Low Sunday in the liturgical year, and marked by generally low attendance as well, the lectionary always includes the Easter evening story of Thomas. The other texts differ over the three year cycle, but readings in the Acts of the Apostles are always included.

The period between Easter and Pentecost, known as Eastertide, could well be considered a waiting time, as Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they “have been furnished with heavenly power.” As such, we could expect readings about what it means to wait, to be patient. Yet, the texts in Acts actually follow Pentecost, when the Spirit has descended, the waiting is over and the acts, the actions, the doings of early believers are underway with such fervor they are accused of turning the world upside down.

Today’s lesson in Acts 4 echoes a passage in Acts 2 in which Luke, the writer of Acts, indicates those in the early church shared all things in common, and no one said anything was their own. Let’s hear how the resurrection and the Holy Spirit transformed the early believers. Acts 4:32-37:

³²*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.* ³³*With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.* ³⁴*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.* ³⁵*They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.* ³⁶*There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”).* ³⁷*He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.*

I confess when there are games like Monopoly sponsored by a grocery chain, I can become sucked in. I open up and paste on those little game strips onto the playing board such that now I am just two pieces away from winning a million dollars, and another two from winning a half million dollar vacation home. Now I expect those are the same two pieces others are waiting to receive as well, or are they? Perhaps I already have one of what are called the “rare” pieces and I am just missing an ordinary one. Well, in another proof that one can find most anything online, two people actually posted the pieces they are missing, and they match the ones for which I am waiting. Now, if I thought there was any chance I might be the recipient of one of those “rare” pieces, and thus a grand prize winner, I might have opted to focus on doubting Thomas this morning, rather than the challenge of a text that would call for me to share that million dollars with the whole community.

I have no way of knowing, but I am expecting more than a few of you have, at some point in your lives, contemplated what are often termed utopian ways of sharing all things in common. Perhaps some of you were even involved in some type of communal living where if not all, a part of your possessions were contributed to the larger pool. Admittedly, such experiences often occur in college or just after when one does not have a multitude of possessions to add to the whole.

More of us have probably used the phrase, “In an ideal world...” and followed that with there would be no need for locks on doors, or armies or police. In an ideal world, one could go to a store at any hour, pick up what you need and leave the money, on an honor system much like roadside farm stands continue to do.

It is clear such ideals of sharing and community involve trust. Trust is rare these days, even in the life of the church, where more and more people want to designate their giving rather than give to the whole. When I titled this sermon, “There are limits,” I originally thought of this in terms of the limits of our sharing, but now also believe it involves the limits of our trust with and for one another, in church and government and society. Indeed, I am concerned there is a culture of distrust so prevalent it becomes a too easy, go-to phrase of barber shop and coffee shop. “I don’t trust...” (fill in you own blank). Without condoning blind trust, I would simply suggest we may be seeding a harvest of distrust when we allow the phrase to too easily slip out of our mouths to fit in with the culture of distrust. As a church, we have a better message.

I thought about what it would mean for a 21st century congregation to take our Acts text seriously. I thought about what might happen if we advertised ourselves as the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury, the church where *no one claims private ownership of any possessions, but everything we own is held in common*. I believe that would catch people’s attention, and I believe it would increase our membership, particularly attracting poor people. And I believe I can read your minds as to your reactions, but let’s hold those thoughts for a moment.

The way this would work would be that at the April 20 Session meeting, the elders would authorize a letter be sent to all members of the congregation. In it, would be the announcement that on Pentecost Sunday, May 24, all those who want to remain members of the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury are to bring to church their checkbooks and passbooks, their certificates and stock portfolios, the deeds to their houses and the titles to their cars. The offering that morning would be a grand ceremony during which we would all sign everything we own over to the church – everything, just like Luke writes it happened in the first century church. ³⁴*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.* ³⁵*They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*

Now, I expect some would suggest that in this church we stay aware of any member needs and have ways of addressing them. So, there is no need to be so radical as to pool our assets and possessions. Yet, we also realize our community reach is limited.

During Holy Week, we considered Jesus’ “the poor will always be with you” statement. In a dialogue, it was suggested Jesus was saying the poor will always live among you as a community. As I have continued to ponder this, I have thought it is a call to expand the scope and boundary of what we define as our community. What would it be like if the poor were not simply the object of our mission, but considered members of our church?

I will be the first to admit this is a difficult text. While I have had my days of idyllic dreaming of everyone living and sharing together in harmony, I find myself setting limits. I don't know that it is so much a matter that we believe we have "earned" what we have, but more the idea of we should have the freedom to decide what we do with what we have. I am also pretty sure this is based on cultural values, not biblical principles.

What if we took seriously the radical "as each had need" discipline. Looking for a place to live? How much room do you really need, particularly if you have no children? Submit your needs to the church, where the final decision will be made as to your need, and whether you might need to downsize.

Purchasing a car? Attending a concert or a ballgame? Going out to dinner? Buying a new pair of shoes, television or electronic device? What do you really need? Do you trust the church elders to set the amount you should pay for an automobile, a meal, a ticket, running shoes, or a computer?

Planning a vacation? Simply submit your travel itinerary, including any flight, hotel, tour, or cruise plans to the whole church for review and approval of your need to travel.

My guess is we would not be very comfortable with such a discipline of accountability, and I am among the least willing to submit my desires to needs testing, or perhaps more accurately, "wants" testing, particularly if I happen to receive that winning million dollar Monopoly piece. On the other hand, I am more than willing to share the one prize I have won in the game: a 32 oz. bottle of grape Powerade!

The witness of the early Christian community challenged all believers to live within their needs, not their wants. [repeat] By contrast, we seem to live with the mantra: "Live within your means." This means, if you have a want and have the means, all power to you – spend what you want! To have to submit our desires and be accountable to the community of faith would be meddling, because it is reaching beyond the 10% tithe we give to the work of the church, and messing with the 90% we consider to be our own.

If the Session sent such a letter and made such a proposal, it is likely those who stayed would call the church's Nominating Committee, not wait to be called, to volunteer to serve on Session because elders make the decisions as to how everything would be *distributed to each as any had need*.

Yet, I suspect the common refrain would be, "this is not going to work, it can't work, there will never be enough." And I would agree, not because there would not be enough, but because the plan is backwards. What we would discover is that we had been trying to devise a system of sharing. That is not what happened in the early church. Luke is quite clear to place the commitment to this discipline of sharing within the resurrection story and the bestowing of the Holy Spirit.

³²*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul...* This was a Greek phrase, traceable to Aristotle, that encompassed the ethic of "prizing what is best for all over what is merely self-satisfying." (Feasting On the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008, p. 385.) Out of this belief and ethic emerged the plan whereby the believers held all things in common.

The resurrection brought a powerful sense of unity and hope and care to the early church. As Will Willimon writes: “The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.” (Willimon, William, Acts, John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1988, p. 51)

I would encourage us not to dismiss this early witness of the church as unrealistic, and instead, hear it as a challenge to how much we have allowed the power of the resurrection to affect us. I would encourage us to recognize that when we say there are limits to how much we are willing to share or trust, they are our self-imposed limits, not God’s limits.

For the early church, the sharing of everything in common was a resurrection response. Yet, there was also a centering goal. As a community, they had decided this: there should not be a needy person among us. [repeat] Today we would call that a mission statement. While we often begin by thinking of how things won’t work, or what rules we need to put in place to protect ourselves from being taken advantage of, the early church began by saying it is not acceptable for any to be in need, and they put all their possessions on the line to ensure all needs were met.