

“Called By Name to Share All the Loot”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Psalm 23; Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

Richard E. Otty  
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final sermon at PCIS

Acts 2:42-47

<sup>42</sup>*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* <sup>43</sup>*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.* <sup>44</sup>*All who believed were together and had all things in common;* <sup>45</sup>*they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

<sup>46</sup>*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,* <sup>47</sup>*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.*

How nice. The believers in the early church gathered in homes and at the temple. They studied together, and ate together and prayed together – sounds a bit like what I have experienced here at PCIS.

Then Luke drops the bombshell: *All the believers were together and shared everything.* All and everything? We run from bombshells. We love the potluck supper and prayer circle, but we draw the line on shared possessions, or at least set the bar at 10%

When I hear some Christians complain the church has lost its way with the Bible's teaching, I do not hear them recite these “all share everything” verses in Acts 2 as their “go to” Scripture; likewise, when I hear other Christians drool over such a radical vision of sharing, I do not see them being the first in the dispossession line.

So, perhaps this is a stalemate lesson and we accept no one is going to bring to the church their prized possessions the way they do for the Antiques Roadshow. Or, perhaps as one calls it, this Acts 2 text is “the early church's '10 minute hippie phase.’ But like a commune grown middle aged, the church has now moved out to the suburbs, started a pension, and begun to worry about the wrong people moving in.” [Jason Byassee in Living the Word section of May 2017 “Sojourners” magazine, p. 44]

The lectionary seems to mute these radical verses in Acts 2, with pastoral verses about caring shepherds and grazing sheep. We will read the beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as part of our communion liturgy. In our reading in John's Gospel, Jesus will speak of himself as being both the shepherd and the gate of the sheepfold. The sheepfold is where the animals are brought for safety at night, with the gate secured behind them.

Yet, before we become too giddy we can avoid the hippie commune, we remember sheep gather in communal flocks, under the direction and authority of a single shepherd. I would suggest our Gospel lesson holds its own radicalism.

John 10:1-10:

*'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.'* <sup>6</sup>*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

*<sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

You may be one of those who told me you would be traveling, and not be in church the next Sunday or perhaps for an extended period, and I asked you, "Did you receive Session permission to make that trip?" It is meant to be a joke about the supposed power of a Session in a Presbyterian Church, but also that any board of the church would have the audacity to oversee, much less need to approve our travel plans.

People in congregations may differ fervently about social issues, politics, or theology, but I have found a strong bond of agreement in the independence we have in choosing how we spend our money and time. We join a community of faith to study, to eat, to worship, to pray, to be in mission. We also join with the expectation and trust others will not meddle with or judge our choices of: the trips we take, the cars we drive, the second homes we own, the hobbies we pursue, the electronics we crave, the renovations we make, the clothes we buy, the furnishings we purchase, the restaurants we frequent; or the concerts or events we attend. Have I left anyone out?

That is to say, we join congregations with the understanding we will be like the early church in which *All who believed were together*. But, at that point we insert a period, for we have no interest or intention to link believing and being together with having *all things in common by selling [our] possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need*.

I believe our culture fosters, and we live with a sense of entitlement. Even if we do not use the word, there is an underlying belief that we deserve what we have, what we desire, what we buy without much thought. We believe we have earned it with our time, energy, imagination, sacrifice, and at times, our exhaustion. We may even thank God for what we have earned or say God has blessed us.

Still, I sense this “all sharing everything” passage lurks at the edge of the church the way Mayhem does in the Allstate insurance commercials. We want to keep it out of the way, in the back seat, but its nagging voice lurks in the background. It is irritating for me to have someone, perhaps even a good friend, who often takes on the voice of conscience, asking such things as, “Do you really need to buy that when children go hungry?” My goodness, I just wanted to enjoy my purchase! Such voices of conscience are a unwanted aggravation to our self-justifications – and they are also needed to keep us honest on our faith journeys. As Andre Gide wrote, “All you are unable to give possesses you.”

This past January, when my exit strategy had been decided, and I knew this would be my final Sunday, I peeked at the text for the day. I thought isn’t that interesting to have a “sell everything and pool it together” lesson for one’s last Sunday. At the time, I jotted some questions and thoughts.

Was Luke, in writing about the practices of the early followers of Jesus pointing to a new economic system, a faith-based means of sharing – total sharing, so all would be guaranteed food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare? Was Luke suggesting the way for Jesus’ followers to be in relationship with one another was to be communal with their property and possessions – that all pooled what they had and all received what they needed and no one was in want and no one had excess? And if that was what Luke was suggesting, is that a church to which we want to belong – or do we have too much to lose?

I looked at the other texts for today – of shepherds and sheep in green pastures and beside still waters. That might be a nice way to go out, a kind of “so long, sheep” farewell. But then I thought, this is my last sermon. The worst that can happen is people will say, “Thank God that is his last sermon!”

I concluded my January notes with this: I have to believe this Acts 2 text is a biblical vision of community set before us. If so, the fact that it does not happen – that PCIS members do not pool all their assets and distribute according to need – does not mean we reject the text. Or at least I hope it does not.

Let’s go visit that sheepfold, with its gate, its gatekeeper, its shepherd. Jesus says, “I am” all three: gate, gatekeeper, shepherd.

Gates are points of access to yards, gardens, animal enclosures. One can scale a fence or wall, but most use the gate to enter and exit the sheepfold.

The gatekeeper and shepherd have different functions. One oversees the sheepfold gate as the sheep enter at night and exit when morning breaks. The shepherd role is that of overseer of the flock in the field. Using the imagery of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, one writer notes that sheep in the fields are always eating in the presence of enemies; thus the need for a shepherd. [Hunt, Alice, Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 435]

In our Christian faith, we believe Jesus is the gate who gains us access to the fields in which we come to know God, and are present with the shepherd. Smart sheep, admittedly an oxymoron, stay close to the shepherd, while dumb sheep go their own way. Either way, the image allows for but one shepherd, which prompts me to offer two bits of advice as you look ahead.

Historically, clergy have been called shepherds of a church, and the congregation, their flock. The title pastor fuels such sentiment. While endearing and seemingly tame, it might be wise not to go the shepherd route with your new pastor – not only Tom, but the permanent pastor who will be called. Considering a pastor to be the shepherd of this flock can belie the understanding there is but one shepherd. Ministers and members are equally sheep in the shepherd's pasture. The shepherd whose voice we know and who knows us by name is not the church's pastor.

This leads to a second piece of advice I would offer you in terms of the role of pastors and preachers, who share sheepdom with you. Quite simply: you are not the customers. The Pastor Nominating Committee is not charged with calling a pastor who comes to meet your needs or satisfy your desires, assuage your theologies or match your politics. Pastors are called to join you in sensing the shepherd's leading in this pasture, to attend to the apostles' teaching and to seek to discern and preach of the shepherd's prods and pulls for this flock of sheep known as PCIS.

The critical question we are to ask one another in the church, is not: "Is this pleasing to me?"; but, "Is this pleasing to God?"

Our Acts 2 lesson took place after Pentecost, after the Holy Spirit had swept into Jerusalem and extended its enthusiasm into the world. In a matter of weeks, the church grew from 120 to 3,000! One might say, if you want to hold onto all you hold dear, keep your distance from the Holy Spirit, and others in the flock who may have been filled by it. Keep yourself isolated. Read the Bible your way, watch the news network that affirms your values, and don't dare believe sheep who differ from you could ever be right.

I think of how many sermons I have preached on our Acts 2 text over the years, or its companion text in Acts 4, that echoes the 100% sharing challenge that *no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.* That was the text for one of my first sermons here in Sudbury in Eastertide of 2015. I think of all that preaching and how not one congregation has responded by sharing all their possessions.

Yet, I have seen movement, if only that we take the Acts 2 sharing challenge seriously and do not simply dismiss it as a utopian dream. A measure of our faithfulness is whether we are moving in that direction – that we risk being so open to the movement of the spirit that our trust of the other sheep in the flock will outweigh our fears.

I find a parallel between prayer and possessions; how we pray and how we share. In this congregation, prayer is taken seriously. You welcome the opportunity to share joys and concerns in worship, and sustain one another in prayer through the week. Yet, even in our prayer we place limits. We generally find it easier to pray for others than to reveal our own needs and struggles and illnesses. I would suggest the limits we have in praying mirror those we place on sharing possessions.

When we share our prayer concerns – for ourselves – we are revealing our need to others;

Revealing our need exposes our weakness;

Exposing our weakness makes us vulnerable;

Becoming vulnerable means someone could take advantage of us;

Being taken advantage of...but wait! In a community of sharing, we will not allow any sheep be taken advantage of.

One could easily parallel those steps substituting possessions for prayer, not only that in sharing everything, we would then need to reveal what we really need, but also that when we reveal our need with others, we will trust we will be cared for and we will not be taken advantage of.

People know we follow the one shepherd by our love for one another and for the stranger. Yet, all churches seek to do that. I think what distinguishes a church is when others see us struggling with pushing the limits of sharing in our prayers, in our meals, and even in our shared possessions. I've not done the math, but I imagine if everyone in the congregation pooled just half of the amount they spend on travel and vacations in a year, I am quite sure that money would build several Habitat houses. *They pooled just a portion of their possessions and gave it to those in need.*

The goal is to move closer and closer in trust, to seek to let go of our beloved independence as sheep for the greater good, to be willing to submit our needs lists to the flock's review. Will it ever happen in terms of pooling all our possessions and property? Probably not, but then did anyone ever think one could rise from the dead?

Fellow sheep, we have had fun together in the pasture, and we have prayed together, and shared meals and mission together over the past two years. Now, while we will be grazing in different pastures, we will remain sheepfolk, with a common shepherd who can, by the Holy Spirit, be in more than one place at the same time, and prodding us each to more radical sharing of the love and peace of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!