

Sermon for Trinity

Easter 2, 2018

"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...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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

Wait a moment! What's going on here? Is this some sly effort from the Bible to sneak in socialism? Or was the Gospel author Luke a socialist even before socialism was invented? Those are good questions. Many scholars, preachers and Christians have thought about them. But before we can answer them, I think we need to consider some other questions first: Why did the disciples share all things in common? Why did they rescue the poor and needy? There are certainly many who call themselves Christians today who would take issue with what the disciples were doing. In order to understand what the early church was up to, I think we have an even more important, fundamental question to answer first: What did Jesus accomplish on the cross?

For the past two or three centuries, the way many Christians have read the story of Easter is that some day in the uncertain future, at a date and time only God knows, God will destroy death. Forever. Death will be no more. That's great to hear but there's a problem embedded in that answer; that explanation puts all of God's work off to the uncertain future. Every hope is a delayed hope. Most of us have been led to believe that someday we will all rise and when we see heaven, then God will set things right. We will live forever. But we have to wait for that time. The operative term becomes, "someday." For now, we're stuck with life as it is. For now, we must muddle along as best we may, nodding here and there to the Beatitudes and the Commandments, but mainly getting by with the best we can do.

There's danger in that thinking. On one hand, we start thinking about this God as if God is Santa Claus—we have to be good if we want the eternal reward, and not a lump of coal. On the other hand, we start thinking of the promised life as so far in the future that for the moment, we can ignore the teaching of Christ. Neither of those views serve us well.

I prefer the way Luke sees the work of God—the work that Christ did on the cross and resurrection starts here, starts today. When Christ returned from the dead, he was saying to us, "Why wait? We start living the Kingdom life now."

That's what we hear going on this morning in the book of Acts. God's not calling us to the Christian life someday, somehow. The first church isn't putting off living the Christian life; instead they're putting to work the teaching of Jesus

right now. Not "maybe," not "if," but now. Plainly, that's what's going on with the disciples this morning. They've remembered the words of Jesus in the Last Supper, they've listened and thought about his teaching. Now they realize that Jesus meant for us to share care, mutual trust and love just as he did at his last meal. That Eucharist was far more than symbolic. The disciples are not making a simple political statement. Instead, they see the death and resurrection as the New Creation; right now, we get the clean slate, the fresh beginning. And this is what we're to do—we're going to pay attention to one another with the same agape love with which Christ treated us. No more, no less.

We could get this wrong, making this new beginning, this teaching complicated. We often do. But that would be a mistake. If we think of God's work as only off in the future, we can raise many objections to the impossibility of the New Creation in this so-called, "real world." I can't begin to tell you how many times in the course of my ministry people have said to me, "Jeff those are high minded ideals you preach, but they won't work in the real world." I'm here to tell you that there's not much that's truly "real" about the real world. The power of death constantly distracts us with the promise of an invented reality that can ignore death. If we just get a new car, or some new clothes or some new friends, we'll make our own reality. But distraction and fantastic promises are not real; the new creation is.

Not too long ago, I read an essay by the novelist Ann Patchett. Patchett was reflecting on how some time earlier, she had decided to bring a delightful new habit into her life. Patchett set out to become a baker. And bake she did; she baked breads, pies, cakes, cookies and rolls. Do you know what happened? Not much. The pies were sloppy, the cakes fell, and the bread was hard. Taken altogether, Patchett assessed the outcomes as somewhere between poor and total failure.

But then Patchett decided to do it all over again. She determined to do it the way her mother had taught her, taking time to pay attention to each detail of her baking. She sifted, weighed, measured and counted and do you know what happened? The very first time she paid full attention, with no distractions, she turned out a perfect cake. Delicious to see, delicious to eat. All she had to do was pay attention.

The first Christians, the disciples gathered in Acts, did just what Patchett did—they paid attention. We know from the Gospels that the disciples were often ignorant of the purpose of Jesus; no matter what Jesus taught, they doubted his wisdom and even his promise. The disciples were, as Jesus told them, distracted by many things. But then came the death and resurrection. Then came the new

beginning. Then came the new covenant. And then came the time to pay attention—God in Christ has promised them a new way of life and that life was now. Today, not in the future, but that life began today, in the moment. The disciples sought to do what Christ had called them to do, to pay attention to one another in love, in agape love. The disciples didn't treat the new life as "pie in the sky," as hopelessly unreal in the face of the world's demands. Instead the disciples got busy, they paid attention to one another and to the world. And as simply as that, through paying attention to agape love, they changed everything about our lives forever.

You can dismiss these lines in your mind, "There was not a needy person among them... [the disciples] laid [their wealth] at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." You can think of the first church as unrealistic. But the simple truth is, these habits worked then and work now. We need only slow down, we need to pay attention and we need to practice resurrection. The whole world can change, starting here, starting today. Amen.

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