

“The Beloved Community”

Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37

Julie R. Harley – January 15, 2012 – First United Church of Oak Park

Our scripture today tells us the early Christians shared all their possessions in common. So today we’re going to have some fun with that. Would everyone in the sanctuary please bring their wallets or purses to the communion table and leave them there during my sermon? I promise I won’t touch them, and you’ll be able to keep your eyes on them the whole time. This is simply an exercise to see how it feels to pool all of our money.

Why is it hard to surrender control of our money?

Money is an idol. Our lives revolve around it – which means it is an object of worship.

We value our independence, and we don’t like the idea that others will make decisions about where our money goes.

Having money gives us security, and the amount of money we have determines a lot about what happens to us in life, so we want as much as possible. If we have enough money, we’re happy to keep it. If we don’t have enough, we’re happy to get more.

Our American credo is: We earned it, we deserve it.

That’s why our two scripture texts today have caused a lot of trouble over the course of history: they address the very sensitive subject of economics in a way that makes us squirm.

The Church has wasted several decades arguing over issues of sexuality, which is essentially a private matter, when we could have been focusing on a more significant public issue, which is economic justice. Theologian Richard Rohr has said, “The Church seems to be more concerned about who people go to bed with, rather than worrying about the fact that some people have no beds to sleep in.” (I’m glad that’s not true here at First United.)

Throughout the centuries, biblical interpreters have said that the early church’s practice of sharing goods in common should not be taken literally. To be truthful, it did not work so well in the Jerusalem church, because some years later the churches of Macedonia were taking up a collection to support the believers in Jerusalem.

For several centuries, the Church believed that only monks could live this way. They took vows of poverty and lived in community, but this was seen as impractical for people who were married or had families and 9 to 5 jobs.

Some small groups experimented with sharing their resources in community, but this often resulted in corruption, and a few leaders accumulated a lot of wealth. Some of my theological heroes, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, commented on these texts and said that giving alms (charitable offerings) is more important than sharing a common purse.

As Dr. Frank Yamada told us last week, we always read the Bible through the lens of our culture. And the culture that controls our reading of the texts in Acts is the culture of individualism.

Individualism is at the heart of American culture. While the vast majority of us say we believe in God, only about half of us actually belong to a community of faith.

Many Americans are “freelance” Christians, who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious, and practice a cafeteria faith – adopting what they most appreciate from a number of traditions and combining them into a personal religion.

Many people no longer trust the institutional church or the denominations that define us. The individual is seen as primary, and community membership is an option, rather than a way of defining who we are and what we believe.

Ultimately, our understanding of these texts hinges on the question of how we define wealth. Are we rich if we have money in the bank? Or does true wealth come from having intimate fellowship with others, having a group of people in your life who will help you when you need it?

The early church in Jerusalem was formed just a few weeks after the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb on Easter morning. The Holy Spirit came upon them and drove them into close relationships with one another. Moved to share their money and possessions, Acts tells us: "There was not a needy person among them."

Barnabas is lifted up as an example. He was so moved by his faith that he sold a field he owned and gave the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to those who had greater needs.

This extravagant generosity is modeled on the life of Jesus, who emptied himself on the cross, in an act of complete renunciation. God then raised Jesus from death, through an act of sheer grace, power and forgiveness. And now Christ reigns eternally over all living creatures, in an act of restoration and reconciliation for all creation.

Acts tells a story of a number of scattered individual believers who were spiritually transformed by the Holy Spirit to become a beloved community. In Acts 2, three thousand people were converted to Christianity in a single day. In Acts 3, the apostles Peter and John heal a man who has been begging for alms and was lame since birth. When they are arrested for this, Peter boldly defends their actions – saying that the healing happened through the power of Jesus Christ. Five thousand more people were converted to the faith, and the apostles pray for greater boldness.

When we are part of a beloved community, formed by the Spirit and centered on Jesus Christ, we are transformed.

Luke (who wrote the book of Acts) uses a rhetorical device known as *chiasmus*, which orders the details of a story in inverted parallelism. It follows the pattern of ABCBA, with C as the focal point of the text.

A – (renunciation) The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and everything they owned was held in common.

B – (power) With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

C – (God's grace) And great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them.

B – (authority) For as many as owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the feet of the apostles.

A – (redistribution) And it was distributed to each as any had need.

A great theologian once said, "Jesus did not write a book, but formed a community." (Lesslie Newbigin) A loving community that shares its resources and shares a common life together is an **epiphany** – a manifestation of God to the world.

Let me share a story of a radical conversion that happened through community.

In 1954, a 25-year-old preacher arrived in Montgomery, Alabama to serve his first church. This young man had just completed a doctorate in philosophical theology at Boston University, and he had opportunities to teach in several universities. But he felt called to the

pastorate, and so he chose to accept an offer from the wealthy, socially prominent Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

Though Montgomery, Ala. was still racially segregated, most of his church members didn't worry too much about those who had to ride in segregated buses, because they had cars. They were educated and successful, and taking on Jim Crow laws was not their top priority.

When this pastor accepted the call to Dexter Avenue Church, he simply asked for time to finish his dissertation at Boston University, for a salary of \$4,200 (making him the highest paid pastor in the city), and for the parsonage be refurbished.

The new pastor wrote a six-page letter to the congregation emphasizing his need for pastoral authority, his ideas for organizational innovations and fundraising, some proposals for church renovations, and also asked to have a full time secretary. Not a word about racial or social justice.

That same year, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that public schools should not be segregated by race. The next year, a woman named Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to sit in the back of the bus. Four days later, this new pastor gave his first speech as the chair of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

He asked only for a minor adjustment in seating procedures by the bus companies, not the elimination of the whole immoral system of segregation. Worried about the opposition he was facing, this pastor kept a loaded gun in his home.

The pastor's name? The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Most of us know Martin Luther King as a civil rights hero, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and a leader in movements for global peace and justice for the poor. And he was all those things.

We do not always realize that his strong convictions and prophetic witness about the need for beloved community came about only **when he became a member of a community of people oppressed by injustice**. We do not realize that his spiritual strength rose from dark midnights of despair, and it was only those dark nights which led to bright daybreaks of hope.

When Martin Luther King was first arrested during the Montgomery bus boycott, he was shaking like a leaf. As he sat in a prison cell for the first of a dozen jail sentences, he had his first epiphany. "In the darkness," he said, "I could see a radiant star of unity."

In January 1956, Dr. King came home late from a rally to find his wife Coretta and baby daughter Yolanda sleeping. The phone rang, and an angry voice threatened to kill King and his whole family if he did not stop leading the black citizens of Montgomery in the bus boycott.

Though it wasn't the first threatening call he had received, something in that man's voice wouldn't let King sleep. He walked the floor, made a pot of coffee in the kitchen, and felt himself growing in fear. King said, "I felt myself faltering. I was ready to give up."

And he heard a voice that said, "You can't call on Daddy anymore. You can't call on Mama. It's time for you to call on that power that can make a way out of no way." And so Martin Luther King got down on his knees and prayed to God. "Lord, I'm taking a stand for what I believe. I'm weak, faltering, losing courage and afraid. People are looking to me for courage, but I'm at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I can't face this alone."

And King heard a voice again, saying, "Martin, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world."

In his kitchen epiphany, King said, "Jesus promised never to leave me alone. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

At that point, Rev. King became bolder and began to challenge segregation laws. In his next sermon, he began to talk about the beloved community. He said, "We are a chain. We are linked together." Even when his home was bombed, he spoke to his supporters and said, "We must love our white brothers." By the end of that year, he gave up his gun.

Dr. King looked around at his community of activists in Montgomery and said, "I am convinced that God lives."

He began to read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the writings of Mahatma Gandhi. He began to preach about the beloved community, which he saw as the embodiment of God's love in human relationships.

He told the crowds that the boycott to end segregation was **not** the goal. "The end of our efforts is reconciliation. The end is redemption. The end is the creation of the beloved community."

Friends, the challenge for us today is that we live between the idyllic dream of the early church and the full realization of the beloved community.

What can we do to embody it?

Tomorrow, dozens of our youth and adults will stand for justice at Kingdom Baptist Church in Austin. We are gathering on Martin Luther King's Birthday to continue the work of social justice for the poor. Though many of us are not poor and do not face the harsh realities of racism and classism, we are joined in one heart and soul with our neighbors. So we will ask our political leaders, who have the power to create change, to reform education funding, to provide more affordable rental housing and to provide jobs for ex-offenders.

Much is at stake in our beloved community.

The Christian witness over and over again calls us to bring isolated creatures into communion. To engage in concrete acts of "being there" for others. To allow the beloved community to overflow the boundaries of the church. To care for each other on a personal level, and pursue the common good on a social level.

At its best, "the community of Christ exists as a structure with four sides open to the world." (Karl Barth, *Word of God*)

One day a man with a serious drinking problem dropped in to talk with Virgil, a member of an intentional Christian community in Evanston called Reba Place Fellowship. When Virgil asked the man to follow Christ and join the community of believers, the man insisted that he simply wanted money for a bus ticket to Cleveland.

"Okay," Virgil agreed, "we can give you that kind of help too, if that's all you really want." He was quiet a moment, then he shook his head. "You know something?" he said, looking straight at the man. "You've just really let me off the hook. Because if you had chosen a new way of life in the kingdom of God, then as your brother I would have had to lay down my whole life for you. This house, my time, all my money, whatever you needed to meet your needs would have been totally at your disposal for the rest of your life. But all you want is some money for a bus ticket."

Come up to the communion table now and claim your wallets and purses. We are called to share more than our money, which is just a symbol of what it means to live in beloved community. Amen.

For more background, see Charles Marsh's excellent book *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today*.