

“Christian Community: Living and Dying Together”

Acts 4: 32-37, 5: 1-11

Today we continue taking a look at how the Book of Acts intersects with our lives as modern day disciples. And we do so by taking a look at Luke’s version and vision of community, a vision where the community gathers for worship, a vision where the community gathers for fellowship, a vision where the community breaks bread together and where every need is met. Luke shares this vision with us not once but twice as he challenges us as modern day disciples to re-discover our call to live in and be in community with one another.

And as we take up Luke’s challenge, our cynical side comes out just a bit. When we hear about Luke’s vision, we begin to wonder if the early church really did achieve this ideal vision of community thousands of years ago, then what happened? Because as modern day disciples, all we see, are splits and divisions in the community of Christ. If the early church achieved it once, why can’t we do the same today? Why is it so hard to be in community with one another? Why can’t we as modern day disciples be like the early Christian community who was as Luke shared, of one heart and soul? What are we missing in this story?

As I’ve lived with this text this past week, I have come to the realization that what we have been missing in Luke’s sharing of his vision is that we are only

reading this story in the literal sense. On the surface, we are quick to read that the early community sold their possessions and we dismiss this practice as preposterous, saying that Luke is just trying to encourage financial giving in his own home church. But what if Luke is calling us to something more, telling us something more about how we are called to interact with one another, challenging us to something more than simply giving away our money and our stuff? What if Luke is really telling us that the key to his community vision is embracing our call as modern day disciples to share our greatest resource with one another: the sharing of ourselves, body, mind and soul, the sharing of our lives with one another, no holding back, the good, the bad and the ugly? What if Luke is telling us as modern day disciples, the way we can truly achieve community with one another is to be the person we really are with one another, no walls, no pretenses, and truly share our gifts of compassion with one another? What if Luke is calling us to be vulnerable with one another and create a sense of belonging for all who are a part of our community, not just the people we like? Would we think that Luke had lost his mind?

It is not like this idea originated with Luke. It is what Jesus taught and told his disciples all along while he was with them here on earth. He told them on multiple occasions that they could not half-heartedly commit to the Kingdom of

God. Jesus told them that it was an all or nothing thing. He even told them that those who took up the call and then looked back were not fit to be his disciples.

And isn't that just another way of saying that as Jesus' followers, who are called to care for one another, called to care for our neighbor's as God has cared for us, we can't hold anything back from the community where we worship, where we fellowship, where we break bread with one another, where we work together to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is in our midst? Isn't that just another way of saying that we can't hold back because we are worried or fearful of what might happen? Isn't that just another way of saying that we can't hold back our greatest resource-ourselves?

Both Jesus and Luke understood that being in community with one another meant belonging completely. And that when people hold part of themselves back and really don't fully embrace the call to be a part of the community, the body of Christ here on earth is weakened. For both Luke and Jesus, being a part of the Kingdom of God meant fully being engaged in the community, meant fully being a part of the community, meant fully sharing our lives with one another, and not just staying on the fringes, and not just staying on the margins. Both Luke and Jesus knew that the call to be disciples, the call to be followers of Jesus Christ, relies heavily on the giving of ourselves fully to one another. They know this because it goes beyond the simple fact that we can to an even deeper understanding of the

Gospel message. We are called to not hold anything back from each other because of whose we are. At the very core of our understanding and belief that we are claimed and named as God's children, we know that we are God's very own. We also know that God has not, that God did not, and God will not hold anything back from us. From our very beginnings, God has shared everything with us and in doing so, has called us into true relationship with God. So why would we expect anything less with all of God's children and God's creation?

Community means giving of ourselves and seeing that all needs are met. We are to be a part of the community, body, mind and soul to fulfill our call to take care of each other. The blessing is that this vision that Luke shares of community is not an ideal but is what we truly believe as disciples of Christ. We've experienced it in our own lives. There have been times when I have taken care of you in your time of need. There have been times when you have taken care of me in my times of need. There have been times when we have taken care of others in their time of need and there have been times when others have taken care of us in our times of need. That's the beauty of true community. No one holds anything back. We share of ourselves, body, mind and soul. We interact with one another, no walls, no barriers, no pretenses, just ourselves, the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly.

What Luke shares in our text today is a vision of a community whose life, witness, and fellowship are empowered by God's generous spirit because they knew that God had never held anything back from them just like we know today that God has not held anything back from us. What Luke shares is a vision of God's grace coming alive and recycling itself in all and through all that the community does until there is no need left unmet.

Luke knows that there is no rule regulating the giving of oneself. Luke knows that there is not law that required people to give of their greatest gift. He just knew that the generosity of self resulted from the outpouring of God's grace in our lives. That's why he gives us a peek into examples of what can happen when we fully belong and give of ourselves to the community and what can happen when we hold back our greatest gift.

For Barnabas, he got it! As part of the community, he experienced true belonging and he was able to fully experience the Kingdom of God in his midst. He withheld nothing! He fully embraced his call as a disciple to create a sense of belonging for all of God's children until every need is met. And as we know, Barnabas' story doesn't stop with just his local community. It was only a beginning! Later he goes out and proclaims the good news all over, becoming one of Paul's companions along the Gospel journey. Barnabas didn't half-heartedly commit to the community and to the Kingdom of God. He didn't stay on the

fringes. He gave of himself fully and experienced the grace, the joy, the gift of new life that the Kingdom of God can and does bring.

On the other hand, Ananias held something back and experienced death. Luke tells us that he dropped dead but I wonder if it was more like missed opportunities to embrace the life that the community of Christ can give, missed opportunities to embrace the true connection of being a part of the Body of Christ here on earth, missed opportunities to experience the life-giving nature of God's grace in his life and so in a way, it was like death, death of his own creating, death of his own being, death of the Kingdom of God in his midst.

What Luke is telling is through his vision of community is that when there is true belonging, true sharing, true community, there is no poverty. No poverty of spirit. No poverty of connection. No poverty of compassion. No poverty of support. No poverty of the Kingdom of God in our midst and definitely no poverty of grace because God's grace flows through and actively energizes us as people of God.

The good news is that we are called to be in community with one another, freely sharing with one another, freely giving of ourselves for one another all because God has freely given of himself for us. God has filled our lives with an abundance of gifts that make us who we are, has filled our lives with grace that renews us as God's people, and has given us a love that strengthens us to be the

people that God calls us to be. This is not an ideal but what we truly believe as the living, breathing Body of Christ here on earth.

We are called to be in community with one another, giving of ourselves, not because we have to, not because we are guilt into doing so, and certainly not because we think we ought to. We give of ourselves because we have experience the abundance of God's in our lives. We give of ourselves because we have experience the of God fully giving of himself for us. We give of ourselves because we know that by doing so, every need will be met and we will experience the new life and joy of the Kingdom of God in our midst.

May we always strive to create an atmosphere of belonging and community, recycling God's grace in all and through all that we do. Amen.