

Acts 2:44-47

Every once in awhile I get assigned a Bible passage that does not inspire me as a preacher. When I follow the lectionary—which tells pastors what to preach on—or, as is the case today, when I follow the dictates of a program (usually for stewardship) and it gives me what I consider a dud of a Bible passage, I sometimes do not know what to do with the verses. We have two hot wars in the West. We have a fraught political situation in our own nation, complete with dueling court cases and congressional investigations and inflation and white nationalism and more. Much more. You came to church today to hear the word of the Lord and that Word ought to address the things that move us most. And we have a Bible passage that gives us a happy-go-lucky summary of how the earliest church lived in perfect peace and harmony. Except that we know that in less than a chapter, it did not.

The picture the end of Acts chapter two gives us of the earliest Christians is that they essentially employed a socialist approach to their common life, and that it worked. It tells us, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” There is just one problem with this description. Once your community has sold everything it owns and distributed the proceeds to all according to their need, what do you do once you've run out of proceeds? Somebody has to earn and/or own the

means to continue the enterprise, or it collapses. As it has every time it has been tried. Indeed, the early followers of Jesus would almost immediately learn this lesson.

So what must we take from this passage? Let us put it in its proper context and see what we learn. The same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke wrote Acts. According to biblical scholars his was easily the most literate—and satisfying to actual Greek ears—of all the writers of the original New Testament manuscripts. I have a reference book that details unique vocabulary and idioms for all twenty-seven books in the New Testament. It was written by a Japanese Christian scholar named Sake Kubo. Kubo states that Luke and Acts have easily the largest vocabulary, and the greatest reference to educated, progressive Greek speech of the day, in the entire New Testament. Their author makes it clear that he considered them two volumes in the same work. He addressed them both to the same fictional figure. He explained that volume one, the Gospel, told the story of Jesus' ministry on earth. Volume two, he added, took the historical record forward to detail what Jesus' followers did next. Our verses appear early in that second volume.

In Acts chapter one, Jesus still walks the earth. He renews his promise his disciples will receive the Holy Spirit. Then he returns to “the Father”, to himself in whatever realm God inhabits. Our chapter, Acts two, opens with the Day of Pentecost, when God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit made manifest in visible tongues of flame that empower the disciples to preach about Jesus in other human languages. Next Peter, already the lead apostle, delivers a lengthy sermon about Jesus as the Son of

God. Peter speaks in the Temple courtyard, a bold move considering the Roman and Jewish authorities have just conspired to execute Jesus on the cross. But the text of Acts tells us that many listeners were “cut to the heart” that day and came into a saving faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Then we find our happy little verses.

My friend Ron, a retired Presbyterian minister, and I have often observed that when we have preached conciliatory messages (make peace in the church, four biblical methods for improving your relationships, etc.), folks in our churches have seemed grateful and made positive comments when they shake our hands after worship. But when we have preached challenging sermons that come as close as Presbyterians can to hellfire and brimstone, the reactions afterwards fit into two distinct categories. The majority of folks look past us and try to mumble something supportive. However, a few will smile, grasp our hands heartily, and say something like, “Thank you! I really needed to hear that!” Peter's sermon to the Jews in the Temple that day was one of those side-winding, stem-winding, stern sermons designed to put its hearers on their back feet. He forthrightly told the Jews they had killed the Son of God. *But*, praise God, this turned out to be God's plan all along. Now, if they could accept this truth, they could enter into the community of Jesus followers who would look after each other deeply and persistently.

This turns out to be the purpose of the whole enterprise. Historian Hannah Grunwald, a German, published in 1988 a study of how American, Russian and German prisoners of war provided for all their captured compatriots during World War

II. How did their officers organize daily life in prison to protect and provide for their own imprisoned men? Every nation in the European Theater had different policies when it came to their internment camps. In Grunwald's estimation, the Russians were the least humane and the British the most, with her native Germans on the lower end of the scale, just a bit worse than the Americans. Interestingly, she felt the Hungarians and Poles were very humane, speculating that their experiences as underdogs in the geopolitics of Europe had given them empathy.

The most fascinating aspect of Hannah Grunwald's research is that every national group of interred soldiers developed essentially the same approach to organizing leadership of their captured men. They all banded together. They recognized that if they tried to resist their captors on an individual basis they would suffer and, likely, die. The more senior and mature among them—Russian, American, French, German, English—all did exactly the same thing: in the press of the moment, they created cultures of mutual support, of self-sacrifice for the good of the whole body. *This is precisely what Peter, James, John and all the rest of the earliest Christians did.* Their decision can guide us as we go about our regular, daily life. It can also guide us as we seek to follow Jesus through the truly tough times, spiritually, physically and emotionally.

My family has suffered a great deal of loss over the past two years. Yet, speaking only for myself, I can say that the communal support of my surviving relatives and—crucially--this church, have made it okay. I really do appreciate those of you who

have encouraged me to take some time off, to give myself permission to grieve, to take time to heal. And we intend to do that. Meanwhile, you have given me what you have and it has proven enough. This is the message of Acts 2:44-47. It is not about economics and the form of government. It is about using whatever resources God has entrusted to us to minister to each other. It is about stewarding our time, our care, our insight, our whatever, to help each other through the hard times. Times like when the person we followed got killed, came back and then went to the Father. Times like when our loved ones die and we pray the promises about life after death are true.

This is a stewardship sermon. This is a talk about the faithful use of what God has given us. And here is how it can work. A woman named Barb (her real name and yes, I have her permission to say this), was born with a real heart for other human beings. She got degrees in social work and counseling. She joined a group practice and developed a solid record of helping teens, especially females. She and her husband had three daughters of their own, but she quickly realized that her experience and expertise did not translate to helping her own girls. They saw her as Mom, not as therapist. And they did not want her to counsel them. As she puts it, they wanted “sandwiches, not sage advice.” One day, her pastor asked her to become a youth group leader. She said yes—and became a major influence on an entire generation of young people. To this day, when Linda's and my “kids” visit Traverse City, they always make sure to see Barb. They understand the impact she had on them. Meanwhile, the rest of us in the church had an impact on her daughters. She is deeply grateful. And that is how it is supposed to go.

Or consider a man named George (his real name and yes, I have his permission to say this). George is the son of an immigrant from Greece, the source of the language in which Luke wrote, and a fifth- or sixth-generation Hoosier. George graduated from Rose-Hulman. He has an analytical mind and a rich appreciation for the unpredictable humor of life. He and I were scolded for disrupting a recent Presbytery meeting with our laughter over our shared love for Mel Brooks movies. I am sure I speak for him when I say I am unrepentant for that moment. It was worth it.

George's family have served as pillars of the Seymour, Indiana 1st Presbyterian Church for generations. In the late 1990's, that congregation faced a serious physical plant dilemma. They had money but no real agreement about what to do. They turned to George. With his characteristic good humor and practical competence he led them into a project that few, if any, of them, could have imagined. It resulted in a facility that empowers that church to serve not only its current members, but also to attract new folks. I have performed a funeral and attended a reception there since we moved here five years ago. It thrilled me to see the upgrades and the young children. Meanwhile, George and Dreeva, his wife, are terribly grateful for the role that church's members played in raising their children, one of whom serves on the board of Camp Pyoca. And that is how it is supposed to go.

When we employ what God has given us to serve others, great things happen. Please consider that when you decide what to entrust to our ministry in 2024. Empathy, engineering, money. Whatever God has given you, give it.