

***Gospel Reading: Acts 4:32-35***

***word count 1,841***

The Book of Acts is a record of the beginning of the church—what happened when Jesus was no longer physically present, and the growing number of followers began to come into community with a common purpose—to begin to understand faith in a new way.

If you look at the gospels in your bible, and remove the Gospel of John, you will see that Luke-Acts is a two-volume set, written by the same author. Book One, Luke, is an account of Jesus. It picks right up in Acts after Jesus’ death, as the story of the early church.

Times were terrible in Jerusalem, and only got worse. Within a few years, Caligula became emperor and terror and instability across Rome and its territories mixed with extreme poverty and persecution.

The long-expected Messiah had been hung on a cross. In Deuteronomy 21:22-23, it says, “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.”

This scripture did not go unnoticed by Jesus’ followers. Joseph of Arimathea came to Jesus’ cross. Joseph was a member of the council who did not agree to the crucifixion of Jesus, and through his position, he was able to ask Pilate for the body. He took it down on Friday afternoon, wrapped it in linens and placed it in a new tomb. The Gospel of Luke says that the women followed him to see where Jesus’ body was laid, but as it was getting dark and the Sabbath was beginning; they went home to prepare burial spices and ointments. They had to wait through the Sabbath, and each Gospel account reveals an empty tomb on Sunday morning.

For the early church, hearing the story told from Jesus’ disciples and witnesses, not to mention the apostle Paul, this conviction that Jesus rose from the dead brought the phrase, “Christ is risen!” to join naturally with “Christ is coming again soon!” And that is where we enter into the world of today’s scripture.

The instability and brutality of the times created a view of a world that was soon to pass away. The apocalypticists’ views held sway.

If you spent last week with like-minded souls hoping to be taken seriously by hanging tea bags from your earlobes, today’s scripture should be quite shocking, and I’m afraid it simply means what it says. The directions for beginning Christian communities go beyond socialism to pure Marxism. Listen:

“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.”

A man named Ananias sold his property and held back some of the proceeds for himself instead of for the community. Peter asked him about it, and he dropped dead immediately. Then they asked his wife about it, and she dropped dead immediately, too. Lesson: Not sharing your wealth with everyone else is deadly.

Now, if you are hearing this story of Christian Communism from another side of the aisle, here’s *your* bad news: the utopian community experiment recorded in Acts failed.

There is some question about whether selling one’s possessions was compulsory (as with the apocalyptic Jewish sect at Qumran) or voluntary for membership in the earliest Christian

community. But our text suggests it was the norm, if not the rule. And although Peter informs Ananias in the next chapter that he was free to dispose of his property as he wished (Acts 5:4), the fact that Ananias publicly lies about contributing all the proceeds from a land sale (and then drops dead!) demonstrates the strong community pressure to pool all possessions for the common good. □

The expression, “Christ is Risen,” coupled with “Christ is coming again soon,” was meant in the immediate sense. “Trouble is all around us right now, and the future may not be,” the mood of the times seems to indicate, “So let’s live as if these were our last days and ask everyone to pitch in for the common good.”

Of course, however much we might admire the radical utopian vision of community practiced in the early Jerusalem church, we are the ones that benefit from historical hindsight. If you read a few chapters further, you will find that the world did *not* end, and there was a church left struggling with a few a limited resources that could be given away. Claudius was now the emperor, he was not fond of these new Christians, and in addition, there was a great drought, which many blamed on the gods’ anger at this new sect. The church in Jerusalem fell on hard times down the line, and required a bailout from the more prosperous congregation in Antioch (11:27-30).

Turns out, they were in it for the long haul, or at least a longer haul than they expected. And the clock is now ticking well past the 2000-year mark.<sup>1</sup>

We have seen experiments in communitarianism in the United States. From hippie communes in the 60’s, to much further back. When the industrial revolution dwarfed the work of craftsmen in its cookie-cutter production methods and labor was poorly treated, communities formed for protection and justice. The Arts and Crafts Movement was such a response, and communities like the Roycrofters formed. The Oneida community became an experiment in living, and eventually formed the Oneida Silver Company.

The Shakers, Halcyon, Point Loma...so many such communities existed the purpose of which was to care for and nurture the community around a central mission. They live and thrive for a while...and then they are gone. However, while they are here, they make a difference.

Perhaps a lesson here is that it is not as important to provide socialist answers, as it is to ask socialist questions, whenever “the least of these” are left at risk, and to work for change.

The church at Jerusalem provided community for each other. That is an important thing. The message Jesus taught, to love God and neighbor as oneself, eventually widened the mission of the church.

Today, the church must do two things: First, it must stand through its actions as a witness to its understanding of Jesus in the community and the world. Being a caring presence in a broken world means standing up for the outcast, feeding the hungry, and being a source of comfort to those who need us most.

I’m not speaking abstractly. I’m asking you to sign up for mission and service opportunities as they come up, and two important ones are now upon us. Please join us in supporting our 20<sup>th</sup> AIDS Walk on May 16. You can sign up as a walker online, and you can find out how on our homepage, or...you can sponsor a walker. On May 2-3, IUCC is a part of “Big Sunday,” and you have some information in your program. Join church members at Ralph’s nearby, or Whole Foods at the district on Saturday, May 2, or be daring and choose another volunteer opportunity. There is more information on the patio, but essentially, this is a weekend of volunteering that has grown from one temple in Hollywood, to all of Los Angeles and now Orange County. Our neighbors next door at Creekside are canceling church and expecting their members to volunteer instead and report back on their activities the next week.

The second thing the church must do is to provide spiritual care for those who covenant with the church and with each other. It should provide meaningful worship that reminds the community of what binds us together in the sacraments and faith story. It should provide a community of

caring where a baby can be baptized in our midst with the real promise to care and love, and where the church's people can bring their pain and hurt to the common table and eat and drink hope.

The communes, by and large, are gone. Many churches should be. If a church cannot live out its mission in the world, it has no reason for being. So many churches choose to try to be relevant over being real; to stand for the status-quo in order to keep either "mega" or simply afloat, over risking reputation to live out Christ's radical notion of full inclusion and love given recklessly away.

The lesson here is that we are not self-sufficient; we cannot live independently of each other. And this is both a privilege and a responsibility.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing."<sup>2</sup>

For the most part we've forgotten about caring for each other today in our supposedly self-sufficient society. Perhaps the fact is that we are not self-sufficient. We never have been, and never will be. Self-sufficiency is a fantasy based in the American mythology of the independent yeoman farmer. Those yeoman were no more self-sufficient than we are. They had their supplies shipped in from England, and they relied on their neighbors to help, just as we ought to do.

Are we self-sufficient? Truly self-sufficient?

Who would put out the fire if not for the firemen, who would keep our streets safe but for the police? Who would educate our children, provide social services where needed, keep our roads in repair and our bridges from collapsing if not for the taxes we pay? We do need one another.

Today, we only think we're self-sufficient. We believe we don't have to rely on others. We used to take people in off the streets when they needed a place to stay overnight. Communes did that. The church at Jerusalem would have done that. They took in runaways and homeless. Now people are homeless and few if any are willing to lend a bed, or give a meal.

Who made the clothes on our backs or the shoes on our feet? Who cuts our hair, who fixes our teeth? Who comforts us when we mourn? Who laughs with us when we celebrate?

Christians are communal beings. It's the foundation of our belief. The bearded and sandaled One himself said: "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:45). Communes may have disappeared. But Christian community and compassion have not — or should not.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Sermon Resources:***

1. Derived from Commentary on First Reading by F. Scott Spencer in, "The Text This Week."
2. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1978), p.18.
3. "Communes No Longer Commune" *Homiletics* magazine, April 27, 2003. I used much of this sermon illustration in the bottom 2/3 of page 3 of my sermon.

## **Scripture for Sunday, 2009**

### ***Acts 4:32-35***

**32** 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. **33** With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. **34** 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. **35** They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.