**Radical Hospitality**

**Acts 4:32-35**

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August 23, 2020

For as long as I can remember, nothing else has given me the same sense of inner peace and connection to God that walking in the woods does.  I used to walk in the woods when I was a kid - exploring rocks and sticks, moss and fallen logs.  I walked in the woods in the foothills of the Himalayas when we were missionaries in India and in the foothills of the Alps when I lived in Switzerland - grateful to have a place of peace just outside the door.  I walked in the woods of the Waterloo-Pinckney Recreation Area in the months during my divorce - searching for the solace that soothed a broken heart.  And I still walk in the woods every chance I get.

There is something about being deeply in God’s creation that puts our lives into greater perspective.  We see ourselves as part of a bigger picture, one piece of the whole vast network of life on our planet.  To sit and watch an ant dutifully carrying something twice its size off to its ant hill which sits at the foot of a huge oak tree which provides shelter for birds and squirrels and raccoons and spiders.  To watch the first ferns reaching out of the ground in the early spring or listen to the babbling of a river on its way to meet another on its way to the ocean.  Those moments remind us that we humans are completely interconnected with each other and with the rest of the living world.

I feel like this global pandemic which has so impacted us all this year is another reminder of our interconnectedness and interdependence.  A few months ago, Pastor Nick preached a sermon in which he described how the natural world has grown healthier and stronger during these months when humans have been staying indoors and traveling less.  A keen reminder of how our activities impact the rest of creation.  But, we have also come to recognize our interdependence on each other.  We’ve seen our need for essential workers - grocery store workers, truck drivers, hospital janitors, and so many more.  People we might previously have dismissed or overlooked.  We’ve recognized that the only way to slow the spread of the virus is when we protect each other by wearing masks.  We’ve realized our need for touch when we go for weeks without a hug or a pat on the back.

All of that has created an amazing opening for us as Christ-followers and for the church.  We are in the second week of a sermon series called “Back to Our Roots” in which we are exploring what we can learn from the early church about being the church during Covid-19.  Last week, we talked about the importance of small groups as a way to help, support, and care for each other.  This week we’ll look at how the early Christians worked together with a spirit of radical generosity.

Our scripture readings last week and this week are from the book of Acts.  Acts is a history of the early church - the stories of the apostles and the practices of early Christian communities.  One of the most startling characteristics of those first groups of Christ-followers is how willingly they gave of themselves and their belongings to help others in their group and in their wider communities.  They contributed to a common fund that anyone in the group might draw from.  They offered shelter and food to other believers as well as to the poor, widows, travelers, and missionaries who would not have the means to repay them.  They understood that a basic principle of Jesus’ teachings was to give what you have to those who have less so no one would be in need.

Right now, in the midst of Covid-19, we have a tremendous opportunity to apply that principle in our church family, our community, and our world.  This pandemic has brought the loss of lives, health, jobs and income, homes, and so much else. As of Wednesday, almost 6 million cases of Covid-19 and more than 171,000 deaths have been reported in the United States.  At this point, 30 million people are receiving jobless benefits.  Almost half of renters could face eviction if new protections aren’t put in place before the CARES Act expires on August 24.  All of us know someone who has been impacted significantly by Covid.  They have lost a friend or family member.  They have been ill and are still suffering the after effects of the illness.  They’ve been laid off and lost their income.  They’ve lost their home or apartment.  They’ve spent literally every day since March at home, frightened to go out for fear that because they are elderly or vulnerable, they will contract the virus and die from it.  On top of it all, there is a great deal of mistrust of state and federal governments on both sides of the political aisle.

What can, we, as Christ-followers offer?  How can we give from what God has given to us?  Obviously, we can give of our money.  The church continues to need your financial support to run ministries that reach out to our members who have been impacted by Covid.  New ministries like the Doorstep Disciples ministry in which volunteers stop at the doorsteps of some of our elderly members and bring them a copy of the most recent “Caring and Connected” and other news from the church.  Or the new Happiness Hours which provide a Zoom room so people can connect with other members of the congregation and spend some time focusing on the good in life when there seems to be so much bad.  Of course, your gifts sustain more established ministries as well.  We will have online children’s and youth programming, adult faith formation opportunities, choir, and multiple options for worship all starting up again this fall.

Plus, the dollars you have given to our Covid Relief Fund have gone to support individuals in our congregation as well as the undocumented student relief fund started by Jasmine Partridge and local agencies like the Hope Clinic, Community Action Network, the Religious Association for Affordable Housing Eviction Prevention Fund, and Justice for Our Neighbors.

So, yes, like the early Christians, we can pool our financial resources to support our church ministries and our community.  Yet, I also think we can look beyond the money we offer to how we can offer something of ourselves as well.  What gifts do you have that you can share with someone else?  Would you be willing to call people who are stuck at home?  Could you run errands for an elderly person who doesn’t feel safe going out or help a church member who can’t afford Wi-Fi get connected so they can participate in all the church is offering?  Would you be willing to be a Doorstep Disciple?  Would you consider volunteering at one of the local agencies that need volunteers - Hope Clinic or House By The Side Of The Road for example.  Could you take someone to deliver their absentee ballot so it’s sure to be received?  Would you consider advocating for those people most impacted by Covid-19 and the economic crisis it caused? Could you do something as simple as sharing the link to our worship services each week so people you know in your family and friends might discover what our church has to offer?

These are the small acts of self-giving that pull our community together much like those first Christians were drawn together by their generosity in caring for each other.  They are also the acts that take us out into our community and help people see by example what we believe it means to be a follower of Christ.  We become the embodiment of Christ in the world.  If you would like more ideas of what you can do, contact Shonagh Taruza, who contributed much to this sermon or check out the church’s Facebook page.

It was not easy for the early Christians to survive in the first three centuries.  Many were persecuted, accused of cannibalism or treason, imprisoned, or ostracized.  Yet, Christianity continued to spread.  You may wonder what sustained and motivated them, and I think the answer is right there in this passage from Acts that is our scripture reading today.  **“**With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.”  The early Christians were filled with hope despite their challenges because they understood the power of the resurrection.

I believe that we can risk radical generosity because our hope is rooted in the resurrection, as well.  From the start, Christ-followers have believed that God is always working for good and, therefore, there is always reason to be hopeful for the future.  That is the resurrection promise! We give of ourselves because we believe in the potential of the church and the community to change the world through God’s work within and through us.  We believe that God will continue to lead us closer to the beloved community.  That good and love are stronger than evil and hate.  And whatever we give of ourselves becomes an investment in God’s promise of a loving, just, and peaceful world.

We need each other within this church family - and the community and world in which we live needs us - especially now.  We need each other to foster hope.  We are interdependent - a system of life and love in which we each have something to give and to receive.  Take some time this week and consider what you have to offer.

May it be so. Amen.