

10/23/11

Proverbs 11:24-25, 22:9; Matthew 16:24-26; Acts 2:42-47

Proverbs 11:24-25, 22:9

²⁴Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.

²⁵A generous person will be enriched,
and one who gives water will get water.

⁹Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

Matthew 16:24-26

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³As we came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Every once in a while, I meet a person who asks me something to the effect of, “So what do Methodists believe?”

I usually mention the Apostles’ Creed, who this John Wesley fellow was, and things like that. But before I had a seminary education, I had a hard time answering that question. Then a mentor of mine told me how he answers it: he said that Methodists usually don’t rattle off a list of approved doctrines, but they can go all day telling you what their church *does*. Methodists show what they believe by what they *do*.

He raises a good point. And we can learn a lot about what early Christians believed by what they *did* (and what they *didn’t do*). It’s a slippery slope to fall into the trap of saying that we are even saved by what we *do*. But I’ll speak to that in a few minutes.

Here in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit has just moved over the first church on the day of Pentecost, Peter has preached a sermon, and now the church is settling into being church.

If we assume that, over time, people have a tendency to muck things up, if we assume that we have a tendency to get distracted, then it would follow that to get to the core practices of the church, we have to reach back to our earliest days. The early church, we have to assume, would be closest to the original practices of Jesus.

So what did the early church do? What was important to them? Our text tells us that they did four things:

1. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings.” – This was so early in the church's infancy that there was not a real discernible difference between preaching and teaching. So for us today, this means devoting ourselves to being present for the preaching, for Sunday School, and for Bible Studies and other spiritual development groups. It means being saturated in Scripture together.
2. “Fellowship.” – This Christian fellowship was so much more than talking about weather over coffee (though that’s part of it). This is the deep, loving fellowship that comes from God’s Spirit. It means not letting anyone suffer alone. And it means intimate sharing and accountability with one another.
3. “to the breaking of bread” – This “breaking of bread” seems to allude to the Lord's Supper, faith and community fed by the sacrament. The promise of the gospel that comes to us in *more than words*, is available to all our senses. But we will miss it if we are not devoted to it.

4. “and the prayers.” – The prayers meant the kind of regular worship that many of these early Christians had been doing in the Jewish temple. It also included all the works of piety, personal spiritual disciplines and personal holiness expected of Christians.

Then, there’s one more thing they did: “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.” (We even hear more about this new practice of sharing goods in chapter 4, verses 32-35 where it says that “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”)

The formula is fairly set: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayers. Got it. We need to teach the basics of the faith, nurture fellowship, emphasize the Eucharist and be devoted to prayer. Who could object to that? What we get all worked up about is: “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.”

Now this was a good seventeen centuries before socialism ever became an organized political movement. So I don’t think it does a lot of good to call Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, a “commie” or a “pinko”. Not only would that be historically problematic, but we are not faithful to the text if we jump over the four preceding practices of the community and go straight to the sharing of possessions.

You see, I want to posit to you today that it was *because* of the first four practices – the teachings, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers – it was *because* they were together practicing these things that they began to hold all things in common. I don’t think they

spent so much time actually sitting there saying, “OK, we’re going to form a collective.” No. I think they were devoted to these common discipleship practices so much that the sharing of possessions naturally developed.

We’ve all been in family groupings of some kind where we borrow one another’s clothes or books or hold things in common. We’ve all either left-a-penny or taken-a-penny at the gas station counter. We’ve all donated some clothes to a clothing closet or bought something second-hand at a thrift store.

These are all contemporary trivial examples. But they help us relate to the early followers of Jesus. Imagine if we were to all come here every day. (Some of you feel like you do that already.) Imagine if we were to have a daily service of prayer and Communion. We’d probably each start bringing food to share. And someone might eventually tell the rest of us, “My alternator gave out on my car and I can’t get it to run. But I have to get to work.” And the rest of us who could, would go in together and try to get that alternator replaced.

That kind of thing happens now, through the Body of Christ. And it’s not some kind of big organized anti-capitalism, stick-it-to-the-man movement. It’s just what emerges when we devote ourselves to the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.

For example, for most of you in the congregation, these children here in our church are not your blood-kin children and grandchildren. But you go in together to make sure they have curriculum that helps us teach them these practices. I did some quick math the other day, and did you know that only a quarter of the teachers for our children’s Sunday School program have children of their own? The rest are these new young adults who are giving so freely of their time

to nurture and educate other people's children. That's a glimpse of this kind of community the early church embodied.

There are all kinds of ways that you share with one another as any has need on a daily basis through this Body of Christ called Trinity United Methodist Church. Sometimes people become a part of the community here who have particular needs and you go in together through the church to help them.

Other times you are living out this sharing relationship with people you've never met and probably will never meet. This happens through various formal channels in the ways our church supports the ministries of our district and conference and denomination and various local ministries. In 2012, you are already anticipating passing along over \$68,000 to the work of God beyond these walls.

Now this is all well and good but it's a slippery slope to go from naming this sharing-of-possessions among us all the way down to works-righteousness and starting to believe that these things make us good people and therefore acceptable to God.

It is imperative that we remember that people shared these possessions *because they practiced the faith in such close proximity to one another*, with such love and devotion to God and to neighbor. They didn't used to get tax write-offs for their charitable contributions back then. They didn't think of giving to God as "paying the preacher" or even "keeping the lights on" at the church (for one thing, there was no electricity to keep on).

If someone's reasons for giving to our church are primarily to get a pat on the back from the IRS or to prop up the church as an institution, then to that person I respectfully say, "Please keep your money." (Don't tell the Finance Committee I said that either.)

Sure we have obligations to pay as part of being church. We have bills to pay and all the rest. But God will provide for those in as much as they are in accordance with God's own will.

Rather, give because we live out our discipleship to Jesus Christ in close proximity to one another. We attend to the teaching and the proclamation of God's Word and all that comes with that. We fellowship with one another, building relationships that point the way to the Kingdom of God. We break bread together in such a way that Christ's presence is made real to us. And we attend to the prayers, the liturgy, and the acts of worship in our personal and corporate lives.

Some of our possession-sharing comes in the form of clothing closets and potluck meals and rides to medical appointments. And some of it comes in the circulation of currency when we give with open hands and open hearts.

However it happens, through the sanctifying work of God, the clothing we share becomes more than hand-me-downs. The offering plate becomes more than a take-a-penny/leave-a-penny cup.

The casseroles become the breaking of bread. The Sunday bulletin papers become a part of our devotion to the prayers. A small group or class becomes a band of disciples following Jesus together.

And while we are busy devoting ourselves to these things, we stop today and look around and realize that we have so much in common with the early followers of Jesus...that we dedicate ourselves to him so much that we *already* have *everything* in common with one another.

Amen.

While we sing the next set of songs, I will invite everyone to take a moment and fill out their pledge cards. But before you fill it out, prayerfully discern what God is calling you to give.

Some of you have come here today with your estimate-of-giving card in your pocket or your pocketbook. You've reflected at home about what you can give. Some of you have asked yourself, "What is God calling me to give?" and you put that down.

Others have thought out their monthly expenses and said to themselves, "Okay. I bring home so much money a month. I need this much for the house, this much for the cars, this much for the utilities, this much for gas, this much for food, and then this much for my fun money. So I have three dollars and fifty-eight cents left that I can give at church at the end of the month."

If that's how you arrived at your pledge, I encourage you to consider the question, "What is God calling me to give?" and put that down and commit to it.

There will always be that person who has given the same weekly or monthly offering for thirty years. It's kind of comforting to them to just keep doing that. It seems kind of quaint and cute. And thanks-be-to-God for that kind of long-term dedication and faithfulness. But what God called you to do thirty years ago is almost certainly not what God calls you to do today.

There will be some among us today whose salary and wages have not increased for some time. I've been in that category myself in some recent years. I know times have been very difficult indeed. But pledging more when we're on a fixed or stagnant income gives us a chance to tie our increase in giving not to *an increase in income*, but to *an increase in faith and trust in God*.

And, finally, there are always folks who feel uncomfortable making pledges to the church. They don't want to "let the church down" in the event of financial problems. To the people in that camp, I appreciate that you take your commitment so very seriously. And I ask us

to consider other obligations in our lives: perhaps you have a mortgage on your house or a rental agreement on your apartment, perhaps you have credit cards in your wallet, perhaps you have a gym membership or some other sort of dues you pay. The point is that every one of those things involves a pledge. You have committed to them. You can commit to God too. In fact, it would be a worshipful act to do so. Should your circumstances change over the course of next year, adjustments can always be made.

But remember, don't plan your giving on the basis of whatever smug satisfaction it might give you or whatever ancillary benefits it gives you or the church. This is about bigger things than those. This is about what God is calling you to circulate in our lives together. This is about living lives of discipleship in close proximity to one another and loving God and neighbor together.

And when you're ready, come up from your pew and bring it down front. Couples and families, come down together. Just fold your card up and leave it on the altar. Be sure and put your name. (You'd be surprised how many people forget that. You don't want our counters to be trying to guess whose pledge it is.)

Those of you who are guests here today, we know that you are not necessarily here to enter into this particular commitment in our life together. But we are glad that you are here and we wonder if you'd commit to pray for us. We don't want you to feel left out in this worship act of coming forward. It can be a great blessing. So if you want to, you can just write "prayers" on your pledge card and lay it forward.

I'll offer this prayer for us to help us each begin to reflect on what God is calling us to give. And when I'm finished the songs will start and you are invited to come forward as you are ready.

Holy God, you have called us to follow in the way of your risen Son, and to care for those who are our companions, not only with words of comfort, but with acts of love. Guide us in the path of discipleship, so that, as you have blessed us, we may be a blessing for others, bringing the promise of the kingdom near by our words and deeds. Amen.

THE BRINGING FORWARD

O God, most merciful and gracious, of whose bounty we have all received, accept this offering of your people. Remember in your love those who have brought it and those for whom it is given, and so follow it with your blessing that it may promote peace and goodwill among all peoples, and advance the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.