

A Communion of Saints

Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37

sermon digest

4-13-08

larry dipboye

Luke's picture of the early Christian community is idealistic even for the New Testament. It comes at the very beginning of Acts in response to Peter's Pentecost sermon; people responding to the Christian message were baptized, and 3,000 souls were gathered into a Christian community. Luke does not use the word *church* at this early stage. They were all Jews. They continued to worship in the Temple. Their distinct Christian community, however, centered in Apostolic teaching, fellowship (*koinonia*) with one another, breaking bread (Eucharist), and prayer. Then, Luke describes a distinct lifestyle: "All who believed were together and had all things in common." According to Luke, they pooled their resources and redistributed their wealth according to need.

A second and final description of the communal lifestyle follows the arrest and release of Peter and John. Luke describes the people of faith, "of one heart and soul." No one claimed private ownership of property; their possessions were "held in common," (*koina*). In response to the proclamation of the Apostles, "great grace was upon them all." Then, Luke makes the astounding statement, "There was not a needy person among them." Here a man named Joseph appears whom the apostles called Barnabas, "son of encouragement." He converted land to money and turned it over to the Apostles for distribution. Barnabas, who later appears as a companion to Paul, is a model of this grace that had come upon the community.

This is a primal experiment that comes at the dawn of Christian community. This "great grace," the freedom to turn loose of material possessions, is attributed to the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Christ. This idealistic picture of the community precedes the use of the word for church (*ekklesia*) in Acts. Perhaps it is a coincidence rather than an intentional shift, but Luke does not begin to use the word *church* until after the story about the cheaters Ananias and Sapphira. The picture is a Garden of Eden corrupted by two crooks. After the fall, it is appropriate to call it a church, and the experiment in communal living is never again associated with the church in the New Testament.

Is church unity too idealistic? Perfect attendance, the physical ideal of gathering the whole congregation at the same place and time, is close to mission impossible in every church that I have ever served or known. The fiscal ideal of depositing all membership wealth in one bank account is beyond comprehension. No wonder this idealistic venture of the early church has been treated as an experiment rather than a model for the proper organization of the church. A few exceptions should be noted: some of the Roman Catholic religious orders, some Anabaptist bodies of the Reformation, numerous groups usually labeled "sects" like the Shakers of American origin, and no less than Clarence Jordan's Koinonia Farm started in 1942 in Georgia.

Jordan was a Baptist preacher/scholar and a missionary. (He was called a few other things). Accused of being a liberal and a communist, he was mostly guilty of taking the Bible seriously, if not literally. Koinonia Farm was modeled after the idealistic experiment of the early church community where no one claimed private ownership of wealth, where all property was jointly owned. In Acts, the people were believers in Christ who were willing to share everything so that all deprivation and need disappeared from the Christian community. Jordan took some exception to the Acts experiment. He was more likely to call the wealthy to follow the command of Jesus to the young ruler, to sell what they had, give it to the poor, to follow Jesus with nothing but themselves. This was his advice to Millard Fuller, father of Habitat for Humanity.

During the years following World War II and the time of the McCarthy Hearings the accusation "Communist!" did not inspire confidence. Getting people together across lines of race and social class is somewhat controversial, but the very idea of bringing people together under one budget had a way of raising hackles and suggesting heresy even if it was right out of the Bible.

The church is a gathered people. The church is not the accumulation of wealth or property, not a building or a location. The issue has never been money, and it never will be. Early in Christian history Cyprian declared, "He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the Church for his Mother." Father God and Mother Church are about as personal as you can get. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber pressed Christians as well as Jews to give thought to the pronouns for our relationship with God in his book *I and Thou*. He suggested that God is not an "it" but "The Eternal Thou." God calls us aside from the world of things to a personal worship of the personal God.

The Acts experiment is less about property than about community. Here people from all walks of life came together with a commitment to one another. The lonely individuals, the isolated islands of humanity became family. "I" became "we." "Me" and "mine" became "ours." The dynamic of this church which led to communal property was a unity of spirit. Maybe the idea is not so far-fetched as we may assume.

Joe Priest Williams was pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Louisville for three decades after the white suburban community became predominantly black and economically depressed. He and his church were

committed to witness to the grace of God where they lived. Joe noticed that people in his impoverished community who had a church family tended to survive, while those who were totally dependent on secular resources were most at risk. Community begins at the level of heart and soul.

Crisis brings us together. Strangely enough, crisis is often the catalyst for community for which material independence is the major barrier. Which comes first? Shall we pool our wealth and depend on each other? Or shall we pool our hearts and souls and give our possessions a lower place in the hierarchy of values. The crisis of transition from the ministry of Jesus to the mission of the church helped to create that ideal community Luke describes at the beginning of the new people of God.

I was pastor of a new church in St. Louis formed by the cooperative mission of three older, established congregations in town. It was a grand idea in cooperation with a slight problem. You could not have picked three more different congregations than the ones who had cooperated in the formation of our church. Within a few years competition between the factions, errors in construction of a building, and financial stress began to create tension. One of our church leaders quipped, "what we need is a good crisis to bring us together." What my friend Wil Duke perceived was that we had really entered a new stage of development in which the luxury of conflict was now possible. In times of real crisis, we tend to lay aside petty differences.

We had a constant flow of family in and out of my childhood home. I came to accept sleeping on the sofa as the norm for holidays when the house was packed to capacity. Periodically we were a way station for someone in the family who needed a place to stay while searching for work. Aunt Mary came to live with us right out of high school. She worked at the local ship yard during the War years, and our family was caught up in the saga of her romance with the kid down the street. When Mary contracted polio in 1954, she lived with us again in order to receive physical therapy that was not available in her town. Somehow I got the message that our house a place of welcome and refuge. I did not hesitate to bring a friend by at dinner time or friends home for the week end when I was at Baylor.

Maybe Luke was cautious about his use of the word *church* as he described the early experiment in community, but the idea of community will not go away. During the Great Depression, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin served the immigrant poor in their Catholic Worker Houses and provided a model for integration of social ministry with Christian community. The dynamic of the church which brings people together has never been a new gimmick of structure or organization. The power is within us then and now. We come together as family, as church, in the unity of the Spirit and the bond of love. We put out the welcome mat and invite the world to sit at our table, well, not really ***our*** table. It is the Lord's Table.

The principle of Christian community centers in stewardship. "All things are thine; no gift have we, Lord of all gifts to offer Thee, And hence with grateful hearts today, Thy own before Thy feet we lay." (Hymn by John Greenleaf Whittier)