

All Things in Common

Acts 2:41-47

Rev. Rachel Knuth
The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
4th Sunday of Easter / Creation Justice Sunday
April 22, 2018

I.

After the joyful celebration that is Easter we turn our attention to the “so-now-what” of our faith. What does it mean that Jesus Christ is alive in a new way? What tangible impact does his uprising have on our lives and our planet? What happens when new life wells up inside us, and cross-pollinates our communities?

Cross-pollination happens when grains of pollen travel from one plant to another, and the genetic material combines. The seeds that result from cross-pollination have the genetic make-up of both of the parent plants. In this season of Easter, and on this Earth Day weekend, when we use the term cross-pollination, I want to say that it’s a time when we might consider how the experience of the cross and resurrection mixes with our lives. The story of new life that emerges from a death-cave has the potential to create new life in the world—not just for us as individuals—but for our community too. And so we open ourselves to the ways in which the Spirit might be cross-pollinating us, might be re-telling the Easter story within us, and therefore in our church and our world.

In today’s Bible reading from the Book of Acts, Peter has just preached his first sermon. The Bible tells us that he gave such an inspiring sermon, and no pressure Pastor Ben, but over 3000 people were moved to join the Jesus-movement that day. Churches ever since have been looking at the verses we read today as a model for how to set themselves up to “be the church.” And what does the Bible say? That “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...they held all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Some modern church-planters call this “Being an Acts 2 Church.” If you google “Acts 2 Church” you’ll find over 311-million hits– from Lutherans to Pentecostals to Methodists and a whole lot of evangelicals– all looking to this very model of how to be the church, based on today’s Bible reading. You might imagine Christian hipsters in Seattle wanting to start a new house-church movement, and looking at Acts 2 for inspiration. Or conservative Christians targeting college towns for small group

fellowship. Many of these churches emphasize “koinonia,” this idea of holding resources in common, reading scripture and breaking bread together, especially in small group settings. There are many iterations of being an Acts 2 Church, from many theological perspectives, but they all hold on to a central scriptural ideal– to pool their resources to support each other, to study and pray, to break bread.

II.

The problem is that beyond these 5 verses, the author of Acts never mentions the house-church, koinonia model again. And we know historically that as Christianity expands it does not hold the utopic model of Acts 2, in fact it eventually becomes the religion of the empire. So is this ideal of sharing all things in common and breaking bread in people’s homes just hyperbole? Is Acts 2 a vision of an ideal that’s unattainable? Was the church in Acts 2 even really an “Acts 2 Church”?

Our church, here in Sebastopol, is a congregational church. That means that we do things like vote on how to organize ourselves, like we did last week. It means that the people of the congregation call their own ministers instead of a bishop or diocese assigning clergy to churches. In preparing for this sermon, I read an unfortunate article that connected congregationalism to communism, and then condemned them both. It was written by a conservative Christian pastor, and it made me lament the ways in which Christianity gets so intertwined with capitalism in the United States. And to be honest I felt a little angry that there are Christians who would prioritize a free market economy over a biblical economy that encourages us to care for one another. It got me thinking about the Acts 2 vision–this idea of holding all things in common, so that no one has need– how can we live that vision in our capitalist society? What does that mean for us as a church in the 21st century? Because I would guess that many of us in this sanctuary have our own bank accounts, we live in separate homes, we don’t share everything we have.

We as Americans are pretty excited about property ownership; and we as Christians have to admit that in our history, our faith has been used as a tool of empire, to dominate and conquer people and lands. Popes in the 1400s issued a series of teachings known collectively as the Doctrine of Discovery, which was used as a way to grant permission to colonizers to enslave indigenous peoples and claim land for themselves. The Doctrine of Discovery allowed European men to claim lands and water and people as belonging to them– rather than lands and water and people belonging to God. It is almost a reversal of what we hear in Acts 2– it is so far away from the economy of Acts 2. So how do we as modern Christians work toward holding resources in common, to the benefit of all, when our culture and even the history of our own faith, have not always guided us toward this goal?

III.

I hear something else in this text, besides just sharing resources and holding property in common. The early church in Acts 2 also does three things: they study, they pray, and they break bread. Verses 42 and 46 say they devoted themselves, “proskatereo,” they were continually devoted to prayers, fellowship, and sharing bread. You see, in Jewish tradition the Bread of Presence, which is seen as a symbol of the Messiah, would have been kept in the Temple as an offering. It was a sacred symbol offered in a certain place. But the early Christians figuratively take this symbol home with them. So, the Bread of Presence becomes not just a Temple offering, but a holy act brought into their very homes. It means that the sacred is brought into the every-day-ness of their lived experience. And they are taking Jesus’ table fellowship seriously— those 3000 converts would have come from a variety of backgrounds, so they are sharing the bread with people of many nationalities and ethnicities. They are devoting themselves to diversity through a shared meal. But they don’t just eat and then go their separate ways; they share bread and then remain as companions on the journey. They stay for fellowship, for prayer, and to learn more about the Love of Christ. Out of this relationship-building, our early Christian ancestors lived in koinonia, in community.

So if the early church shared their possessions and redistributed them so that everyone was cared for—or if at the very least that was their ideal— what might that model mean for us? What is the resource we hold in common, as koinonia? On this Earth Day weekend, I would offer that the Earth is what we hold in common. And as Christians who believe in the uprising of new life, who strive to live into the ideals of Acts 2, holding the Earth in common just might be the radical response God is calling out of us at this time in our planet’s existence. As modern Christians, congregationalists who live in a capitalist society, in a country that devalues the Earth, we hold up the Psalmist’s words, “the earth is the lord’s and all that is in it,” and we see that caring for the environment is integral to expressing our faith. We live in a time when our choices about plastics and fossil fuels and climate agreements and industry regulation matter—not just for us, but for our neighbors, and the people who will live on this planet after us.

There is an Earth Day video circulating on FaceBook right now, that shows a girl dressed up like the Earth, called “What if the Earth Treated Us the Way We Treat the Earth.” In this facetious video, the Earth dumps oil on an unsuspecting person in their lounge chair, tosses trash on surprised picnic-ers, and uses a blow-torch to destroy someone’s ice cream cone. It’s slightly disturbing and slightly funny, but the video is naming the unjust ways we treat the Earth. And acknowledging our role in participating in injustice can be a step toward repentance. The Earth itself is in need

of our repentance, followed by our concerted effort toward repair. Traveling the post-Easter road as Christians means going to the broken places in ourselves and our world, and inviting resurrection.

IV.

The idea of koinonia may have been more prescriptive, more of a goal than a reality for the early church, but it remained (and remains) a worthy goal. And imperfect as being the church in Sebastopol in 2018 may be, we also strive toward a vision of the kingdom of God, to be the body of Christ in our community.

Perhaps like the apostles and leaders of the early church, we are called to bring about signs and wonders in the world. It's hard because in our day to day life we go about our business— and yes it's hard, but despite recent backsliding by the federal government, despite the facts of global warming and inconvenient truths, there is movement forward on the environment. There are signs and wonders. Small changes are making a difference— like the trend toward reusable metal straws for coffee drinks, and townships banning plastic grocery bags. More people around the world are relying on wind and solar power than ever before, and renewables have become way more financially accessible than ever before. And in Marin County there are farmers experimenting with something called carbon farming— they're using farmland, the actual dirt, to try to pull carbon out of the air. Not just here in forward-thinking California, but farmers in places like Kansas are using no-till methods to maintain the integrity of their dirt— and use less pesticides. In our own small ways we are bringing about signs and wonders, offering signs of resurrection and new life as we care for the Earth.

And our faith in a brown-skinned prophet who died on a cross and whose uprising inspires us still, our faith in Jesus compels us to reach toward the ideal of Acts 2, to hold all things, even the very Earth, in common as a precious resource, so that all people have what they need to thrive. This season of Easter, may we follow the risen Christ who is in solidarity with the vulnerable, broken places of our world, and may we be called to rise up in prayerful action on behalf of God's creation. Amen.