

Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Easter II

**PRAYER:** God of infinite wisdom, you bring the dawn of each new day. We praise your name for sending Christ with the promise of new life. You scatter the clouds of darkness so that our eyes can behold the truth of your love. You replace the finality of death with an affirmation of life without ending. You burst upon our being with each ray of sunlight, bringing light to illumine our world with the presence of your redeeming grace. As we stand on the threshold of your throne room may you be pleased with our worship and our hearts. Amen.

**STEWARDSHIP:** All that we have reflects the eternal love of God who raised Jesus the Christ from the dead. As those in the early church in Jerusalem brought gifts for those in need, so we too bring offerings as a sign of our commitment and concern. May what we present now to God be a testimony to Christ's resurrection, and may God cause them to be distributed in such a way as others may live.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O God, who in Jesus sent your life to earth and on Easter revealed your power over death, we bless you in the name of Christ our Lord. We cannot know the risen Christ as Thomas demanded to know him. We cannot touch the print of the nails in his hands or gaze at the wounds in his side. But we can know him in the power of his resurrection. Jesus left us, but he did not leave us alone. Before taking his leave of earth, he breathed your spirit on his disciples, enabling them to recall his words and deeds and to interpret them.

That same spirit is still at work. Not only does it enable Christ to be one with Christ; it enables us to be one with each other. We do not envy those first disciples. For just as Christ became their companion on the Emmaus Road, he becomes our companion on the roads we travel. As he walked with them, he walks with us. And if we will but listen, he will also talk with us. Moreover, if we will walk in his steps, he will claim us as his own.

O Lord of heaven and earth, who was never more truly present with us than when you joined humankind in Christ, we adore you for revealing yourself in Jesus, as you were and are and evermore shall be. We thank you for him; we thank you for those who have kept his memory and spirit active in our world. Their name may not be known to us, but their presence is undeniable. As Christ gave himself to your mission, they gave themselves to his mission. As he bore witness to the unity between God and humankind, they bear witness to the unity between Christ and the church.

Yet our life as a Christian community has rarely moved outsiders to exclaim that we are one with Jesus. Unlike those who did evoke this testimony, we are not of one mind and one spirit. We betray our claim to unity with you by our practice of divisions among ourselves. Forgive us, dear Lord, for this betrayal of those who come to us in search of bread for the journey. We cannot but feel guilty that our love has not been more generous; that oppressors have looked to us for silence, and not in vain; that the victims of the system have looked to us for justice, but in vain.

As we intercede in prayer for these victims of our faithlessness, send us forth to put life into our words. Restore their faith in you through our demonstration of faith in them. Awaken us to your will, that we may awaken them to your will. Renew your partnership with us so that your spirit will infuse our partnership with them. And let us and those, hand in hand with you and one another, go into the world to perform the mission to which Christ commissioned us. Let us not forget that, in faith as in life, we all rely on mentors. Grant us the grace, dear Lord, so to represent you that we will neither displease you nor mislead other.

Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Easter II

Acts 4:32-35

“Community of One”

A minister who had served his current pastoral charge for several years, had resigned his parish, and was trying to tie up loose ends before departing. One of his parishioners, who he had never really been particularly fond of, seemed extremely distraught at the pastor’s impending departure. In an effort to console the man, the pastor said, “Don’t despair, I am sure that you will get a good new minister”. To which the man said sadly, “That’s what they told us the last time.” (Good Clean Humor, p. 85)

Methodist preacher, Matthew Phillips, wrote something that really opened up a can of contemplative thought worms for me. He was speculating on reasons why people might question their participation in a local church. All of us have those moments when we wonder, “Why am I here? Why do I bother with the church?” My initial thought was, that people question why they go to church, most likely out of their negative experiences inside the fellowship.

If, as they say, “absence make the heart grow fonder” we can conclude that there are a lot of people in Simcoe who just love First Baptist. When you talk to folks in non-church settings, or even at weddings and funerals, and they find out you are a pastor; quite often conversation shifts to how they were hurt by something that happened in the church. It may have been the wrong word said, a change in music style, or a beloved pastor who was mistreated.

One reason for a distaste of the church, that I have heard many times, (I kid you not) are related to friction over the use or misuse of the kitchen. In my thirty years of ministry, I have seen and heard more disagreements, and hurt feelings that have occurred in the kitchen of a church than anywhere else. Actually, there is a considerable variety of reasons people give for why they believe the church has failed them. Sometime, when I am brave enough, I might explore in a sermon why we Christians need to have thicker skins.

We all know of these reasons for our displeasure at the church fellowship, but Matthew Phillips raised another reason, he believes, people question their fidelity to a church that I had never really considered. He wrote, and I quote, “Sometimes the bible makes you wonder why you joined the church.” The bible? Interesting! Phillip’s point is that sometimes what we read, interpret, and preach about: as biblical imperatives for Christians, is quite scary or upsetting to say the least. Like the command to “Love your enemies”.

This apprehension is certainly true about a passage like the one we just read from the book of Acts. Acts is a biblical book, many believers avoid; most often because they believe it portrays the church in an unrealistic light. Rev. Phillips suggests that Acts is like the fine print of a contract. You know its there, but you tend to want to overlook it, and assume it doesn’t apply. The mere appearance of these three little verses probably has, at least for a few of you, worrying that the Pastor’s is, at the behest of the board of managers or deacons, looking for more money.

Just to set you at ease, the managers and deacons had nothing to do with today’s scripture selection. It comes from the lectionary. I am all for extolling the community virtue of generous stewardship, but using this passage this way, may be an abuse of this passage.

Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Easter II

I once again stress to you all, that every passage of scripture comes out of a context. It is why I believe we should be very wary of sermons based on single verses, out of context. We need to think of a passage's meaning, as it relates to what goes on before and after it, as well as who is writing it, and to whom initially.

First of all, for today, let us remember that we are reading the writing attributed traditionally to Luke, who was a physician, and companion to Paul, and who was an early convert to Christianity. Many scholars have serious doubts as to whether it was Luke who penned these books, primarily because his view of Paul does not always line up with the epistles of Paul.

Luke, whoever he or she was, desired, or was inspired, to record not only the events of Jesus' life, but also that of the early church. The Gospel of Luke, and the book of Acts, are almost better read as if they are one complete story. The gospel flows neatly into the book of Acts, and that is Luke's vital point. Luke's primary thesis is a depiction of the salvation history of God. In other words, how God acted to save us.

Everything, that happens in the book of Acts is predicated on what? I will give you a hint. We just celebrated it last week. The resurrection of Jesus; of course.

It is very clear, that Luke saw the early church community as a product of the resurrection of Jesus. No resurrection; no church. The message of the resurrection, brings hungry hearts to hear the apostles preach, and the power of their words is enhanced beyond measure by the Day of Pentecost; as the Holy Spirit infuses the believers with power. We read after our passage today, about the believers who went out to preach with boldness, to heal the sick, and win thousands to Christ. Not to overlook the expansion into Gentile cities and communities.

Luke's point in today's passage, is that very early on, in the community of Christ, there was tremendous generosity. This is further backed up by the contrasting stories that follow; of Barnabas selling a field and giving the proceeds to the apostles. Then of course, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Just their names make us cringe. These two folks sold a piece of property, and claimed they gave all the proceeds to the apostles, but they withheld some money.

Both were struck dead; not because they kept some money, but because they lied. Talk about church discipline. Both the act of generosity, and that of greed, were seen as prompted by cosmic forces. The Holy Spirit prompted generosity in Barnabas, and Satan prompted the greed in Ananias and Sapphira. This whole section, and much of the book of Acts, and the epistles that follow; reveal that faith in the resurrected Jesus is not to be lived as a solo venture.

Luke tells us that 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." We are told there was not a needy person among them, for many sold their properties, and gave the proceeds to the apostles.

Now let us be honest here in admitting for the record, that this approach to life as a community of faith is foreign to us. Very few, if any of us, would feel motivated to this level of generosity. Maybe, we tell ourselves, this was just a one-time thing.

Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Easter II

Once the church grew to a large level, and became an institution, such acts of generosity became fewer. But let's stop right there. Is it such a rare thing. I always thought so. *Try Trofgluben* writes that this level of communal sharing was not that uncommon in the ancient world.

Luke's initial readers, would not have found his depiction as idealistic. It was more appropriate than surprising. In Deuteronomy 15:4-11 we read that God commanded his people to never let someone remain in a state of need. Aristotle, the noted Greek philosopher, in his book *Ethics* writes, "Among friends everything in common". Pliny the Roman, writes that when offering hospitality, one's possessions should be seen as belonging equally to your guest. Then there are several verses in the epistles that speak to sharing our material goods with those in need.

But most important of all, did you catch that Luke says that in this environment, a great grace was upon them all? The implication here is that the generosity of Christ's people extended beyond the community to outsiders as well. Remember how Jesus said, "They shall know you are my disciples if you love one another." But this sense of community, as being fully intertwined, is not just an ancient phenomenon either. Many of our First Nation friends will tell you that they see themselves as part of a larger community.

The success and the failure they focus on, is that not of individuals, but as their community. Many indigenous cultures around the world, see their reality in the same way, and would fully appreciate and understand what the early Christians were doing. So, as I pondered this considerable experience of seeing our environment through the eyes of community, it became more and more apparent to me, that the source of our uncomfortableness with this passage from Acts, stems from a clash with our own culture.

Our readiness to dismiss this passage as idealistic, unattainable, or even unrealistic; is a product of our own cultural biases. And as modern Canadians, whose roots are deeply entrenched in western ideas, it is quite easy to demonstrate this bias. One of the things that always intrigued me living in Toronto, was how different cultural or ethnic groups intentionally settle in certain areas. Toronto is a huge city made up of separate neighbourhoods.

So, Toronto has, within its borders, defined areas referred to by its predominately ethnic makeup. There is Greektown, Chinatown, Little India, Little Jamaica, etc.: and many of these areas have yearly festivals to celebrate their cultural uniqueness. Surely some of the reason for such settlement patterns is to assist immigrants with familiar language and culture, but generations of the community born in Canada remain in their neighbourhoods. Why?

It is all about community. A community that also transfers into unicultural churches like our Chinese Baptist churches. Community shapes us, supports us, and generally enriches our lives. So, why are so many North Americans shunning community, in favour of social media; which is not community, no matter what Facebook funder Zuckerberg says. The answer clearly is that we have been so ingrained with the idea that we are individuals first.

We are told to look after ourselves. Then slowly over time, we begin to evaluate the truth by how it makes us feel or fits into our own world view. I saw on the weekend a spoof of Rene Descartes famous quote, "I think therefore I am" with "I feel therefore I am".

Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Easter II

There is a huge difference between the two. Fake news, the current buss word, is a product of individualism, and a distrust of community. I ran across a very fascinating piece that John Ortberg wrote in Leadership Magazine about a Psychologist named Milton Rokeach, who wrote a little book in 1959 called, *The Three Christ's of Ypsilanti*. I then found out that it was made into a movie released last fall starring Richard Gere.

In the book, Rokeach describes his attempts to treat three patients at the psychiatric hospital of Ypsilanti, Michigan, who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each patient believed they were unique among humankind and were called to save the world; in other words, they believed they were the Messiah. These three men were full-blown cases of grandiosity, in its pure form. Rokeach had an awful time getting through to these three men.

He wanted to see them get a grip on the reality of who they really were. So, he decided to undertake a little experiment. He put the three men together in a little community, to see if by interacting with others who claimed to be the Messiah, it might break through the delusion. It was, he says, a kind of twelve step recovery group for messiahs. As you can imagine, this little experiment led to some very interesting conversations.

One would claim, "I'm the Messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth." "How do you know?" Rokeach would ask. "God told me." Then one of the other patients would counter, "I never told you any such thing." However, Rokeach reports that every once in a while, one of the three would get a glimmer of reality-however, never deep or for very long.

The Messiah complex was very deep in these men, but it is interesting that any progress made at all, only occurred when the men were in community. (Choice Contemporary Stories and Illustrations, p.42) Here in lies the real heart of the message from this passage today. Many Christians, especially Evangelicals, Baptists included, stress the importance of individual spirituality. The important point of making a personal decision to follow Christ, is erroneously used as a template for many in their spiritual pilgrimage.

And so, we hear things that unsettle us, but we are perhaps never sure how to respond to. For example: someone might postulate that they don't need the church, because they can worship God in their own way. Another might argue that there is no church around that "meets their needs". Another might argue that the church only takes and asks for more; never giving and offering back. Another might complain that their own individual contributions are never fully or publicly recognized.

Notice the trend in all these, and probably lots more. The New Testament, especially the Apostle Paul, and the entirety of church history, all point to one inescapable fact. You must make an individual decision, but the full abundance of life offered by Christ, can only be experienced in community. We, not me or I, are the body of Christ. In the body of Christ, the full expression of empowerment, and gifting of the Holy Spirit, is manifested.

In the community of faith, we are fully nurtured. And, this points us back to our passage today.

Sunday April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Easter II

The demonstration of tremendous generosity the early church experienced, came about because the community was together; worshipping, and caring for each other. Read on in Acts 5:12, 14-16 and we read,

“Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles... Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter’s shadow might fall on some as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.”

The amazing work of the Holy Spirit, occurred predominantly in community. The community of the Apostles, and then by extension, the body of Christ. Can we not finally agree that we need each other, if for no other reason than we can nurture each other’s faith journey. We are many members, Paul says, but we belong to one body. That when I harm my brother, or sister, I am really harming myself, and the whole community.

Can we jettison this rugged independence we love so much, and embrace life affirming dependence? It has been done before, and not just in the early church. Keith Miller and Bruce Larson in their book *Edge of Adventure* make a powerful point when they write...

*The neighbourhood bar is probably the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It’s an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it is permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is un-shockable. It is democratic. You can tell people your secrets and they usually don’t tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers.*

They continue by saying, *-With all my heart I believe that Christ wants his church to be un-shockable, democratic, permissive-a fellowship where people can come in and say, “I’m sunk!” “I’m beat!” “I’ve had it!”* (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p.92)

You cannot know and be known, love and be loved, on your own. We need each other. We need each other to experience the fulness of grace, peace, love, hope and joy, found only in the body of Christ.

**BENEDICTION:** O God, as you have brought us together to think thoughts of Christ, send us forth to do the deeds of Christ. Let the affections of our hearts and the deeds of our hands proclaim our devotion to you and our love for one another. Amen.