

“All Things in Common”

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April 12, 2015 Easter 2B

John 20:19-23 Acts 4:32-35

Taxes are due this week. How’s that working out for you?

Yesterday *the Times* reported that President Obama and his wife earned \$477,000 last year. They paid 93,000 in taxes and gave 70,000 to charity. That’s about 15% to charity, or after taxes, 18%. Not bad. They set a good example for our nation. Vice President Biden and his wife, on the other hand, earned 388,000, paid 90,000 in taxes and gave 7,000 to charity. 7,000 is not exactly generous for that amount of income. It’s less than 2%. Shouldn’t it be that the more you have, the *higher* percentage you give? In this church we have a good number of people who give more than \$7,000 to us each year, and they don’t make nearly as much as the Vice President.

Leah read from the book of Acts this morning, how the first group of believers came together after Jesus’ resurrection. The passage paints a picture of radical generosity, 100% given to the church. It says they sold their homes and land and gave the proceeds to the leaders to distribute as needed. No one had any private property, but everything they had was held in common. It was spontaneous, voluntary, communal living, and there was enough for everyone. It says there was not a needy person among them. And they were of “one heart and soul.”

Or so they say. Some people claim this scenario in the book of Acts couldn’t *really* have happened. We’re just reading a romanticized version of it. In the very next chapter we have the story of Ananias, who kept back some of the proceeds from the sale of his land, and got in trouble for deceiving the elders. And in chapter 6 it says that the Greek-speaking Jews complained against the Aramaic-speaking Hebrews, because the Greek widows were not getting their share of food. Looks like a culture clash to me. We also see conflicts between leaders and arguments over Christian practice. So everything was not as rosy as Acts 4 would like us to think.

Still, something unusual was going on, so that the Latin Christian, Tertullian, wrote in the second century, “Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy... ‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other.’”^{*} The early church wasn’t perfect, but they were generous. People looked out for each other, as a family would. This made an impression on their neighbors, and it continues right down to the present day. They will know we are Christians by our love. It’s our distinctive sign.

Why were the disciples so generous? First of all, they believed that Jesus was coming back soon to restore the Kingdom of God. And when that happened, life as they knew it would be totally different, and there would be no need for private possessions. Besides that, the disciples believed that Jerusalem would be destroyed in their generation (Matt. 24:1-2). And in fact the Romans laid siege to the city and burned it to the ground in 70 AD, in response to a Jewish insurrection. Christians mostly stayed out of this conflict. But getting rid of possessions would actually make it easier to leave the city, which many Christians did before the Romans laid siege to it.

This was a time of instability, but also of hope. And instead of turning inward, and looking out for their individual interests, the followers of Jesus took care of each other. This was not a new idea. They were living out what they learned from their Jewish heritage. Jewish law stated that when someone was reaping a harvest, they were to leave food in the fields to be gathered by the poor and the alien.** And in Deuteronomy (15:4) it says, “There will ... be no one in need among you...” So this wasn’t a new idea. It’s just that these new Christians were passionate about putting it into practice.

Unfortunately it doesn’t look like they succeeded in the long run. It may have worked for a while, but Paul referred in some of his letters to a collection to help the Jerusalem church, which apparently at that point was struggling with poverty.*** Selling possessions may work for the short term. But it’s like a pyramid scheme. If the only source of income is people selling what they own, then the pool of people has to keep getting larger, to support those who have already sold everything. Eventually the possessions run out and then what do you do? There have to be some steady sources of income if you want to feed everyone over a long period of time.

It doesn’t look like the churches outside of Jerusalem lived communally at that time either. But they were still generous, as Tertullian wrote. Generosity was a sign of the power of God among them. It was a visible demonstration, validating their testimony to the resurrection of Christ. Jesus Christ is risen, and that changes how we live together.

The Bible does not promote one kind of economic system over another. You can be a capitalist Christian or a socialist Christian. But however we organize ourselves, it needs to work in such a way that people have what they need to live. It’s not that everyone has to be equal, but people of faith look out for those in need. Poverty is not God’s will. When God’s will is fulfilled, no one will be in need.

So how are we doing? In this country, it doesn’t look like we are moving in the right direction. Most people recognize a growing gap between the rich and the poor. The people at the top are keeping more of their money, and more and more people at the bottom are falling hopelessly behind. Yes, some people are generous, and charities help to fill in the gap. But when a corporation reaps billions in profits, while their lowest paid workers live below the poverty level and have to rely on government subsidies to make ends meet, this is not in accord with Christian values.

As people of faith, we know our life together is complicated and there are no easy answers, no one way to address the problem that not everyone has what they need to live with dignity. But we can uphold certain values in our life together. We can support lawmakers who are not afraid to address greed and corruption. We can support laws and programs that care for people who can’t care for themselves, and increase opportunities for those who can. And we can look for ways to cultivate a more generous spirit within and among ourselves.

A generous spirit is not just about giving money to charity. Some charities make things worse, as those of us who read the book Toxic Charity last year found out. Whether or not a charity is helpful or harmful, a generous spirit is not just about giving. It’s also about how we organize ourselves. And it’s about openness, compassion and mutuality, a sense that we belong together and need each other. Where does that come from? And how do we get there?

Eulalia read from the gospel of John this morning, that on the evening of the resurrection, the disciples had locked themselves in a house out of fear. But Jesus came in and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” And then it says he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The disciples were afraid and had been protecting themselves. But when they experienced Jesus alive with them, and felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, they stopped protecting themselves and walked in the world with boldness and generosity.

Leah also read from Acts that as the apostles testified to the resurrection, “great grace was upon them all.” Grace means a kindly attitude, love that is given without someone deserving it. The disciples didn’t deserve grace. They had all deserted Jesus and fled. And here they were sitting behind locked doors. But Jesus came to them and gave them the gift of peace and forgiveness. So they told others what they experienced and believed, that Jesus was alive. And they were blessed with a spirit of grace and power and generosity.

This is important for us as a church because we need that spirit to keep us together. Fifty years ago people in this church had a natural social connection to each other. Most of them were white Americans who lived in Leonia, their children all went to the same schools, and many of them belonged to the same political party. But that has changed. Now more than half of our people live outside of town, and there are at least ten different cultures of the world represented here. We are such a diverse group, we can no longer count on social connections to keep us together. The only things that can truly bring us together are God’s spirit and grace. We are drawn together because we are all human beings who have been received into God’s family by grace.

That’s the basis on which we help each other, not that another person thinks like me, or enjoys the same kind of pastimes, or is my best friend. It’s nice to have friends in church. But we help each other, not because we are friends, but because someone is in need and we are part of the same spiritual family, sisters and brothers. We help each other because God’s spirit and grace are among us, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And God’s grace and power are here with us today. So may we live bold lives of generosity and love, and take every opportunity to express this love to each other. This is our distinctive sign, not that we know all the answers, or can tell other people what to think or how to live, but that we love one another, as sisters and brothers. I challenge you today to be part of it. Talk with someone you don’t know. And look for an opportunity to help a brother or sister. And may God’s spirit and grace be with us all. Amen.

* as quoted by Dan Clendenin, “Much Grace Was With Them All: Our Distinctive Sign,” at www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060417JJ.shtml.

** See Lev. 19:9 and Deut. 24:19-21.

*** See I Cor. 16:1-3, Romans 15:25-26, and 2 Cor. chapters 8 and 9.