

Delivered: Saint Paul UMC (Lincoln, NE) on April 18, 2021 (3rd Sunday of Easter)

SERMON: A GENEROUS PEOPLE

Series: "An Easter People"

Text: Acts 2:42-47

By *Jed Linder*

Focus: Generous fellowship is a mark of the Easter community.

Function: To encourage greater generosity at SPUMC.

OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray... Gracious God, we thank you for this time together to worship, to pray, and fellowship with one another. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and prepare our hearts and our minds for your message to us this day. In Jesus name we pray, amen.

I. INTRODUCTION: LIVING AS A RESURRECTED COMMUNITY

Easter Sunday has come and gone, but we are right in the midst of the Easter season, also called *Eastertide*, a period that lasts for 50 days until the Day of Pentecost. And Eastertide is the perfect time to talk about what the Easter event means for us as the church, and how, 2,000 years ago, things changed forever. That empty tomb changed things forever. Those resurrection experiences the Jesus' followers had changed things forever. They transformed Peter from a man afraid to admit he knew Jesus, into the rock upon which Jesus built his church. They transformed the disciples from a group of followers who abandoned Jesus when he was on his way to the cross, into Apostles willing to die for Jesus and the good news he brought. And they transformed a tiny band of societal nobodies and misfits into a worldwide movement that would begin breaking down barriers, flipping societal norms on their heads, and calling the world into a new way of life, a resurrected, Christ way of life, coming from this very first resurrected community.

And so, for the rest of the Easter season, we are going to be looking at this resurrected community in its infancy. We are going to be looking at the life of very first church as it's recounted by Luke in the Book of Acts. This church begins as a very small collection of Jewish men and women who made up of Jesus' closest friends, family, and followers, all who witnessed the resurrected Lord. And these people become the seed that Jesus planted, and that Jesus watered by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. And from this seed and spiritual watering, the first sprout is pops up [SLIDE: Sprout], and the church begins to grow.

SCRIPTURE

So that brings us to our Scripture for today. Acts 2:42-47 [Begin SLIDES of the scripture]:

⁴² The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. ⁴³ A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were united and shared everything. ⁴⁵ They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. ⁴⁶ Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. ⁴⁷ They praised God and demonstrated God's

goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved. (CEB)

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Thanks be to God.

II. KOINONIA

This is the first snapshot of the first church – the first resurrected community – and it’s when the church is operating at its finest. And we see right away four hallmarks that help to identify this community. I’ll read the first verse again:

⁴² The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [That’s one], to the community [that’s two], to their shared meals [that’s three], and to their prayers [that’s four].

Now we’re going to talk about all four of these over the next few weeks, but for today we’ll focus on the second hallmark mentioned, the devotion each believer has to the community itself.

The Greek word for this practice is the pretty well-known word *koinonia* [SLIDE: word *koinonia* onscreen], which many Bible translations translate “fellowship.” But the term fellowship today is one we overuse, and undervalue. We think of fellowship pretty much as a “how do you do?” and a cup of coffee and donut. And those are good things, especially the donuts, but we’re talking about something much deeper here.

We see it in this first church that fellowship, or *koinonia*, means doing life together! From the holy, religious activities like prayer, worship, and witness, to the ordinary activities of eating food, sharing goods, and spending time together. And it’s important to point out that just because they were doing all of this together, it doesn’t mean they were some homogenous people-group who all thought just alike... They were not. Yes, they were all Jewish, but they had different backgrounds, different jobs, different politics, different ethnicities, different prejudices... they were different people. But they didn’t let those differences stop them from living their lives together. Because what united them, the resurrected Jesus Christ, was greater than all of those things.

Now, to the Western context we live in today, this type of fellowship might seem quite foreign. After all, the churches split over everything now. We split over the type of music we want, the youth and adult ministries we want, the politics we want... We think today’s church is supposed to serve each one of us as the individual, instead of the individual serving the church.

Because we come from a very individualistic culture; where everything in life is ala carte and we can pick and choose who we want to be and what the truth is we want to believe. Thus, we can select who is worthy of our time, our love, and our generosity... But our passage for today, and the first church it remembers, challenges these notions... This resurrected community says that when people come together in Christ’s name, regardless of how you feel about them, they become someone to whom you are devoted... to whom you share your life with... including your money and possessions.

III. RADICAL GENEROSITY

We read that, ⁴⁴ All the believers were united and shared everything. ⁴⁵ They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. This was part of living in this kind of radical *koinonia* – a radical *koinonia* is made up of a radical generosity.

Now please don't misunderstand what is happening here... We have a tendency to want to read this through our current political lenses and label it with a modern economic or political theory. But this is not an abolition of private property like in a communism or a commune. People are not selling everything they had, putting it all together into the "public" fund, and then drinking Kombucha and eating granola all day. No. The verbs in the original Greek are in the imperfect tense, which means they were ongoing. It was an ongoing practice. So, people would enter into the community freely, there was no government coercion, and gladly offer up their possessions to sell *if* someone had a need. They still had their homes, as we see they were all eating in them together. And they still had some people who had more while others had less. But what they didn't have was a *needy person* among them.

They lived out of God's abundance, trusting they would always have enough provided by God's grace. That means they were free from their possessions – they were not possessed by their possessions – putting one another before their own wealth. They saw their own well-being connected to the well-being of the others in their community. And they practiced a radical generosity providing for one another whenever one was in need. It's like that famous quote from Mahatma Gandhi [SLIDE: Gandhi quote], "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed."

IV. CHRISTIAN EQUITY

Now some of you might have already recognized it, but for those that didn't, this first church is clearly practicing equity. This is, of course, a big concept being discussed right now in the public discourse, particularly in contrast with equality. For those that don't know, allow me to briefly explain:

Let's say I have a small church of 10 people, and I have \$1000 in the collection plate to give to the community. The COVID pandemic has just hit, and I know times are tough out there, so I give each person \$100. That's equality. But, let's say 9 of those 10 people are actually doing just fine during COVID, they haven't lost their jobs or income in any way, and they don't need the money. But that 10th person lost her job and now she needs \$1000 just to keep a roof over her head. Instead, then, of giving everyone \$100, including those without the need, I give her alone the \$1000 to help her survive and get back on her feet. That's equity. The church community has provided for her need.

It should be noted that equity in this case is not based upon a people-group or intersectional identity, which is talked a lot about right now – we'll actually talk about something like that in a few weeks. It is, instead, an equity based on each individual's personal situation. That means, you actually have to know the person, know their story and know their struggles and needs in

order to fill those needs! In order to ease someone's suffering you have to know what they are suffering from, and only then you can provide the relief needed.

And that is why this radical generosity has its place within the church's *koinonia*, because they know one another and they love one another and they provide for one another. They were, for all intents and purposes, living as a family... and that is part of being a "Resurrected Community."

V. CONCLUSION: SOMETHING TO SAY

I want to close now with what we, as a resurrected community today, can say to the world around us. I'll do this each week. You see, I believe there is something special about following Jesus and about being the church. And we have something to say as the church. We have an alternative to offer the world. And it seems clear to me that right now our voice is desperately needed. Our politics, our media, our society can be so divisive, selfish, unforgiving, and driven by domination... But we are to be driven by service to others, and we have an amazing message of unity, generosity, and love. And we can deliver this message beyond just our words, but by our actions... our giving of money, our giving of time, our sharing of God's love for all people!

Can you imagine being a part of a church family, a *koinonia*, where you know you will always be loved and cared for by others, no matter your past, your present, your gender, your race, your ethnicity, your orientation? Where you know you'll never fall through the cracks of the system? Where losing a job or having a medical emergency isn't a promise of poverty? That's what a "Resurrected Community" can be.

We've got some work to do, but by God's grace, Jesus' guidance, and the Spirit's power, we can be that church and send that message to the world. And that is good news!

CLOSING PRAYER

Allow me to pray...

Gracious God, the awesome promise of Easter can seem so far away at times... it can be enough to lose hope. But you are ever faithful, and you provide for your family out of an awesome abundance. An abundance that we can then share with one another. Help us to overcome the temptations of greed, of closing our fellowship – our koinonia – off from others due to prejudice or hatred, and empower us to live out the good news of Easter this day, and every day. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.