

“In Search of Community”

a sermon by

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Text: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions.” (Acts 4:32)

Several years ago I had the chance to visit the city of Athens, Greece. High above the city, visible from almost every site, are the ruins of the Acropolis, home to one of the greatest civilizations humankind has ever built. It is hard to stand there in the midst of those ancient ruins and not imagine that “Golden Age” in Greek history in the time of Pericles where a civilization was built that has survived for over twenty five hundred years. When we think of the means by which they lived, it may seem very crude and primitive by our standards: no automobiles, appliances, cell phones, and computers. But when one thinks about the means by which they lived – the Athens of Phidias, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Plato – one realizes that this was a community that perhaps has surpassed any city built since then – including cities such as New York, London, and Paris.

Or, one remembers this little band of twelve disciples that lived with Jesus in Galilee. The fastest method of travel in those days was a donkey. Their houses consisted of one room with two small windows and usually no chimney, where the family slept on the upper platform and the beasts slept on the floor. Not really the means by which most of us would hope. But when you think of the things for which they lived, what group of individuals anywhere have lived as did they?

I.

There is a passage in the Book of Acts that opens a window for us on the life of the early church. In chapter four we read 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.” (Acts 4:32) We also read that there was not a needy person among them, but the people who had possessions gladly sold what they had to give to the community.

Now, this passage is one that has troubled many people over the years. Some have argued that the early church practiced a form of “communism” or “socialism.”

Such is not the case. Private property was not banned. The people gave what they owned. After all, to abolish private property is to abolish giving, since a person can only give what he or she possesses. It is also noteworthy that sharing was not enforced. People gave because they wanted to give.

The distinctive insight into this passage is that it demonstrated something that was unique. These people cared so much about each other that they were willing to sacrifice personal pleasure for the good of the whole.

Acts demonstrates this by both a positive and a negative example. The positive example was a man named Barnabas (Acts 4: 36-37). He sold a piece of property and gave the proceeds to the apostles. Barnabas was given the name “son of encouragement.” He was the kind of person all of us admire. He didn’t tear people down. He built them up. He gave willingly, generously, and with a big heart.

The negative example is found in Acts 5:1-11 in the famous story of Ananias and Sapphira. In this case, a husband and wife, perhaps jealous of the attention that Barnabas had received, conspired among themselves to deceive the community. They too sold a piece of property, but they kept some of the proceeds for themselves. That in itself might not have been a bad thing, but they professed to the apostles that they had given the church all the proceeds from the sale of the property. As a result, both Ananias and his wife Sapphira were struck dead.

Once again, this story has troubled many people. After all, they gave most of the proceeds to the church. So what if they had kept only a small part for themselves? The issue here was deceit and greed.

Some have found this punishment troubling and have wondered if this was in the spirit of the one who forgave a woman taken in adultery and told her to “go and sin no more.” There are those that think this story should not be in the New Testament. It is, however, a sobering reminder that the severest punishment that occurred in the primitive church did not fall on an adulterer, a murderer, or a thief. It fell on a “respectable” couple who falsified a gift in an attempt to appear generous when they were in fact very greedy.

II.

At its heart, this narrative is about the search for community. One of the dimensions of the world of the New Testament was the violence that was present in the Roman Empire. Human life had little value. The Roman games in the arena were a symbol of the cheap value placed on human life. Sometimes in a single afternoon thousands of people were killed: gladiators by the swords, innocent peasants devoured by the lions – it was a very violent world.

The Christian church found itself in the midst of this world. But the church offered a different view of life. As this passage in Acts demonstrates, compassion was a mark of the community. Those who had a great deal shared with those who had little. The early church also formulated the office of “deacon” – these were individuals like Stephen who made deacons and who had a special responsibility to the most vulnerable people in Israel’s society – widows and orphans.

As such, the church received a lot of attention from the secular society in which it existed. People noticed the difference. Some theologians even went so far to say that “Extra Ecclesiam nullus Salva” – “Outside the church there is no salvation.” By that they did not mean that a person who was not a member of a church could not be saved. Rather it meant that so many people found help and healing within the church that they could not imagine salvation apart from this.

But, what about today? We are living in a very impersonal society. There are many people in our society who live alone – many without any family at all. Moreover, we are a society that often disregards the marginal people in our society – the poor, the illegal immigrant, the homeless, and the countless children in our midst without real families.

One of the fundamental tasks of the church is the task of pastoral care. By pastoral care we mean the concern for individuals as part of the community of faith. For Karl Barth, pastoral care was the “cure of souls.” Barth believed that the cure of souls means the concern of God for individuals in light of God’s purpose for each one of us, the divine promise and claim addressed to every person, and the witness demanded of every person.

So, what is it that makes for the community that everyone seeks?

III.

First, there is the conviction that every human being is created in the image of God and the purpose of every human life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Creation means that we are creatures, whose lives are the expression of the purposes of God. Human life does not just happen. It exists because God thought of each one of us before we were born, called us into being and gave us an identity.

In this weekend’s edition of the *Wall Street Journal* there is an article entitled “Man vs. God: Two Prominent Thinkers Debate Evolution, Science and the Role of Religion.” The article features the work of the atheist Richard Dawkins, whose book *The God Delusion* has been discussed widely. Dawkins argues that “The greatest show on earth is not God but Darwinian evolution which explains the creation of life and leaves God with nothing to do.”

But, as a number of scientists have pointed out, Darwinian evolution cannot explain everything about our universe. It cannot explain everything about human life, in particular why some humans have sacrificed themselves to save others. Herbert Butterfield, a very distinguished historian, has observed that one distinctive contribution of Christian faith to Western culture was a sense of the preciousness of human life. Human beings are valuable, not because of some inherent characteristics but because God, the creator of heaven and earth, is willing that they should exist and knows them by name.

This is a fundamental assumption about the Christian community. Nicolas Berdyaev once pointed out that where there is no God there is no man. By that he meant that when God is left out of the picture, human life has value only as he or she is a member of the right family, the right class, the right political party, and the right culture. As Christians we believe that every human being is a child of God, and indeed the dwelling place of the living God.

All of us live under the command of Matthew 25 – “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

IV.

Secondly, pastoral care grows out of the church’s understanding of human sinfulness. One of the greatest controversies of the early church was the Pelagian – Augustinian Controversies of the 5th century. It pitted two very brilliant theologians and churchmen against one another. One of these men was a British monk by the name of Pelagius. He was offended by the great violence and corruption of the Roman Empire. Pelagius insisted that the church had to stand against this. He viewed the church as a group of morally perfect people who were strong enough to confront the evil of society.

Now there is something very appealing about this. Pelagius believe in the triumph of the human spirit over passion, weakness, and temptation.

On the other side of this debate was St. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa. Augustine was very sympathetic to Pelagius. He too longed for the church to be a moral community. But Augustine also saw that the church could never be a perfect community as long as it was made up of imperfect humans. For Augustine the church was not constituted by human achievement. It was the gift of God. Augustine referred to the church as an “Inn for Convalescents.” It was not a place for perfect people but a place where people could experience the forgiveness and power of God.

Thirdly, pastoral care grows out of the church’s understanding of salvation. In theological terms the church has always affirmed the role of justification and sanctification. In justification we assert that we are saved by God’s grace and forgiven our sins. In sanctification we affirm that God’s grace continues to work in our lives.

Sanctification, which is the process by which all of us seek to be more like Christ, is something that all of us should work for, but it is something that none of us will ever perfectly achieve. There is a human possibility of growth in grace, but when this becomes self-conscious and a form of self-righteousness, it is very destructive. To be a Christian is to know that one lives on the one hand by the forgiveness of sins, and on the other hand by the power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives. To be a Christian is to know that growth in grace is possible, but it is also to know that one sins in one’s best deeds as well in one’s worst deeds.

We are living in a time in which people are seeking real community – people young and old alike. People are seeking a community that can support them, encourage them, and even correct them.

The pastoral ministry of the church is concerned with building this kind of community. It is therefore one of the key aspects of the ministry of the church.

May God grant to us the wisdom to know our great need for God’s love and the courage to demonstrate that love to all we encounter.

Amen!