

Acts 2:42-47 (NRSV)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Community of Our Longing

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: May 11, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

So, the early church was really a spiritual commune. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ... And day by day the Lord added to their number...”

Any of us old enough will find this idea familiar. In the 1960s and 70s any number of intentional communities, or communes, sprung up around the country, many of them in Massachusetts. Out in Western Mass, where I grew up the most famous, or infamous, depending on your perspective, was the Brotherhood of the Spirit. Founded in 1968 by a local charismatic, the group was founded on spiritual ideas very similar to those in the early church. By 1970, the community numbered around 50, and it developed formal rules for their life together. Drugs, cigarettes, alcohol and sexual promiscuity were banned, and members set out to purge themselves of their imperfections.¹

It’s hard to miss the similarity between these intentional communes and the description of the early church community in Acts. It’s one of the reasons that politicians who hate taxes and welfare but love the Bible have such a vague relationship with the latter. If you really want to say that the United States is a Christian nation, founded on Christian and Biblical principles, it’s pretty hard to escape the fact that Acts should be the blueprint. The principles of a Christian nation would be pretty well summarized in these few verses we’ve read this morning: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

It’s pretty easy to prove that most of the people calling us to recognize the United States as a Christian nation wouldn’t recognize it if it were. But, to be honest, picking on disingenuous politicians is low hanging fruit. Furthermore, there is really no wide agreement that the country should be a Christian nation. Even many of us who are Christians are skeptical of that idea. But even if we don’t think the country should be modeled on Christian principles, there is a related question we cannot so easily brush off. That question is, shouldn’t a Christian church community look something like the one described in Acts? Shouldn’t our church community look something like the very first community?

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.... with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

Surely we do some of these things, some of them very well. But I think if we are honest with ourselves, we don’t do them all perfectly. I love this community, as I am sure you do, too, but I have to admit that it’s not perfect. To paraphrase Paul, there are times that I do what I wish I would not and times I do not do what I wish I would. Maybe some of you know the experience, also.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance_Community (accessed May 10, 2014)

Not to put too fine a point on it, no church I know of is close to perfect, nor is any family or marriage, or anything else I know of under the sun. In many ways this is very discouraging news. The communes of the 60s and 70s were formed with the hope that an ideal community could be made. Before them, groups like the Shakers hoped to build heaven on earth. Every marriage begins with the commitment to love 'till death do us part. But in the end, human frailty invades our Utopias. The ideals so bright in the beginning soon dull, at least a little and sometimes a lot. This is the human predicament.

The human predicament. How are we to think about it? There are a few ways. Unfortunately some of the common ways of thinking about the human condition lead to pretty disastrous results.

One real favorite is to believe that if everyone would just act right, things could be perfect. We say that things are supposed to be perfect, and they can be, and if things aren't perfect, someone's not doing something right. It's someone's fault. Am I dissatisfied with the community? Let's see if I can figure out who is the blame for that. If things aren't the way they are supposed to be, there must be somebody to blame. If we can just find out who is to blame, then we can figure out how to fix things, and then they will be perfect. The problem with this option is that it never actually works, and it leads to a perpetual state of frustration, and along the way, a lot of people get blamed and often badly hurt.

Another favorite option in religious circles, especially, is almost the opposite. We throw our hands in the air and say that we human beings are hopelessly flawed. By our nature, original sin, or some other defect, we humans are simply incapable of living out our ideals. So, we can quit trying and leave things entirely up to God's grace. But leaving everything up to God isn't very tenable in the extreme. And nobody really does it. Who walks into the street on a dark rainy night and says it will be God's will whether I get run over or not? But by picking and choosing a little, we can justify our apathy. The poor will always be with us. War and rumors of war are inevitable.

Another option, another real favorite, is to say that Christian ideals are simply naïve and unrealistic. We can't live by love and sharing in the real world. We'll just get stepped on like a doormat if we try. Better to admit that real life is a dog eat dog world. If we accept this reality, then we realize that we should just look out for ourselves. This option has a number of real advantages. With one sweep of the hand we can dispense with worrying about ideals of sharing, caring and compassion; they're simply simple-minded, we can say. But if we say our ideals are nonsense, then our feelings of ill will, or our desire for vengeance, for example, become perfectly acceptable. We can end up justifying things that will send chills up our spine. Not only that, as Fred Buechner reminds us, if we turn our craven desires into a feast, we will create havoc not just for others; in the process we will eat ourselves alive.

So, what are we to do with our predicament? What are we to do with our imperfect communities and our imperfect selves who inhabit those communities?

When my daughter was around eleven she promised me she would never act like a teenager. About a year and a half later, she no longer remembered the promise. Echoing in the halls between the children's bedrooms would come shouts from my sweet little girl, "Wesley (her younger brother), you're a roach. Leave me alone. Get out of my sight."

So, Emma and I would have a conversation. “Em, honey, you can’t treat your brother like that.”

“Why not, he’s a roach.”

“Honey, he’s not a roach. He’s your brother, and you need to treat him nicely.”

“No, he’s a roach.”

Time to change the strategy. “Look honey, he’s much younger than you are. He doesn’t understand things as well as you do. You have to make allowances for him.”

At that my daughter’s expression became utterly incredulous. “What do you mean I have to make allowances for him? You mean I have to pay him, too?”

I broke into laughter, which ended this attempt at parenting through the use of reason.

I’m sure you all have similar stories in your own families. That is, I’m sure that in your own families you can cite examples of trying to get children, or adults for that matter, to act differently from how they feel. Have we not all had such experiences, on the giving end or the receiving end?

I was asking Emma to act as though she felt brotherly love for her brother. I was asking her to act as though she wanted to treat him fairly, as though she wanted to share her space with him, to act as though she wanted to make allowances for him.

Now, let’s be clear, I knew this was not what Emma felt like doing. And I knew that she knew that I knew that. This was not about saying to her, “Come on, Em, you know you love him.” At least in this moment she didn’t, but I was asking her to act as though she did.

This is all quite familiar, is it not? It’s how we teach children manners, sharing, caring and all manner of things.

And why do we do this? After all, families remain imperfect, even with the best of parenting. Why even bother? And more to the point, why do we try to teach our children to pretend, to act as though they feel love and generosity when they clearly don’t feel that way?

We all know the answer, don’t we? We teach our children what we want them to become. And to do that, we ask them to act as though they are already there. Some might call it fake it ‘till you make it. But I rather think of it as something like a spiritual practice. By acting as though they love when they don’t feel that way, they actually change. They become more like they pretend to be. Will they become perfectly loving? No, of course not. But will they become more loving? Yes, they will. In our families, we commit ourselves to a set of values, a way of being with one another, that that we are aiming for, that doesn’t yet exist and may never fully exist. But they are the ideals that we enact, even when, maybe especially when, we don’t feel like it, because we believe that we will gradually make ourselves into the people we act as though we are.

Was that first church community way back in the beginning perfect and ideal? I don’t know. I have my doubts. But what I have no doubt about is that the ideals expressed in the story they wrote about the community are right on the mark. It is the community they longed for. It is the community we aspire to. In this community we are called to practice love, sharing and goodwill even when we don’t feel like it, even when we feel as though some people are roaches. We do it not just because we ought to. We do it because

doing it changes our common life together for the better. As a bonus, it changes us for the better, too. It is the way to become more like the community of our longing. Amen.