

“The Church – Sharing with Others”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 28, 2024

5th Sunday of Easter

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Acts 4:32-35

Introduction

During these several weeks of Eastertide, we have been reading from the Book of Acts to discover markers – or practices – of the early church. We have seen how these early followers of Christ in Jerusalem gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus, participated in acts of physical and spiritual healing, and practiced new beginnings. This fledgling community of faith – led by the apostles Peter and John – was creating a new identity: how they would confront the challenges they met and live together in a diverse society.

The characters of *Cory and the Seventh Story*¹ face some of these same challenges. They live in a place where some possess more than others, creating animosity and division. Like the early apostles, Cory and Owl are provided with a story to tell: to witness to a different way of living together as a community. In today’s scripture reading, from Acts, chapter 4, we hear about faith practices that set the community of believers apart. Like a children’s story, it might sound to us a little simplistic – we may quibble with its practicality – but it offers something to chew on as we contemplate how God is calling us to be the church in our own time and context.

Read Acts 4:32-35

These stories from the book of Acts – and from the earliest days of the Christian church – ask us to ponder the question: *what does the resurrection of Jesus make possible?*

Let us recall that Peter and John have already been arrested for having healed a lame beggar outside of the temple and brought before the council to answer the question: *by what power or by what name did you do this?* In healing this man, Peter and John were disrupting the existing power structure; some of the people – especially those with something to lose – did not like the story the

¹ Brian McClaren and Gareth Higgins, *Cory and the Seventh Story*, Convergent Books

apostles were telling; the religious leaders were not happy that someone like this beggar who had always sat outside the temple now not only came in, but did so leaping and praising God. What other changes might this be leading to?

The majority of people in the ancient world had little wealth and few possessions. While they may not have been beggars, their livelihoods depended largely on the Romans and their local collaborators. Thus, the welfare of local communities required the sharing of possessions. What Acts 4 describes is a community of believers that chose to pool their resources so that nobody would be in need. Some members – probably the exception rather than the rule – had houses or property that could be sold in order to make sure that none in the group suffered from want.

Thus, when the text tells us that *everything* was held in common, we likely see a dash of hyperbole. Even in those seemingly simpler days, it would be hard to live without any personal possessions. But what should not be lost is the spirit of generosity that existed among these believers; the way that the resurrection of Christ compelled them to practice this ministry of sharing. It seems they genuinely cared about the needs of others and understood there was more they could offer than just praise and prayers.

While the early Christian church described in the New Testament writings had its share of disagreements and controversies, it was known for its spirit of sharing. The resurrection of Jesus, and the Spirit's power, made it possible for these communities to exhibit the same self-sacrificial love that Christ embodied during his own life; to provide an alternate narrative to the greed and self-centeredness that is a part of every society's story. As Willie James Jennings describes it, "Money here will be used to destroy what money is usually used to create: distance and boundaries between people."²

A great grace was upon them all. In an earlier description of the Acts community, from chapter 2, we hear how the believers *ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.* These two English words – grace and goodwill – share the same Greek derivative, *charis*. As the Swifthouse reminded us in today's story, by gathering around tables to share meals we can begin to bridge the differences between us; possibly even forgetting, at least for a while, what divided us in the first place.

² As quoted by Matt Skinner from *WorkingPreacher.com*

So, what are the ways that we, as Christ's community of followers, practice sharing; how do we give witness to the resurrection of Jesus in the ways we choose to live together? My mind turns to our Faith Garden – where we use our church property to grow fresh produce for hungry people who would, otherwise, get only canned or boxed items from the food bank. I think about the Pass-It-On Store where folks can give what they no longer need to become a resource for others who have need. I think of the community meal, where we offer free dinners to any and everyone who wants them for whatever reason, no questions asked. I think of all the ways that people lend their time and skills to build, beautify, or repair our church property. And I think of the rides that members offer one another, whether here to church or to doctors' appointments or the grocery store.

I also think of the ways that our denomination and broader church encourages and exemplifies this spirit of sharing. There are now 18 local congregations that are mission partners with North Church, sharing time and meals and other resources, showing the homeless in our community that God, and God's people, care about them. I think of the international hospitals and schools – like the Dougbe River School in Liberia – that the church supports; showing our commitment to participating in healing and educating those with fewer resources than ourselves. I think of the hundreds of fellow Earth Care Congregations from around the country who, like we do, are trying to imagine and engage in creation care practices and awareness.

We are well-aware, of course, that all of this good work – in the spirit of sharing, peace, and love – takes place in a world often grounded in competing narratives; where politics colors institutional trust, where the violence of war plods on month after month and year after year, where Anti-Semitism bleeds into peaceful protest, and where fears about safety and security influence how we live and who we welcome.

What does the resurrection of Jesus make possible? For the Christian community of faith – in all of its various forms and contexts – it means that we have been provided with an example of generosity and a spirit of sharing. We look back upon the early church, and we look forward as the church today, to provide witness to a different story: one that boldly exhibits *charis* – goodwill and grace – towards all people. When we gather together, we retell this story of resurrection power that can transform people and the world in which we live. And we bear witness to this story of peace and love by sharing what we have been given.

Sometimes, as in the scripture we read today, that might involve offering our prayer and praise, our time and resources so that others will not be in need. I see

the people of this church faithfully giving tithes and offerings, welcoming preschool families and other groups to use our space, and supporting local and international ministries (in addition to the ones mentioned before) such as Homeless Hookup, Blankets Plus, Rise Against Hunger, and more. Generosity has real-world consequences.

What does the resurrection of Jesus make possible? In a few weeks, we will see how – in the book of Acts – the coming of the Spirit in Pentecostal power gives birth to the church of Jesus Christ; the gathering of people to tell and bear witness to this alternate story of peace and love. It is a story that not everyone likes, for it may ask participants to give something up for the welfare of others. This is a resurrection story; a new beginning. And as the Swifthorse says, “It’s now up to you to help the story come true.” Amen.