

Acts 2:42-47 (JB Phillips NT)

They continued steadily learning the teaching of the apostles, and joined in their fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer.

Everyone felt a deep sense of awe, while many miracles and signs took place through the apostles. All the believers shared everything in common; they sold their possessions and goods and divided the proceeds among the fellowship according to individual need. Day after day they met by common consent in the Temple; they broke bread together in their homes, sharing meals with simple joy. They praised God continually and all the people respected them. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were finding salvation.

The Community of Saints

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: April 13, 2008

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Text: *Acts 2:42-47*

A funny thing happened on the way to my sermon this week. I looked up the assigned readings, I opened the Bible. I began reading. And then to my amazement, I realized that instead of reading the Bible, I was reading an article from the Medford Transcript about North Prospect Union Church.

It read, “The members of North Prospect union UCC joined in their fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayer. All the believers shared everything in common; they sold their possessions and goods and divided the proceeds among the fellowship according to individual need. Day after day they broke bread together in their homes, sharing meals with simple joy. They praised God continually and all the people respected them. They loved and respected one another. Never was anger on their lips. Never was envy in their hearts. Never did they speak a word of annoyance, never did they gripe about one another, and never did they disagree. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were finding salvation.”

So, I’m thinking to myself, This is bad. My Mind is surely going. I thought I picked up the Bible, and instead I grabbed a newspaper. I thought I was reading about the early church, and Lord, I find myself reading a newspaper article about our church community right here on North Street in Medford.

Well, as those of you who may also be losing your minds may know, at least the confusion doesn’t last very long. You forget what confused you in the first place. So, soon, I forgot that I was planning to read the Bible, and I just got enthralled in the article about our church. I loved where it talked about our simple joy of being together. And then that love and respect for everyone part. No envy, no anger, no annoyance, no griping about each other, no disagreement with one another. Man, I was just reveling in the description of this community we have created here. And I was thinking to myself, this is pretty amazing. I’ve hardly ever seen a newspaper reporter get things so right. Then came that last part. Every day the Lord added to their number. I mean, you can’t buy that kind of PR. The Medford Transcript might have blown our Easter advertisement, but they sure made up for it here. We get a great article, and then they end it with a subtle suggestion of evangelism – The Lord’s adding to their numbers daily. Can’t you just see the barely-hidden meaning? Everybody’s going to that church; you better go, too. Man, you can’t make this stuff up!

Well, of course you can. We did have an article in the Medford Transcript. It said some nice things. But it didn’t say these things. These things were made up. I made them up, so I know. Or better said, I took them, with a bit of modification, from the story of the early Christian church in the Bible.

I think it is fair to say, though, that you can understand my confusion. For we, very much like the first Protestant reformers, are compelled by the early years of the church. The Protestant reformers wanted to take the church back to the beginning. They wanted to recapture the early

ideals of the faith. They wanted to get back to those days when the church was pure and unsullied. Like them we who are their heirs have a continuing desire to reclaim the simple and true source of our beginnings. We are drawn to learn what it was like back then, and we want to be like that here and now. And so you can understand my confusion when I found myself reading the book of Acts but somehow I became convinced I was reading the newspaper. I wanted our church to be like that first Christian church in Jerusalem.

Now, when I sorted it all out and recovered from my reverie, I was suddenly hit by a rather nasty realization. North Prospect Union Church is a great church, to be sure, but my oh my, it sure does fall short of that utopian church in the book of Acts. We may be a good community, but we are certainly not a perfect one. We may be good people, but we nonetheless have within us and among us fears and resentments, anger and envy, hurts and broken hopes. We are not perfect. We are not even all that we want to be. These are disturbing realizations. On this day when we take new members into the church, they are all the more disturbing. Our new members may want to think about what they are getting into.

So, on my way to my sermon this week, a circuitous route brought me, now, to this point. What are we to make of the most imperfect life of the church? How are we to understand our falling short? What do we think we ought to be, and how do we think we ought to get there?

This morning I would like to look with you at some words from a little book called, *Life Together*. Its author, whose name I will not mention because I was told that at least one person is counting how many times I've referred to him, the author of *Life Together* addresses some of our very questions from his theology and from his experience of Christian Community.

He says, "On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image."¹

He says that people often come to the community with "a very definite image of what Christian communal life should be, and they will be anxious to realize it."²

Then Bonhoeffer, alright, its Bonhoeffer. Then Bonhoeffer surprises us. He says, "But God's grace quickly frustrates all such dreams. A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community. By sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. ... Only that community which enters into the experience of this great disillusionment with all its unpleasant and evil appearances begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it." He says, "The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both." He says that God wants to disabuse us of our idyllic dreams of the ideal community. Our idea about an ideal community is bad, bad, bad.

"Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Volume 5*, 35.

²Bonhoeffer, 35

survive,” he says. Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.”³

Now, this all sounds, perhaps, a little foolish. Why would bringing our best, most earnest and honest ideals into the Christian community be a problem? Aren’t these ideals we bring – love, harmony, sweetness and light – Christian ideals to begin with?

Well, no, says Bonhoeffer, “God hates this wishful dreaming because it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who dream of this idealized community demand that it be fulfilled by God, by others, and by themselves. They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge one another and even God accordingly. They stand adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of the community. They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together. Whatever does not go their way, they call a failure. When their idealized image is shattered, they see the community breaking into pieces.”

I think he’s got it right. Haven’t we all heard it? This is a church, shouldn’t it be filled with harmony? I came with all my best hope and ideas, and now someone doesn’t respect the way I see things. I want one thing; they want another. And pretty soon we’re criticizing each other for our failure to be our ideal.

Good friends, the Christian community, it turns out, is not about construction our own corner of heaven or our personal image of the promised land over here in Medford. It’s not about coming up with the best ideas and then being as mad as a hatter when things don’t turn out my way. Bonhoeffer knows, and so do we, that having these ideals of a community that we want to construct in our own image, as well-meaning as that image may be, is all about us and not much about God. And so we should be happy when God frustrates our attempts at perfection in our image. We should be glad when God lets the community disappoint our best intentions. We should be glad because then we can start about the business of becoming a real Christian community, not some skin-deep version of one.

Now, you may be asking, where in the world is this all going, preacher. We read of the early church in Acts, this wonderful community, and then you tell us that that’s not what we should be trying to construct here. You tell us that we should be glad when we are frustrated by the imperfections of the church. Preacher, you may rightly ask, what do you want of us?

And I’m here to tell you, to tell you what I want, if not of you then of you. I am here to tell you that I want that community described in the book of Acts, or better said, God wants that community for us. The trouble is you can’t get there by a direct line. When you try to get there by a direct line, we end up taking ourselves and our ideas for that community way too seriously. We don’t listen for God, or maybe better said, when we think we’re talking to God, we’re talking to ourselves. We get mad at those who get in the way. We have to learn how to get to that community, and the way there isn’t simple and easy. You know why? Because we keep tripping over ourselves. Learning to get to this community is to learn to walk toward it without tripping over ourselves. And the nature of sin is that one of the first things we trip over ourselves, over our best hopes, dreams and ideals.

³Bonhoeffer, 35, 36

In this Christian community, like every other, there are going to be people you don't like, people who don't act right. There are going to be those who don't seem to pull their weight or measure up. In short in this Christian community the same people who are outside in our neighborhoods are going to be here. We don't have a selection process. At first that sounds a little peculiar. But what God wants us to know is not only does everyone get in here, but we also need everyone.

Bonhoeffer says, "Strong and weak, wise or foolish, talented or untalented, pious or less pious, the complete diversity of individuals in the community is no longer a reason to talk and judge and condemn, and therefore no longer a pretext for self-justification. Rather this diversity is a reason for rejoicing in one another and serving one another. ... In a Christian community, everything depends on whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. The chain is unbreakable only when even the smallest link holds tightly with the others. ... Every Christian community must know that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of the community."⁴

But this only makes our problem worse. We may have preached against one kind of ideal community, that in which everything is perfect and harmonious. But now we are handed another notion of Christian community which is even more difficult and up to which we cannot live. All-inclusive. Everyone has a place and is necessary. Isn't trying to achieve this diverse, everybody-counts-no-matter-who-or-what-they-are community at least as frustrating to try to achieve anything else? And is it a church community that we would actually want? Sounds pretty messy and inefficient to me.

Now, of course, we are coming to the fulcrum on which all this rests. So long as we try to build the community we want rather than the one God wants, our desires will be frustrated. So long as I want so and so to be a certain way so my church can be what I want it to be, is exactly how long I will find my church un-fulfilling. On the fulcrum the board tips in a new direction. What happens when I turn to another person, maybe someone who frustrates the daylights out of me, and instead of wishing they were different so my picture of things can be perfect, what if I turn to them and pray for their well-being?

Bonhoeffer says, "A Christian community either lives by the intercessory prayers of its members for one another, or the community will be destroyed. I can no longer condemn or hate other Christians for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble they cause me. In intercessory prayer the face that may have been strange and intolerable to me is transformed into the Face of one for whom Christ died, the face of a pardoned sinner. That is a blessed discovery for the Christian who is beginning to offer intercessory prayer for others. As far as we are concerned, there is no dislike, no personal tension, no disunity or strife, that cannot be overcome by intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the community must enter every day. We may struggle hard with one another in intercessory prayer, but that struggle has the promise of achieving its goal.

"How does that happen? Offering intercessory prayer means nothing other than Christians bringing one another into the presence of God, seeing each other under the cross of Jesus as poor human beings and sinners in need of grace. Then, everything about other people

⁴Bonhoeffer 95, 96

that repels me falls away. Then I see them in all their need, hardship, and distress.... Offering intercessory prayer means granting other Christians the same right we have received, namely, the right to stand before Christ and share in Christ's mercy."⁵

The Christian community, like that one described in the book of Acts and the one we would want here, is a paradox. For when I want it, when I try to make it be what I want it to be, I will be frustrated by my own efforts, and I will continually trip over myself – over my ideas and over my self-interest. But ironically, when I come because I need to share in Christ's mercy, and when I'm willing grant the same to the others who come, Christ will make something of which we can only dream. Wouldn't it be great to pick up the paper one day and read that it has happened. Amen.

⁵Bonhoeffer 90, 91