

(Acts 2:42-47 NRSV)

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A Blessed Community

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Acts 2:42-47

Today's sermon is the second in a two part series. But I don't want you to worry if you missed last Sunday's sermon, or if you were here, but you don't remember it so well. Like they do on Masterpiece Theater, I will start with a brief review of where we've come so far.

Last week our text came from the letter of First Peter, at the end of the first chapter and the beginning of the second. First Peter was concerned with the empty way of life so many are caught up in. And it was hard not to agree with him. This world seems far more capable of creating human misery than of creating human community. Bloodshed and hunger, hatred and violence, war and fist-shaking – these are some of the images our news brings us day after day. And other images are of well-dressed men and women testifying before congress, and moving in and out of courtrooms, accused of greed and corruption almost beyond imagination. And the Roman Catholic Church reels from a scandal of the sexual molestation of unnumerable innocent children, a scandal which threatens the church's very capacity to speak on moral matters. And so far, the responses of the leaders of the church have been secrecy and the age-old practice of shooting the messenger – they blame the press.

First Peter warned against the empty way of life. He urged his readers to live as strangers, to live as exiles. That is, First Peter urged his readers to live a different life, to live differently from the hollow and empty life. First Peter urged his readers to remember that they were redeemed from the empty life by Jesus' resurrection, for by Jesus' resurrection they were brought to fullness of faith in God. First Peter argued that true faith in God leads people away from the empty life and toward the life of love and community. He says, “²² Now that you have purified yourselves by grasping the truth, you have sincere love for your brothers and sisters; love one another deeply, from the heart.”

First Peter believed that a life filled with faith, a life infused with the Spirit, could not help but be a life lived in integrity and in fullness. It could not help but be a life lived loving one another deeply from the heart.

And last week we talked about some ways in which one might cultivate one's faith and spiritual life. For by developing faith and spirituality we would naturally live better, more full, more loving, and more moral lives. We talked about attendance at weekly worship. We talked about hearing the scriptures in worship and studying them in Bible study. We talked about the sacraments of the church, especially sharing communion as Jesus did with his disciples. We

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talked about various forms of prayer and meditation, both the kind in which we ask God for help, and the kind in which we try to still our own voices and listen for what God is trying to tell us.

In these and in other ways one may cultivate a faithful and spirit-filled life. And when one cultivates such a life, one lives naturally in exile from the empty things; one loves others, deeply, from the heart.

So there you have the problem – a life of emptiness that so sadly characterizes much of humanity, and you have the first half of the solution – the cultivation of faith and spirituality which causes one to live a life of fullness. That was last week. This week we are reversing the solution. Last week we saw that faith causes one to live differently. This week we are going to look at how living in certain ways can create a faithful and spiritual life, can create a spiritual community.

In this morning's passage from Acts of the Apostles we join the church right after its full birth at Pentecost. When we studied this passage last week in Bible study, several of us were a little uneasy about this passage. Certain aspects of it seemed something like a cult – we read that everyone was giving away everything they owned when they joined the community and that they seemed to be almost under a spell of the apostles. Quote, “⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Our uneasiness is fair enough. We are rightly suspicious of charismatic figures under whose spell people give up not only their belongings but their judgement. Jim Jones or even Osama Bin Laden come to mind – creators of passionate followers whose minds and consciences have been anesthetized and cut away. What's left is very dangerous, indeed.

But we probably need to be a little fairer to the passage in Acts, though. First, we know that it was written many years after the event it portrays. Pentecost happened in, say the year 33. But Acts was written no earlier than year 70, more likely as late as 90. Acts was written forty or sixty years after the events it describes happened. Like a lot of memories it is probably somewhat exaggerated – like that six feet of snow our parents walked through seven miles to school. On the other hand, we are perhaps too suspicious these days about strong and passionate feelings. Many believe that we in the mainline church have declined over the years in part because we are tepid in our faith. The minister of the Baptist church which used to rent our sanctuary told me that we would grow our church a lot faster if we shook and moved and shouted more on Sunday. Maybe he's right. So, if we can set aside our suspicions of the early church, and also realize that the story is perhaps a bit magnified with nostalgia, if we can put aside our reservations for a moment, there is something extraordinary about the excitement in this new church community. This passage from Acts describes a treasured moment in Christian history. It describes a time when religious fervor was vibrant, when generosity ran high, when gladness and praise filled the air, when the people were devoted to the teachings, and when fellowship meant

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sharing all things from one's possessions to the meals eaten together. It is hard not to envy the spiritedness and vigor of this church community described for us here in Acts.

I would like to share an old story with you. It's called, "The Rabbi's Gift."

There was once a famous monastery which had fallen on very hard times. Formerly its many buildings were filled with young monks and its big church resounded with the singing of the chant. But now it was deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. A handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters and praised their God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared the word would be passed from monk to monk: "The rabbi walks in the woods." And, for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him. So, after the morning Eucharist, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome. It was as though he had been waiting there for some time. The two embraced like long-lost brothers. Then they stepped back and just stood there, smiling at one another with smiles their faces could hardly contain.

After a while the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room there was a wooden table with the Scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Book. Then they began to cry. The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the wood of the table with their tears.

After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. "You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again."

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, "The Messiah lives among you." For a while, all was silent. Then the rabbi said, "Now you can go home!"

The abbot left without a word and without ever looking back.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together in the chapter room. He told them he had received a teaching from "the rabbi who walks in the woods" and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, "The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah."

The monks were startled by this saying. "What could it mean?" they asked themselves. "Is Brother John the Messiah? Or Father Matthew? Or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah? What could this mean?" They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi's teaching. But no one ever mentioned it again.

As time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a very special reverence. There was a gentle, wholehearted, human quality about them now which was hard to describe but easy to notice. They lived with one another as men who had finally found something. But they prayed the Scriptures together as men who were always looking for something. Occasional visitors

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found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and young men were asking, once again, to live with the monks for a lifetime.

In those days, the rabbi no longer walked in the woods. His hut had fallen into ruins. But, somehow or other, the old monks who had taken his teaching to heart still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.. .they still felt sustained by his prayerful presence.

Frederick Buechner says, “Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept.

“Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking,” he says.

Then Buechner goes on to hit the nail on the head, “Sometimes,” he says, “wishing is the wings the truth comes true on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it.”

“Sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on.” Our parents always knew this truth. Treat your little brother like you love him, they would say. In part our parents would offer such encouragement to keep peace and safety in the house. But at a deeper level, our parents knew that they were helping us to develop habits which would in fact become reality. In the end, you cannot act like you love someone very long before you find out that you actually do love them. Is it love which always existed that we had simply to discover by trying it out? Or was it that the habit has created the reality?

I think it can go both ways. But surely to the degree that our actions can create reality, to the degree that how I treat another person then becomes the truth of our relationship, it is incredibly important that I try to act with love and integrity, compassion and generosity, well wishes and kindness. For those actions will create fruit from the seed that is planted. And is it not obvious that if the opposite kinds of seeds are planted, they equally will create the opposite kinds of fruit?

Last week we learned that if one were truly held in the arms of faith, if one were to have purified oneself by grasping the truth, it would be nearly impossible to be seduced by the empty things of life. Conversely, it is also the case that if one resists the temptations of the empty things, if one practices right action, love, generosity, compassion, respect, and good-heartedness; then one will find one’s way to a deep faith that will make the practice of these virtues ever more natural, ever more a part of one’s being.

In the story of the Rabbi’s Gift it ended up this way, “Occasional visitors found themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Before long, people were coming from far and wide to be nourished by the prayer life of the monks and young men were asking, once again, to live with the monks for a lifetime.” In the Acts of the Apostles it went like this, “⁴⁶ 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, ⁴⁷ 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.”

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All that is left to ask is, how will things end up in our world? And how will it go in our church? The answer, our prayer must be, is that they will become blessed communities. May our faith and our efforts help make it so. Amen.

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