

## Is Community the Answer?

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr. at Peace United Church of Christ on May 15, 2011

*The Lord is my shepherd....* The 23rd psalm may very well be the best known if not the most beloved verse of scripture, although it's too bad that it's usually heard only in the context of funerals. It is a tad odd that we love it so much considering we know so little about shepherds and shepherding, but despite our ignorance, we viscerally understand that we are being comforted and fed. With these words we are reminded that we will neither be forgotten nor forsaken, but provided for out of the plentiful bounty of God's love.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.* The earliest Christians believed in these words, and because they did not want, they were free to give. And because they believed in the good shepherd, they were free to let go and to trust. Let's go back to our lesson today from Acts: *They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Ok. That part makes sense. Nothing too radical there, right? But then we hear these words: *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all as any had need.* Now THAT is another ball game entirely, especially for American Christians. Are you ready to sell all your possession and put it into a common pot here at Peace? Tell you what; don't answer that question.

Interestingly, this passage ends with the words, *And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.* Now my assumption is that such a... socialist notion would scare people off. But scripture tells us just the opposite. It was precisely because of the nature of this community and the quality of the fellowship - it was precisely the members were ONE - that people were drawn to them.

While our reading today is limited to the 2nd chapter of Acts, let me share with you a few verses from chapter 4:

*No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. There were no needy persons amongst them. From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostle's feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.*

We're also told that an individual named Barnabas sold a field and brought the money to the apostles. Two chapters later, in chapter 6, we hear about financial assistance for widows and then in chapter 11 we hear about famine relief efforts. *And there were no needy persons amongst them.* Doesn't sound like a bad deal, does it? But it all starts with those words, *no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.* And folks, if those words aren't making you uncomfortable, then you're not hearing me, or you're not seeing the potential ramifications of these verses.

You see, Jesus, Paul, Peter and Barnabas were never interested in starting churches in the same way you think of churches. They weren't interested in church buildings, altars and majesty. Well, they were interested in majesty, but it was the majesty that emerged, not from a building, but from a people. What they were doing was nothing short of creating an entirely new community built upon ideas radically different from those embraced by the rest of society. Instead of focusing on buildings, they met in people's homes. Instead of altars, they gathered around a kitchen table. And instead of ministers and a consistory, they had table servers. And in that ancient hierarchical society, the people around those tables were one. But there was more to these communities than a group of people who liked eating.

L. Gregory Jones is the dean of Duke Divinity School and he was asked to speak to a church here in North Carolina about the topic du jour: homosexuality. But Jones declined

believing that the discussion could generate more heat than light. However, he suggested that they meet together to talk about community. More specifically he wanted to talk about covenant and that which binds Christian community together. The folks agreed. Jones suggested that for the first meeting that everybody bring their checkbooks. Copies would then be made of each checkbook and distributed to the other members of the community. To say the least, THEY - FREAKED - OUT. After all, it's MY money and who are you to tell me what to do with MY money. But that's just it; from the perspective of the early church, it's not our money at all. Now are you starting to feel uncomfortable?

Folks, what you may not be aware of is that this model of being a church - this model we see at Peace and so many protestant churches like it, is not the only model for being the Body of Christ. There are others. Benedictine monks, the Shakers, many small-house churches, the Iona community in Scotland, the Richmond Hill Center in Richmond, VA, the Catholic Worker movements, as well as a group of emerging inner-city Christian communities have all embraced a model more closely following that found in the Acts of the Apostles. Now historically, many of these movements were limited to a single gender, but modern expressions include men and women, AND they include singles as well as married couples. Now finances in these communities are open because they are each accountable to each other as to how they spend their money. I know this sounds strange to us, but there really are places and contexts in the world where this is not viewed with the suspicion we cast upon it.

So these folks not only worship together, they live together, and eat together, and study together. They commit themselves to a common purpose: to be the body of Christ in that particular and specific place. As a specific example, there are over 185 Catholic worker communities all of which have committed themselves to non-violence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, and forsaken. Even if you're not ready to sign the dotted line, it's interesting is it not?

But let's go back to where we began. The 23rd psalm assures us that we are being provided for and as Christians, we affirm Christ to be that shepherd who provides for us. BUT, the church also affirms that we are the Body of Christ; we are Christ's hands and feet. We are the green pastures for others; or not. We are the refreshing waters for others; or not. We are the voice of God for others; or not. And there is no way we can be God's pasture and waters and voice to others by ourselves. As Bruce Springsteen sings at most concerts, there are just some places that you can't get to by yourself. Scripture universally recognizes that needs will not be met by embracing individualism. Even when Jesus' disciples were sent out, they were sent out in pairs. It is in community that we will find green pastures and still waters and tables of plenty. It is in community that we will be green pastures and still waters and tables of plenty for others.

So based on this one sermon are y'all ready to change how we do church here at Peace and all move in together? Personally, I'm against the idea. After all, there are no showers here at Peace. Before I signed the papers on my new house I went back to the master bath to make sure the shower worked. I like my shower. BUT, we do have a really decent size kitchen here at Peace. But, without being rude, do we really use it enough? While I'm neither a mother or a daughter, I loved being invited to last week's mother-daughter banquet. And not only did I have a great meal, but Dorothy Meeks told a lot of jokes. It was fantastic! And for those of you who missed last month's men's fellowship, not only did you miss a great program arranged by Dale, but you missed some really wonderful crabcakes, and this Chesapeake boy knows his crabcakes.

So I know. Perhaps we're not ready to move in here together, BUT, perhaps we need to be more purposeful about eating with each other, both here and in our homes. Maybe we need to start a ROMEO group: Retired old men eating ot. Maybe we need to have FEAST groups who eat in each other's homes: Fellowship, Eating and Sharing Together. And does everybody need to do everything here? Probably not, but it's hard to be part of a fellowship and even harder to create a

fellowship if you never fellowship. Speaking of which, maybe we're not ready to insist that every member must attend worship and must attend educational and fellowship opportunities, but guess what? Some churches do. And perhaps it could be perceived as ironic, but churches with higher demands tend to grow more than churches with no expectations of it's members. And by the way folks, if you don't want to be here on any regular basis, why do you think anybody else would?

At the heart of this community in Acts was a group of people who were bonded with each other; they ate, they fellowshiped, they worshiped, they prayed and they did it not as individuals, but as extensions of each other, as a community. And in a world of an eye for an eye; in a world of individualism; in a world of every man for themselves, we are told that the Lord added to their numbers. In their midst the larger society saw green pastures and clear waters and the very stuff their souls craved. How about this world? What does this world need? I'm terribly suspicious that the answer is one in the same. I think we need to be part of something larger than ourselves; I think we need something to give ourselves and our life to. So tell me, is the answer to Peace's future found in a group of nice people getting together once a week for an hour and listening to a semi-decent preacher? Or does Acts at least point us in the direction we need to go. Is community what the world needs?

I had a community once at the University of Richmond. It really wasn't unusual for dinner to last 90 minutes, if not two hours. And no, we didn't need two hours to eat. And no, the food wasn't that great. We just loved each other's company so much and we laughed so much that no one wanted to miss it. I will admit we did not share common finances per se, after all none of us really had any money. But whoever had some money left over on Friday night bought the Dominoes and the Cheerwine. And more than once we bought that holy communion by piecing together the offerings of each. We got together on Thursday evenings as a larger group and we studied at the feet of Rev. Judy Bailey. I'm sure she would never embrace the term apostle, but it literally means "sent forth." It sure did feel me to me that she was sent to us. Thanks to Facebook, many of us still keep in touch with each other, BUT, there are still days where I think my biggest fear is that I'll never again taste community as I once had it.

Maybe I'm wrong, it wouldn't be the first time, but I'm convinced the answer is community; a group of people bonded together by bonds deeper than niceties. This preacher is convinced that it is nothing short of green pastures and still waters and the nourishment of our soul. We do and provide some of that here, but is it time to take it a step farther? Amen.