

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we come to worship. We come to be fully present, setting aside our distractions, the weight of to-do lists, and all those little things that take us way from true fellowship. We come to bring you our burdens, our cares, our joys; we bring all we are. We come to recognize our responsibility as citizens of this church, this community, this world, and, ultimately, as citizens of your Reign. We take these things seriously, and yet, we find ourselves easily drawn away from our center. We now lift ourselves to you for your care.

Holy God, we are the church, in all of its goodness, in all of its faults, in all of its triumphs and all of its failures. We consistently look back to scripture to find ourselves, to take inspiration from iterations of church past. Help us to live faithfully in the tradition of our brothers and sisters before us. Help us to live faithfully in this world of today and not of worlds past, where their conflicts and opportunities are not those we face today. Help us to respond with love and care to a world that needs the church at its best, not a church that bickers over the issues that matter least. We pray that we reflect the callings of the church so much that future generations will look back at our time with renewed determination and hope for their future. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord and head of the Church now and always, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one saying...

SERMON

When I attended Iliff in Denver, I lived in a house with five other people. The premise was simple: we sought to mutually uplift one another, divide chores and responsibilities for each other's benefit, and provide a community where we could live together well. It was a great idea, and it often was great, but it wasn't always great. When you have three Graduate Students and three full time workers in a house of six, sometimes

things just don't get done. There was always something to keep us busy in every part of our lives, and when we all weren't in harmony in responsibilities and keeping up with one another, we found ourselves nitpicking one another. This chore didn't get done when we were all expecting it, and no explanation was given. Another person didn't remember when we were meeting together. Grace toward one another could be overindulged. Little things drew us away from each other; when they did, we found ourselves losing that sense of community. When you think about it, the church is the same way. We lift the ideal to care for one another, that we are the best we can be in these doors, but we often fall into the same traps. Gossip, frustration, judgmental attitudes, and nitpicking can become the norm more so than love and care. The little things become the most important things at the expense of lifting and being the living Gospel to one another. It happens more than we'd like, and when that happens, we cease to be the best of the church. We become a grumpy family or a cranky social club, and that has no connection to the Spirit of Christ.

This is an important passage to Christianity of past, present, and future. Acts demonstrates the beginnings of the church and how they show us what the church should be: uplifting, centered on learning and caring, and a place of mutual sharing and care. Great stuff, but...well, to be frank, no church ever has fully lived up to it. We get glimpses here and there. I doubt that even this early church community could always live up to this ideal. Ever since, we've had a lot of ups and downs. We've had schisms. We've had incredible fights; we've even killed one another for the smallest violations of orthodoxy. If nothing else, this passage should draw us back to what is integral, what really matters, what is the point of the whole exercise. We know the alternatives; time to come back to the source. Let's look at the earliest church from Acts, take it apart to find faithful understanding of

what this passage calls us to do and be as the church today under the caring of the Holy Spirit, and take a turn to live most faithfully as the Church today.

Here's the story so far in the two parts of Luke and Acts: Christ died and rose again. The disciples eventually came to find him, heeded his word, and then watched him ascend to heaven. That's where the era of Jesus' ministry ends. The disciples lie in wait for 50 days, and Pentecost came, but we'll get back to that in a few weeks. Pentecost is where the era of the church begins. The Spirit drew each other into community. This is the first, with the original disciples and new followers living together in relative harmony. It sounds idyllic, perhaps even a utopia. This was a place and a time when the disciples and new followers could come together as one community, bound by the Holy Spirit, sharing all that they are and all that they have, for mutual uplifting. But it goes deeper than gathering together for worship; it goes into a lifestyle of living with and for one another.

I'm sure you know what I'm going to say next. The main thrust of this passage is to sell everything and live in one community, so "Let's go sell everything we have and come and live here together!" Nope. That's neither practical nor desired...I could be wrong, but I doubt it. We aren't supposed to literally do what this passage seems to tell us to do. Last week at our visioning meeting, I discussed a new word to many people. Here's your 10-cent word of the day: exegesis. E-x-e-g-e-s-i-s. It's a big word for what we try to do when studying scripture. Put simply, it is studying the bible on its own terms instead of our terms. We look at everything within the context of the passage, the book, and the history of the book so that we may faithfully draw out the message of a passage for our time. It's about looking at the passage as a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Century Christian, and then using that viewpoint to discover the relevancy for a 21st Century Christian. Let's not forget that the

bible is a book for all people in all times, but it wasn't written to all people in all times: each book was written to a particular community with specific concerns and specific advice.

This is a process that is much easier said than done, but this passage calls for a detailed look. Cutting through literalism, we aren't called to give up everything we have. That's not what the passage seems to call faithfulness for all ages, but maybe it was to this age. What's the main point of faithfulness for us? What is lauded is willingness to give up things that matter, what we value for the benefit for others. In other words, sacrifice for one another.

I don't think that we know how to get to the heart of sacrifice. That's a hard thing. We begin to see it with those who learned about sacrifice the hard way. Last week was the NFL Draft. The press really tries to not only tell the story of the prospects and their skills professionally but to get at what makes them tick personally. There are many stories of young men who watched parents work two or three jobs when they grew up just to make ends meet. They sacrificed their daily lives for the benefit of their children, and now their children seek to give back to them in response. This is one of the most honorable acts of sacrifice, but we as a church can take things a different way, a way that is much harder but in line with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we are not challenged when we enter these walls to reach higher and deeper places of faith, then we aren't coming here for the right reasons. As such, we must look at sacrifice the same way. One of the hardest things I've heard from the words of scripture is the voice of Jesus in Matthew: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven...For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" Ouch...that indeed gets to the heart of sacrifice because it takes us to a place we don't want to go to do things

we don't want to do. What kind of sacrifice does this require us to do and to be? I imagine in this community that not everyone particularly liked each other, and yet they sought to sacrifice for one another. How much more so does this take us when we consider our enemies. How do we best love and sacrifice for our enemies? It's a beyond complicated question. I don't have any particular answer for you here, but if we are to follow the path of Jesus, especially in this broken world, we must deeply consider it.

Now that the main point of the passage for us is clear, we can take it apart further. There are many facets to this early church that catch your attention. In verse 42, we see the first emphasis: devotion to the Apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayers. Of course, the Christian life begins with faithful teaching and learning, fellowship, and devotion. Parts two and three work together very well, as fellowship is best when we can break bread or dine together. That's why the church potluck is a thing. As we progress through the passage, we see something interesting here: "All who believed were together and had everything in common." "Everything in common" seems like a dangerous phrase, as it can be interpreted in negative ways that destroy community. What I get out of it is the focus of what follows: "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." It's not about having all their possessions in common but their needs in common. What is also important to see here is the emphasis of "glad and generous hearts." This wasn't a community that focused on following rules in heartless duty but a joyful service. This is a community devoted to each other and a common goal, a gathering of believers in Jesus Christ that focused on the community lovingly and joyfully.

We see a different image of the church today in the details, but not necessarily in the overarching themes. We don't look like this; faithfulness for us does not require that we

live together in a commune. The period of the New Testament had different norms, different responsibilities, different issues to tackle, so we don't draw everything into our time. We are in a different world, but there's a lot we can learn from this early church. We have the same callings and needs. We must foster community that lives with glad and generous hearts, one where we can truly sacrifice for one another in Jesus' name. Today's church can leave a lot to be desired. Instead of thinking about faithful sacrifice, we easily get caught up in orthodoxy, right belief, that we fail to focus on orthopraxy, right living. It's easy to believe the right things, but it's much harder to live the right way. That was the focus of this early community: living well in the hope and empowerment of the Risen Christ and newly arrived Holy Spirit. We as the global church must return to this focus. Faith is nothing without living well. When our service goes awry, we move to the little things, which often is nitpicking about beliefs. There's no support for that focus in this scripture.

The church is in flux. What the age of the disciples dealt with isn't what we deal with, and what we deal with, the disciples couldn't have imagined. Nevertheless, the focus of faithfulness is the same, although the details of how we do it may be different. We must gather together not out of duty but joyfulness. We worship in learning, prayer, and breaking bread together. We serve one another. We sacrifice those things that can matter a great deal to us for the benefit of those we love and those we may not. These things are just as hard today as they were back in the day, but they are just as necessary to follow the Lord. To pick up our Cross and follow Christ give us new challenges with every age of our world and with every age of our lives. In this, we find true faithfulness throughout life and throughout time. Thanks be to God for the example of the church that helps us celebrate and learn with every age of our lives and world. Amen and Amen.