

Easter People: Enduringly Generous
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On May 5th, 2019

Acts 4: 32-35

Last Sunday we began a sermon series that we're basing on passages from the book of Acts that show the apostles in action, demonstrating characteristics of what it means to be what I would call Easter people. The theme last week was **surprising boldness**, and in comparing the fearful disciples in the upper room with the brave ones speaking up under the threat of imprisonment and death, I posited that it might take time for Easter to sink in.

Today's passage actually comes a chapter before last Sunday's. Here, Luke, the author of Acts, gives us a glimpse of the disciples generously sharing their resources with one another. Listen now for God's word:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

If you want to make a supposed biblical literalist squirm, or a committed believer in the merits of free market capitalism perk up, or nearly anybody else for that matter, lean forward in their pew wondering what on earth the preacher is going to say about this one, just read the passage you just heard from Acts 4. Or, the one two chapters earlier, which says of the disciples right after Pentecost: *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

Pesky little texts like these, and Jesus' invitation to the rich young ruler to sell all that he has and come and follow him, and the material in the Torah which enjoins Israel to practice the year of Jubilee (by forgiving debts and returning land to its original owners every 50 years), oh, and for that matter, about three quarters of the Sermon on the Mount, make a biblical interpreter's job really interesting.

Sometimes what happens is that when people hear texts like these read, their impulse is to immediately start to excuse, refute, domesticate or dismiss them. Well, yes, that was then, but this is now. We all know that's not the way human nature and human economies operate. With regard to the year of Jubilee, there is no evidence that anything like that was ever actually tried in ancient Israel—and had it been tried, we all know it wouldn't have worked, right? All of that happens before the preacher ever says a word. If you have already checked out, I'm sorry.

I think engaging that impulse too soon is a mistake. Not because there isn't some truth to the claim that societies which try to fully implement utopian ideals don't end well. Not because there isn't ample evidence that human beings tend to twist high-minded ideals to their own ends. But simply because texts like the one we read today not only made it into the canon of scripture—they

somehow stayed there. As uncomfortable as they make us, they are still there: these stories about no one claiming private ownership of possessions, and having all things in common, and distributing proceeds of what they sold to make sure that no one had need. They all somehow stayed in the canon.

Which makes me wonder, why didn't the early church just take care of that problem? Why didn't they just remove them texts like this, once they started to get a little power under their belts? Why didn't portions get dropped at the Councils which helped set the canon of the old and new testaments? Why has it been left to individuals and communities to figure out how to wrestle with these stories that make us, in McLean and Northern Virginia, so uncomfortable? Why didn't they just get rid of that stuff?

I think one answer is that stories like these are a bit like the grain of sand or grit in an oyster that eventually becomes a pearl. They sit there and sit there, quietly insisting that somehow, someday that somebody do something with them. And perhaps, like the patriarch Jacob who wrestled with the angel at the ford of the River Jabbok, the secret is that we don't let them go until they bless us. If we wrestle with this story about the disciples sharing their possessions so that no one had need, we will come away, as Jacob did, with a limp, but also with the reminder that we are people of God—a generous God who expects us, **at the very least**, to be generous, too.

Easter people, people who follow a God who won't let sin, death, and evil get the last word, are people who let stories like the one I just read today do their long, slow work in us. Reading and reflecting on *and then acting on* texts like these which call us to share our resources to meet others needs is part of how Easter sinks in. People can read Acts 4 and think differently about the role government should play in meeting others' needs, but we can't very well read Acts 4 and not be feel a push, or better yet a pull, towards generosity in meeting the needs of those who have less than we do.

I've had an ongoing discussion with a friend at Immanuel over the last fourteen years about the role of the church in society. He very wisely tells me, "the church shouldn't be so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good." To which I nod my head, and I reply (I think also wisely) "Yes, but the church shouldn't be so earthly minded that it is no heavenly good." We live our lives—all of us as individuals and the church as a whole—somewhere on a spectrum between on the one end the as of yet unreachable ideal of everyone having enough in a just and peaceable kin-dom and on the other end settling into a view of life that says human nature is red in tooth and claw so we might as well just get all we can and not care about our neighbors.

The stories of Jesus nudge all of us in the direction of the ideal, while recognizing that we're not likely in our lifetimes to get there. The stories nudge us more and more in the direction of generosity, while at the same time a clear-eyed view of human nature (our own and others) keeps us from going too far. As if that would ever be an issue, right?

Although it can be argued that followers of Jesus have not done enough in response to stories like the one in Acts, these stories have been part of the inspiration for deeds of generosity over a couple of millennia as people who follow Jesus have worked for the common good. Over the centuries, followers of the risen Christ have built hospitals, and homeless shelters. They've established feeding programs, and helped fund efforts to provide affordable housing, and they've been on the front lines in working for justice for all, and sung, "We Shall Overcome" while working to ensure voting rights, and moved outside of their comfort zones to open their homes to troubled youth, just

as Joanne McTague did in adopting Marcus, one of our original Dreamers. Marcus will be here in June for our celebration of the Dreamer program.

I would argue that something like that would not have happened were it not for Acts 4.

Here at Immanuel, texts like Acts 4 are part of why we have always paired projects like the building of the sanctuary and the meeting house with major mission efforts. And we've raised money for the major mission first, which is we had the Dreamer program to begin with.

It is also why we have an Endowment, and encourage people to give generously not just of their financial resources in this life, but also through their estates, so that others can be blessed and the work of Immanuel to make a difference in the world can continue. Rather than continuing this sermon by telling you about the work our Endowment grants have accomplished this past year, I'm going to let three people provide the illustrations by telling you themselves what more about the difference generous gifts to Immanuel's endowment have made in the past year.

(The sermon closed with three individuals speaking. Corinne Magee talked about an endowment grant that was used to provide reading materials for inmates and families at the Fairfax Adult Detention Center. Kim Pacala talked about how Five Talents used an endowment grant to buy lap top computers, cell phone access to the internet and data, and extra batteries for their work in South Sudan to further the mission of the organization to help women expand and develop small businesses through access to microloans and community savings groups. And Scott Fisher talked about the work of Students Helping Honduras and how an endowment grant helped purchase a new van to transport the children SHH serves).