***Church: Keeping Faith with the Goodness of the World***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on April 30, 2023*

*based on Acts 2: 42-47*

*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.*

This passage has made people nervous for a good long time. But a colleague likes to say this isn’t communism – it’s common-ism. It’s about holding everything in common. Jesus had transformed these people, and so they acted out what they had experienced. Simple as that.

An earlier portrait of such a community exists in the New Testament, one that is a bit more specific about the process. It comes from the letter of 1st Peter.

This community of early Christians had been through misery growing up in the 1st century Mediterranean world, and because of the church, they were rescued from homelessness and found their feet. Here is how the writer of 1st Peter puts it.

*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into God’s wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)*

The Christians living in Asia Minor to whom this person writes were foreigners; literally strangers in a strange land, who had been welcomed in by the Christians.

The Christian communities of the day were little assemblies of women without husbands, slaves without masters, and foreigners living in someone else's country. They were viewed with suspicion and hostility by many of those around them – all except the Christians whose communities dotted the urban Mediterranean world.

Fact is, the Christian Church may have initially been established *because* of the facts of migration, widowhood, and homelessness that were ever-present realities in the first century world.

Everything in life has to do with timing and location, of course and the establishment of institutional religion is no different. I’ve explained this once before in a different sermon but it’s so foundational to understanding the beginnings of Christianity and it’s essential ethos, forgive me for repeating this.

In the first and second century, more and more people in rural areas were surviving childhood. The young men who entered their teen years had to decide what to do with themselves.

Because of laws of primogeniture, it was the first-born sons who inherited everything from their fathers. What is a young man to do, then. if he survives to the age of thirteen and his older brother is first in line to inherit the family property? He might move to the burgeoning cities where he knows there is need of day-labor.

But how does he get his start? Thousands of young men went to the cities and ended up on the streets with nowhere to go. It was the Christians who picked them up out of the gutters. Christians saw it as part of their mission to house them, feed them, help them to find the jobs they needed to survive. And who funded the enterprise? Mostly it was widows who had property.

Here is why. Men in the Roman world would put off marriage until their late twenties. They would marry women who were around fourteen years old. And when the men would die in their later 30s of one thing or another, their widows, in their twenties, would often then have money and a home. They knew that if they re-married they would automatically have to give everything they owned to their new husbands. Now why would they do a thing; I mean, if they were smart?

Well, many were indeed smart, and Christianity welcomed such women into their communities.

So, they would join communities full of like-minded women who knew better than to marry and give up everything.

Besides, the teachings of Jesus said that women were people with rights too; rights to everything men had rights to. In the letters of Paul we can see that women with property often became leaders of these early communities. In this way the early church in Asia Minor became a home for the homeless.

Persecution of such communities was a chronic problem. Many thought these communities were nothing more than cults, and complaints were often made against them. But the authorities most often did their best to mitigate these troubles.

People came to see that those who called themselves Christians were doing work necessary for the safety of all in these cities. Many came to see that the health and welfare of all depended on doing good to the poorest of the poor among them.

If there is one lesson that comes out of this pandemic let it be that we have learned that the health of the wealthiest among us depends on the health of the poorest. It’s obviously true, but getting the richer among us to admit that is no easy thing.

The narcissism in this country is as wide spread as the virus was. That was not the spirit of the community Luke speaks of in Acts, nor Peter’s, nor should it be ours.

Remember, Peter’s community was a community of immigrants. It was made up of people who were hungry, lonely, jobless, homeless, and a step away from death. But they were plucky too, which had gotten them to the cities. Had it not been for the Christians treating them like valued neighbors they would not have survived.

Those early communities were not always peaceful. You can be sure they had difficulties getting along sometimes.

But they were made up of people who knew how difficult survival could be, and so they gave people a break when they needed it, even if that made them feel a little like chumps once in a while.

Listen to this story from Carole of Three Rivers, Michigan

*When my husband and I were a young married couple, we had a neighbor who was a single mother and needed a lot of support. She often came over to use our washer and dryer, or just to drink coffee and visit. One day I hosted a committee meeting for a community group. The members were all older and more affluent than I was, and I wanted them to think highly of me, so I served dessert and coffee on my best china. Everyone seemed comfortable, until my neighbor walked in with her robe on, got herself a cup of coffee and pulled up a chair.*

*Once I introduced her, she took over the conversation and proceeded to tell everyone about her troubles with her boyfriend, who was a boating enthusiast. She was thinking of breaking up with him, she said. “He never seems to have any time for me. He’s too busy with his boat,” she said. “His boat … and his wife.”*

Now, with that fresh in mind, listen to this one. It’s by journalist, Sebastian Junger. It’s about how he hitchhiked across this country when he was young. Here is what he had to say about the day he was making his way through the aftermath of a blizzard in Gillette, Wyoming.

*After two or three hours I saw a man working his way toward me along the on-ramp from town. He wore filthy canvas overalls and carried a black lunch box. As he got closer, I could see that his hair was matted in a way that occurs only after months on the skids. I put my hand on the pepper spray in my pocket and turned to face him. “You been out here long?” he asked. I nodded. “Where you headed.” “California.” “Warm out there.” “Yep.” “You got enough food?”*

*I thought about this. Clearly he didn’t have any and if I admitted that I did, he’d ask for some.*

*That would mean opening my backpack and revealing all my expensive camping gear. I felt alone and ripe for pillage, and I just didn’t want that. “I got some cheese,” I said. “You won’t make it to California with just a little cheese,” he said. “You’ll starve.”*

*At first I didn’t understand. What was he saying? I kept my hand on the pepper-spray.*

*“Believe me,” he said, “I know. Listen, I’m living in a car back in town, and everyday I walk out to the mine to see if they need me. Today they don’t, so I won’t be needing this lunch of mine.”*

*I began to grow smaller with understanding. In his world, whatever you have in your bag is all you’ve got, and he knew “a little cheese” would never get me to California. “I’m fine really,” I said, “I don’t need your lunch.”*

*He shook his head and opened his box. It was a typical church meal -- a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bag of chips. I kept protesting but he wouldn’t hear it. I finally took his lunch and watched him walk toward town.*

*I learned a lot of things in college. I learned things traveling in Europe and in Mexico, and in my hometown of Belmont, Massachusetts. But I had to stand out there on that frozen piece of interstate to learn generosity from a homeless man.*

I imagine that the church Peter addresses is full of people like the man who lived in his car, and also the single mom in the first story I told you. And I imagine the people in those churches struggled with that; with deciding how best to deal with all kinds of people who have learned different “strategies” for surviving in a world where the rich get all the breaks.

We’ve all heard stories like one I remember from NPR where a social worker spoke of a woman who always had the latest cell phone with all the bells and whistles and often sported perfectly done nails, but who was forever saying she had no money for diapers.

Stories like that fill FOX News and social media and turn off the empathy in the best of us, sometimes, right? We don’t usually want to deal with such people.

Or with people who frankly scare us, because they look or smell different from us. I’m talking here about the impulse we all have to keep our finger on the trigger of the pepper spray.

But let me suggest the following. Maybe the real question at hand every time we choose to look a stranger in the eye is, will this encounter open me up to my own poverty, a poverty which may have nothing at all to do with money?

Will an encounter with a Family Promise mother or someone at the Blanchet House open me up to my own loneliness? What I’m saying is that choosing to look a stranger in the eye may become a mirror to help us look at our own despair about living.

Of course, this requires courage. It may require that we remember some things about our own youth, our own childhood that may be very tender; wounds left untended for decades, maybe. But, you know, there is healing available if we are willing to try.

I am aware that I am saying this in the wake of a number of tragic shootings of people who went to the wrong house or the wrong car and were killed because the armed person was brainwashed by FOX news or NewsMax into thinking they must be intruders. Unfounded fear is usually behind everyone’s worst decisions.

One more story. This one could be written by any of us about a fellow church member named Anne who marches to her own drum beat.

*[Anne] seemed too intense and I wondered if perhaps she was also a little cuckoo, which I suppose is not the politically correct word. Anne sometimes sounded like a mad Old Testament prophet, beseeching us to tend to the starving people of the world, to save the rain forests. She was so unabashed in her faithfulness and need that it made some people nervous. She was like your craziest aunt, the religious one with funny eyes who drinks.*

*Initially, I tried to keep my distance and make her understand that she and I were more church family than friends, but she did not seem to get it, or simply would not obey.*

*She brought me Mary, Mother of God, mementos and Jesusy things to carry with me when I traveled, and she called me sometimes to ask how my son, … and I were.*

*Little by little, I let her into my heart. True, she was odd, but she was also courageous, and dear, kind, and feisty, and very tender toward the children at church. I started sitting next to her during worship, sharing a hymnal or a Bible, and calling her at home from time to time to ask how she was.*

The woman asked Anne to visit the Sunday School class of five- to twelve-year-olds that she taught and talk about her faith. Anne started by asking each of them their names and then whether they had noticed anything unusual about her.

“There was a polite silence. The children shook their heads with burlesque puzzled looks, until one child all but smote his forehead, and said, “Oh! You mean your hand!”

The child was referring to what Anne called her “paw.” P-A-W.

She told them that her mother had been a chemist for the military in World War II, helping develop chemical weapons.

Her mother and several of her colleagues had given birth to children with defects. Her defect was being born with a hand that wasn’t completely formed.

*She showed them the scar tissue where she’d had surgery as a baby. The kids studied it with the fearless attention with which they might have examined a huge potato bug.*

*She told them how family pictures were arranged so that other people’s bodies hid her hand. “My mother found me disgusting.” Anne said. “And only a few people over the years wanted to hold my hand. I felt totally alone, until one day, Jesus came into the great emptiness.”*

*It happened when Anne was six years old. She felt Jesus speaking to her. “He was saying, ‘I’m sorry it turned out this way, but you are whole in my eyes.’ So I got me back,” she said, “and in Jesus, I found a real mother.”*

*“Did you mind having only one hand,” a girl asked?*

*“I didn’t like it at all. It’s been harrowing. And there are many things I love to do that I can’t do well. Having this paw made me notice how much suffering there is in the world. It makes me ask, “What’s that suffering about? What’s the answer?”*

*The suffering itself means nothing. But the answer is also that I can’t look away from it. I saw that God wanted me to help relieve the suffering. And that work has given me peace.”*

*Anne’s life was ended by cancer not long after her visit with the children. Her husband asked that the children make decorations for her casket, which they did. The parents delivered them to her home and decorated the casket themselves.*

*At her funeral, the pastor said this, “Faith is not how we feel; it is about how we live. And Anne lived her own eulogy, gardening, praising God, fighting the great good fight for justice, loving her husband, playing piano, doing her yoga. Anne believed, without wavering. You don’t run into such faithfulness often, faith in the goodness of the world.” (Anne Lamott, in her book, Plan B: Further Thoughts about Faith).*

I think that kind of faith, that kind of belief in the goodness of life, is what set the early church on a firm foundation. Not guilt, not the ecclesiastical power of early church leaders who were made into Bishops.

No, it was the simple faith of the rank and file members – who had grown up knowing misery and the stern judgment of their “betters,” but who found some within the church who offered them love, and mercy and full membership into the family of God simply because they were created by God like all the rest of us.

Amen