

Acts 2:42-47
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“Community of God”

Rev. William Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

I remember serving as Intentional Interim pastor at a church that practiced a very progressive position on faith and social issues. The church boldly proclaimed a sense of God’s Spirit calling them to Deep Inclusivity, seeking to proclaim God’s welcome to all.

One day in the office I opened a letter and it was request from a person to join the church. The letter was from a former, defrocked Priest who had served time for the crime of child sexual enticement. He knew he could never be a part of the Catholic Church again, so he came to this “inclusive” church hoping to find a spiritual home.

I got together with a few Congregational leaders to ask what we should do? We found out the legal requirements this man would need to be allowed to attend church. And the requirements were rigorous. We prayed and had meetings, and debated what to do. We didn’t all agree but finally one night around midnight we finished a letter suggesting this church might not be the right church for this man.

Our hearts sunk as we sealed the letter... we wanted to trust the justice system, we wanted to fulfill our call to be inclusive. We wanted to exercise God’s forgiveness. We wanted to believe that all the supervision requirements were enough for us to welcome this man with open arms, but we just couldn’t allow ourselves to take the risk. Our inclusive statement about community had been challenged.

Today, in the Acts of the Apostles we see another bold statement of community. After the resurrection, the story describes Jesus followers forming into an egalitarian community where they shared in worship, all finances were contributed into a common pot, they shared fellowship, food and communion together. The passage uses the word “All” at least 4 times to drive home this point. And, we are told, as each day passed the community of faith grew in Spirit and number.

This suggests there were democrats and republicans and socialists and green party members there. There were men and women, rich and poor, people from diverse backgrounds, people with a suspect past and more upstanding citizens. Some had a criminal record while others didn’t. Some had power in society, others were left out. The new community in Acts is described as the place everyone set aside their privileges and advantages and committed to being together in the presence of God.

It really was a bold statement of Community. See when Churches today post things like “all are welcome here,” or “no matter who you are or where you are on the journey of life you are welcome here,” the church better mean it. Because every time the church fails to live up to the message of Inclusivity, every time someone takes the courage and risk to enter the door and they discover their kind isn’t welcome, we do the message of God’s inclusive love a disservice.

We all know the church is imperfect. It is a human institution and we who are made of skin and bone mess up, we fall short, we fail God sometimes, in spite of our best intentions. But we need to be living into the vision to the best of our abilities. Trusting God to forgive and help us improve any mistakes we make.

A few years ago I heard about a church without walls. A young pastor in an East Coast city invited the homeless to gather on a Saturday morning in the local city park and said they would have worship and a meal. When the day came a few people showed up. She suggested they spend a little time cleaning up an area in the park where they could hold worship. So they did. Then they shared songs and prayers, scripture and a short message, and if they didn't know the songs and prayers -- she taught them. Then at the end she said they were going to share communion. She had secured donations from local business until she could provide a communion made up of a full meal.

But the real miracle happened in the weeks afterward. Each week more and more poor and homeless people would show up. Each began to bring something to contribute to the "communion" time in worship. After a few weeks, this pastor didn't need the donations from the businesses. Everyone contributed and everyone was able to eat. Local politicians and dignitaries began to show up for photo opportunities, and the pastor asked them to come back the following week and bring something to share, and many did.

The bible story today links inclusive Community with the mutual sharing of possessions. So, while it is likely that none of us here today are ready to put all our possessions into a common pot. The story challenges us. I wonder... Is the challenge to live into this vision too much for us?

We could give up. We could do what little we can for others with the little extra we have, and make sure we take care of ourself and our family? We could turn this act of faith into another thing we have to do that drains our energy?

OR... do we become inspired by this vision, does the vision draw us together seeking God's guidance to find innovative and creative ways to grow into the vision of the kingdom of God.

Jesus calls us to live our faith, not with melancholy and burden, but with awe and beauty. Jesus calls us to live our faith not with dull and indefinite hearts, but with glad and generous hearts.

In closing I want to share how one congregation has accepted the challenge to be creative. They worked for months to formulate a statement of the kind of community they wanted to be, in Christ. If it sounds familiar, I have passed this along to some of you before.

In closing I share First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in Memphis, TN and their inspiring, inclusive... Statement of Community...

We will be together.
We will stand as brothers and sisters given life by one God.
We will be together. We will watch out for one another.
We will listen to what needs to be said in a spirit of compassion.
We will respect the power of silence. We will wait for the slowest.
We will sooner or later catch up with the fastest.
We will dry the tears of those who are weeping
and know that they will dry ours when the time comes.
We will let ourselves begin to feel at least a little of the pain
of those we have considered our enemies.
We will entrust our stories to each other.
We will not be skeptical that peace can come.
We will not forget the joy of life.
We will not forget to be grateful.
We will do our best to stir in each other hope, courage and faith.

Tom Stoppard, a 20th century playwright said, "To me, the trick in life is to take that sense of generosity between kin, make it apply to the extended family and to your neighbor, your village and beyond."

To that I say...

Amen