

**Acts 2: 42-47 “From Bread & Cup to Faith & Giving” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/16/22**

Over the past decade, an interesting phenomenon has arisen, that is to search out one's heritage, our ancestry – 23 & Me, Ancestry.com, and others have made it easier to do. One of my daughter Ivy's Christmas presents was an opportunity to find out more about her birth family through 23&Me. One of my cousin's daughters has pursued the same with my mom's side of the family. TV & movies have tried to tap into this interest with productions like Batman Begins, X-Men Origins, House of Dragons, Rogue One – we could go on and on. There seems to be this human need to rifle back to the past to find out the place and time that something or someone big started off. We just really want to know what Bruce Wayne was like before he became Batman. As Laura Jean Truman notes, it is our fundamental drive for genealogy and the Book of Acts is sort of the church's equivalent of a genealogy.

The passage read this morning describes the Christian community as it begins. In a few short sentences, Luke sketches a vivid portrait of the early church in the vigor of its youth in Jerusalem. Since Luke writes, in part, to provide a model for the church in his own day, we shouldn't be surprised to find him touching on those qualities which are central and normative for the church at large which are vigorous leadership, evangelism, fellowship, worship, and stewardship. The last of those, stewardship, is what we give our attention to as we plan our budget for the upcoming year. And before you freak out about Luke's depiction of the community members selling everything they owned, please remember that Luke firmly believed that Christ's coming again would be in his lifetime. There would be no need for planning for the future or for personal possessions because it would only be a few short years at most before Christ would come again and take all his followers to a new realm which they understood would be somewhere else from where they currently were. So in this age as we come to see God's promised realm in a new light, and we aren't called to sell off our possessions, how exactly are we called to use our resources, and in particular our money?

In order to follow in the spirit of giving within the Acts 2 church, we need to expand our perspectives. To that end, Fred Craddock questions why, in describing the ideal church in its model behavior, are we told they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, breaking bread in their homes? Is the writer interrupting himself to say, oh yeah, they did take time to

eat, and if so, couldn't we have assumed that? One hardly pauses in documenting the lives of God's people to say they went to the bathroom, changed the candles, drank and ate when needed. The truth is the reference is there for a reason which becomes central to our Stewardship focus, as we ponder how we might share more fully of God's gifts.

Consider for a moment if you were asked to draw a picture entitled "The Church," what would you draw? Would it be a building with a cross in a big round circle encased over the patio and inside a sanctuary with chairs of worshippers or maybe a small group in a circle studying the Bible, an altar and a pulpit? When Luke portrays the church and its mission, more than any other writer, Luke places in the center a dining table. If you read through this Gospel, you probably will be as surprised as I was to discover how many of the great lessons Jesus gave were given while he was at the table, around the bread and cup. In the home of Martha and Mary, he spoke of pots and pans and God's realm. Sitting at Simon the Pharisee's table, he taught of love and forgiveness. As a dinner guest, he once warned the other guests about seeking places at the head table. At a banquet, he said that when you're giving a big banquet, make your guest list of those who are financially unable to return the courtesy. He was at a dinner when he said the realm of God is like a man who gave a great banquet. Those invited made excuses and so the room was filled with people of the street. One of the most beautiful parables Jesus ever told was that of a dinner party for a prodigal who had returned. It was at a meal that Jesus spoke of his death. After his resurrection, Christ incognito appeared to two Emmaus-bound disciples and as evening set in, they invited this stranger to stay for dinner and at the table, they asked him to say grace. So he took the bread and broke it and said the blessing. And the Lord was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

In the second volume of Luke's work that we call the Acts of the Apostles, Luke pictures the risen Christ with his followers. The phrase is used, "they were 'staying together'" which literally means "sharing the salt." In other words, while eating together, Christ gave them the Great Commission to witness to all the world. Why is it so vital for Luke to picture the church sitting around a table? Because for him, sharing food is basic to the definition of a church. There is nothing more spiritual anyone can do for another than to share food. This

has its roots in rabbinic tradition as a story is told about a certain village where every year the rabbi was absent on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Day of Atonement is still honored today occurring just a couple weeks ago. The rabbi's absence was explained to the congregation as "Our rabbi has ascended to heaven to make intercession with his people." A visitor heard that and joked, "Nobody ascends to heaven; that's just foolish." The next year the same thing happened with the same explanation. "Our rabbi has ascended to heaven to make intercession with his people." And again the same response from one who was now a regular attender, "Nobody ascends to heaven; that's just foolish." The third year, this doubter was determined to find out the truth so he hid under the bed in the rabbi's cottage, waited and watched. In the early morning, the rabbi got up and gathered what food he had into a sack and started out through the woods. Along the way, he collected firewood. Finally he came to a clearing where a humble cottage housed a widow and her children. The rabbi gave the food and fuel to this poor family. The next Sabbath the congregation explained the absence of the rabbi by saying, "The rabbi has ascended to heaven." But the former doubter arose and announced, "No... he has gone even higher."

One goes higher when one shares food, when one shares resources. Luke is saying that wherever some eat and some do not, you do not have church. But it is not just in the bread that Christ was present, it was in the breaking of bread, in the sharing of bread. The very nature of the church is contradicted when some have to eat alone. When Paul learned that the church of Corinth had grown so permissive that one of the leaders was living with his father's wife without any objections, Paul searched his imagination for the worst possible penalty and he finally concluded that the leader was not to eat with the church. He must eat alone. It was the worst possible consequence. Society has taken that a step further as they impose solitary confinement on those criminals who are deemed dangerous. The tragedy is that our society has allowed the same practice to continue in its neglect of the increasing number of aged and widowed. Of course, there's no punishment intended but the pain is still there. If you don't think so, just ask those who sit alone amid stainless steel trays, forced to eat alone when their only crime is that they have grown old. But in the church Luke describes, eating together was the test and proof of their common life. It was from the bread

and cup being shared, that faith was strengthened and giving was empowered. It set the standard for followers to discern the value of their shared gifts – do their gifts heal, do they bring hope, do they work to re-create part of the world so that people can rebuild their lives; do those gifts invite us to participate in God’s work of transformation? In considering what we share, whether it be bread and cup, financial resources, or gifts of time and volunteerism, the Holy Spirit calls us to be the church as God intends.

Author Rita Snowden tells of a visit to a small town near Dover, England. She was having tea and bread at a bakery where the smells of homemade bread were all around. She then became very aware of another unbelievably pleasant scent filling the air. She asked the waiter the source of the scent and was told that it came from the people passing by. He explained that they worked in a perfume factory down the street and were on their way home. When they left the factory, they carried with them the fragrance that had permeated their clothes during their day’s work. It is one more image for the church, where the sweet, fragrant love of Christ flows out from all of us and those we meet will experience something of God’s fragrance through you. The church can be portrayed in so many ways, but prayerfully, with each depiction, wherever the church exists, now as then, God’s people will break bread and partake with glad and generous hearts and now, no less than then, the Lord will be made known in the breaking of bread.