

Easter.4.A.2023.04.30.Sermon (Acts 2:42-47)

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"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **43** And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. **44** And all who believed were together and had all things in common. **45** And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need." This is our text. Let us pray: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen."

During one of the Toronto Maple Leafs games earlier this week, the announcer pointed out that the team which scored the first goal of each game had been the victors. There can be lots of reasons for this, like the ability to change your strategy to the defensive because you're already ahead. But at least a part of this is the confidence that comes with knowing you are winning. I was thinking about how much like life this is. When I was a vicar, my supervisor told me that if I didn't bring home some wins early, if I didn't have successful efforts towards ministry early in the day or week, I would psychologically defeat myself. I would think that I had failed, and I would freeze up, and do worse, and it would be a self-fulfilling prophecy of doom.

What we believe and what we tell ourselves matters. It changes our mindset. So what is the mindset of our church? You know what the mindset of the church has been the whole time I've been in the Lutheran Church-Canada? We're dying. It's all over. It feels like every conference and every magazine article and every presentation deals with decline and shrinking and fading away. I'll never forget a powerful church politician in our synod saying to me over lunch one day as a freshfaced pastor: 'hey this synod is going to be done in 10 years, the culture has turned, the world is too sinful. We can probably squeeze out a decade.'

That was the mindset he had. While he wouldn't have said the following words, he was essentially telling me: God is not going to help us, we have to take care of ourselves, and carve out whatever piece we can of this thing. Even as a seminary student I remember reading the strategic plan of LCMS: build more parishes where people of ethnic German descent live. They

believed more in the power of ethnic prejudice to convert, than the Holy Spirit in word and sacrament. And I mention this to you today, not to blame any one person. Because I think these are thoughts which anyone who's ever sat on a church board has had. I think it's a lie the Devil is telling us to get us to give up. It's the way to have a losing mindset, to forfeit the first goal, to be halfway on your way to failure.

What a stark contrast the mindset of the early church was. They were devoted to the Word of God, the apostles' teaching, to breaking bread together. It was a miraculous time in the church. A period of growth, or evangelism, of outreach.

The most remarkable verse is this one: "[T]hey were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need". The early Christians were treating each other as a family. One American commentator says: I am a capitalist in my workplace, and a communist with my children. He meant that we share everything we have with our kids. We let them get their fingerprints on our windows, let them crawl into our beds when they have nightmares, we spend our money to buy them new boots. And we do this because we know that we are a family. Families share everything in common. The early church heard the words of the apostles that we are one people, one family in Christ, and they believed it. And so they took care of each other as a family. It wasn't about communism or capitalism though. This verse isn't even really about money at the deepest level.

The point of the passage is that if you look at the way ordinary sinners react, their greed, their selfishness, their lack of generosity, and when you look at how the early Christians acted, no one could say 'well they're just like everyone else'. They had new hearts, they were committed to loving their neighbour not just in their words, and not just on Sundays, but with all of their lives, even their wallets.

They weren't forced or compelled. Instead it was that the people so believed the promises of the Gospel, they cared so much about the teaching of Christ, that 'the things of this world grew strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace'. They just didn't care anymore.

Geologists say that diamonds are nearly a billion years old. We wear them on our fingers, and we think we own them. And it must be quite comedic from the diamond's perspective. The diamond in my ring was around before Moses received the Ten Commandments and I think I'm the one who owns it? When we realize our short time here on earth as humans and the scope of eternity in the kingdom of Heaven, we are freed from the myth that we are owners of anything.

God has given us gifts and talents, time and treasure. And what are we using them for? To stack a bunch of shiny things in a pile like a dragon hoard? The church of Acts 2 was not focused on their retirement funds, they cared about the kingdom of Christ. They used whatever they had for the mission of the Gospel. And they weren't scared the church was going to die out. They didn't have a losing mentality. Because they believed that Jesus said the gates of Hell would not prevail against his church. And remember gates are defensive. So Jesus says that the church is going to grow so much, expand so far, that Hell is going to try to build like defensive walls to keep out the gospel, and the gospel is going to break those walls down.

These Christians believed that, and so they weren't scared. They knew God loved them and cared for them, and so they didn't worry about tomorrow. And because they believed that they were a family in Christ, they treated each other like a family. They paid each other's debts. They shared whatever they had. And their lives were so radically different from the world around them, that people could not help but notice.

Have we processed that the people sitting in the pew next to us, will live with us for eternity. That we have been baptized into one family of God, that gathers around this altar at the same kitchen table? Or are those just words to us that haven't affected our minds or our lives? ||

The bible doesn't command that we must sell everything and give it to the church. But Acts 2 shows us that when the church is ablaze with the fire of the Holy Spirit, it is not business as usual. That when Christians have the mindset of scoring the first goal, when they are at their best, it looks like caring for each other, it looks like paying other peoples debts, it looks like love.

Look at the circumstances faced by the early Christians in Acts 2. The governing authorities were dragging people out of their houses and arresting them. They beheaded St. James the pastor of the Jerusalem church. That's what they were up against, and they won. I remember one historian saying that Christianity spread in the Roman Empire as an illegal religion until the day they couldn't find an executioner for all the people lining up to be martyred. That's when Constantine converted and the law changed. And today do we dare to write in 2023 that the government and culture are too hostile to Christianity? We dare to think our lot is too hard? We dare to imagine our circumstances are too difficult for God to bear?

The early Christians believed: if God is for us, who can be against us? They believed that in Christ we are more than conquerors. St. Paul said **while he is chained to a prison guard** "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength". What do you believe? What do you tell yourself?

'It's hopeless' 'I can't do it' 'it's impossible'.

It is time for us all to repent of our excuses. It is time for all of us to confess our sins, our defeatism, our losing mindset, and to be renewed by the Spirit of the Living God who has said

that he will never leave us nor forsake us. We think our situation is impossible? Fine. Jesus says with God all things are possible. God can do the impossible.

The same God who transformed that community in Acts 2, is still working here among us today. His word is still living and active, at that altar we still commune with Christ and those saints. So let us believe what God tells us, let us live boldly in faith. And we will never be the same again, and neither will the world.

[and] God give us the grace to repent of our excuses, and believe in your promises, in the name of Jesus, Amen.