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Acts 2:41-47

GOOD NEWS STORIES

Some stories sound too good to be true. And I wonder if that's how our passage from Acts strikes you--as too good to be true? We are given a picture of what the earliest community of Christians looked like. Here is what we are told: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings and to fellowship; they broke bread together--perhaps meaning some ritual like communion but definitely meaning actual meals together; all their material goods were shared and held in common and they sold their possessions to help one another's needs; they worshiped at home and in the temple together; they were generous; they had goodwill toward one another.

Does all this sound to you as too good to be true? This utopian image of the earliest Christian community has some scholars wondering if these practices were actually lived out as universally as the writer of this story leads us to believe. But even if this story is somewhat romanticized, it points to something pretty crucial. It points to the fact that the story of Jesus, of his life and Resurrection, transformed his first followers, and that there was an impulse to make this story part of their lives. Even if they didn't live it out perfectly, there was among the earliest followers of Jesus an impulse to make this story come alive in their lives. The good news of what God had done in Jesus didn't remain just a nice idea for these folks--it became concrete. And what we see is those first Christians living out their faith in important ways: coming together as a community, worshipping, praying, learning about Jesus, sharing meals with one another, sharing their belongings with one another, and helping take care of one another's needs. It's a picture of the Christian church getting it right.

Now, one thing that is great about the Bible is that it is also honest. And so if we are given a somewhat idealized portrait of the earliest Christians in this passage, all we have to do is keep reading in the Book of Acts to get a more balanced perspective. Because before too long,

we will be told about Christians who were selfish and some who were greedy. We will learn about church embezzlement, racial exclusion, leadership failures, congregational self-destruction, and all kinds of church infighting. The Bible does not portray Christians as perfect.

So what we can take away from today's passage from Acts is not that the biblical writers wanted to white wash the truth but rather that they wanted us to understand that Jesus transformed lives. Those first Christians were transformed in real and meaningful ways because of the story of Jesus. Those early Christians, with their sharing and caring and prayers and worship and general goodwill, give us a picture of what the Church looks like when it gets it right, when it is doing what it is supposed to be doing in the name of Jesus.

And to be honest, it's kind of refreshing to hear about Christians exhibiting good behavior, isn't it? Because all too often we hear other stories in the news: stories about clergy abusing children, stories about extravagant misuse of church funds, stories about church fights and divisions. Human history tells us terrible stories of the Christian Church supporting genocide, colluding with the power of the state in oppression and injustice, of shoring up power and wealth for itself, of the devaluing of women and their gifts, of discrimination and exclusion. And then sometimes our own personal stories may include stories of the Christian Church wounding or hurting us. I have heard many of these wounded stories: of gays and lesbians told they were worthless by the members and leaders of their churches, of women who were denied leadership in their faith communities, of individuals who were abused by someone within the Christian community. There are so many stories out there of when the Church has gotten it so badly wrong--of when it has not lived out God's love, acceptance, grace, or peace.

What is amazing, however is that somehow, somehow, even with all this bad behavior, the true story of God's love and grace as revealed in Jesus Christ, the story that has the power to change lives, this story has nevertheless managed to make its way down through these thousands of years to us today. And I think it was done, in part, through the kinds of people we read about

in Acts--people whose simple lives were transformed by God's love and who then lived this love out in their ordinary lives in extraordinary ways. This story really meant something so crucial to them. And they told it by how they lived and by what they said.

I think these stories of the Church getting it right are important for us to remember and to tell. And I don't believe this because I want to gloss over Christians' failings. It is essential we recall how Christians have failed to live faithfully and to confess these failings. And I don't want to focus today on the Church's good behavior in order to puff ourselves up, to pat ourselves on the back, to get big heads about how good we are. Rather, I want to draw our attention to such stories as today's passage from Acts because we all need witnesses to the faith. We need witnesses to show us what following Christ should look like. I think we desperately need examples of Christians who are generous, who serve, who sacrifice, who strive to forgive, who work for justice, who look out for the needy in the name of Christ. We need these witnesses to the faith or how else will we ever learn what it means to follow Jesus?

I wonder, who has been such a witness to you? Who has modeled the transformed life, by how they love, and serve, and give, and share? Maybe you have found such good news stories right here in our congregation. Maybe here at UPC you have witnessed people taking care of one another: taking one another to doctor's appointments, visiting the sick or the grieving, preparing food for those in a time of hardship. Maybe you have found good news in the way people will share joys and concerns and then pray for one another, or in those who work in the food pantry, or in those who work toward social change and justice, or in another church member's extraordinary generosity. Maybe it was some other Christian community or individual in your life who served as an example of love and grace, of justice and inclusion.

There are so many examples of when the Christian community has failed, has wounded, has hurt, that when we see examples of Christians living as new creations in Christ, of loving, forgiving, serving, being generous, including the outcast, standing up for the powerless, when we

see these examples, we want to make sure they are noticed. We want to notice and celebrate them not because we ourselves are so good. The reason we need to share these good new stories, like the one we read from the Book of Acts today, is because they all point to the goodness of God. Our heartbreaking failures as individuals and as a Christian communities cannot stop the life-giving, loving, redeeming activity of God. The real good news story we celebrate today, the best news of all, is that Christ cannot be stopped by our sins or failures. Those early Christians from the Book of Acts gathered in all their brokenness and imperfections, just as we gather in all our brokenness and imperfection, because of the Spirit of God. And the good we might do, grows out of this transforming love.

In a short while we will gather around this Table. This Table is where good news stories and bad news stories exist side by side. We come to this Table with our personal bad news stories and our communal bad news stories to this place of good news--to this place of God's love and forgiveness. Here we receive the good news that can heal us and that can transform us. We are loved and we are forgiven. And then, empowered by this good news, we leave this place to tell this story by how we live. And may others know we are Christians by our love.