

Easter 4 - A (2020)
Acts 2:42-47

Surrounded by Your glory
What will my heart feel
Will I dance for You, Jesus
Or in awe of You be still
Will I stand in Your presence
Or to my knees will I fall
Will I sing Hallelujah!
Will I be able to speak at all
I can only imagine
I can only imagine.

Mercy Me, "I Can Only Imagine"

Every morning at 5:45, my phone sings "Surrounded by Your glory . . . I can only imagine." I can only imagine a picture of heaven, but it's also nearly impossible to imagine the reality of what we heard in our Bible reading from Acts today.

Acts gives us such a simple and clear picture of the church at its earliest. They were worshiping. They were sharing their possessions. They were eating together. I can only imagine. But that picture also grates on some folks: having things in common. "Maybe that worked for them, but it won't work for us." "This isn't what we do."

We don't hold all things in common. At least most of us don't. When we become Christians, most of us don't sell all of our possessions and goods and pool all our resources so that we can live together in a communal home and distribute anything left over after our needs are cared for to those in need. Not that folks aren't generous and don't give some of their resources to serve the needy. Certainly many people do.

But the fact of the matter is, we live in a capitalist society. So, this whole idea of selling all of our possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need, is sort of antithetical to our way of life. This is a kind of socialist way of thinking about organizing an economic system. It is the absolute polar opposite of capitalism, which is a system that thrives on maintaining a competitive market and which teaches us to value private property, not communal property, as the principal motive for hard work, invention, national security and wealth.

So when I read this story. I can only imagine because I know that this isn't what I do. This isn't what any of us do. At least this isn't how most Americans live. I can only imagine.

Today's Bible reading is about a collective US.

Together. Being a community. Holding all things in common. And if it's not going to be our possessions, then it needs to be something.

We need to make some kind of sacrifice to call ourselves Christians. We need to offer some part of our lives to God. There must be something that we can take away from hearing this story about these first Christians who, according the Luke . . .

Devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer,

Were together and had all things in common, who sold their possessions and goods and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Day by day, spent much TIME together in the temple, breaking bread and eating food with glad and generous hearts.

Praised God and had the good will of all people, so that day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

You know, as it turns out, though, this practice that Luke, the author of Acts, describes didn't last that long. Even in the early church, things quickly changed. In those earliest days after the conversion of the multitudes of people at and following the Pentecost event, we catch a glimpse of a moment in time in which people were really passionate about their conversions.

They were passionate because they were convinced that they were living in the "last days," they expected Jesus to come back the next day or next week or soon, and so they were fully committed to living, for the short time that they had left on this earth, a radically altered lifestyle.

So those early Christians who believed this are pictured as being continually in worship, unselfishly pooling their collective resources, holding their beliefs and hopes and dreams in common, and seeing many signs and wonders all around them. In short, they sum up the exhilaration of the believers in Jerusalem as they lived in the very charged atmosphere of expectation that Christ would soon return to rule the whole world. It is an idealized moment in history, and it focuses on all that was good among those first disciples. But, alas, the moment was fleeting. And predictably, the practice described here didn't last long.

Because after a while, reality began to set in: Christ didn't return to rule in glory. The apostles got thrown in jail for their preaching. Ananias and Sapphira did not act with unselfish generosity toward their community, but instead acted with greed and dishonesty. You can check out their story in Acts 5. The different churches began to get into conflict with one another about who was practicing and preserving the true faith. And pretty soon, Stephen was murdered.

The cold hard truth of the matter is, it just isn't easy to hold all things in common. Not for me, not for you, and not for the early Christians. It's not easy to sacrifice. It's not easy to live on less.

It's very hard not to be selfish. But we have to try. Partly because the whole world has been changed by the coronavirus pandemic and the normal we once knew is not now and will not be the normal that will be. Business have closed for good or have been severely restricted. The number of unemployed has exploded and they may not even have jobs to go back to when this is over. Hoarding supplies prevents others from having what they need. We need the message of Acts 2 more than ever: "all the believers . . . shared everything they had. That's not just practical; it is an issue of morality and good stewardship. It's just the right thing to do --to take a little less, to use a little less, of the available resources, so that others who have need will have a bit more.

That's what it is to be CHRISTIAN. But is it true that even if we tried, we probably wouldn't be able to do this for very long? Would our human selfishness get in the way?

In Acts, the Christian community flourishes – formed by Christ and nourished through teaching, fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and prayer. Those are the essential marks of the church: the Word of God proclaimed, Baptism, Communion shared, and a disciplined common life. It is not just a description of how the church used to look; it is a blueprint for how the church should look today! In that kind of church, people learn to care about each other, hold each other accountable and experience the joy of life together. Not just an "everybody knows your name" social club, an authentic Christian community acknowledges that the Church belongs to God.

Last July when I arrived at the Parsonage which was to be my new home, I was touched by the beauty of the raised flower bed in front of the house. People spent effort and time and money to buy and plant beautiful flowers that I enjoyed all throughout the summer and into the fall. I was thrilled to discover a raspberry patch in the back yard, and I enjoyed raspberries on my cereal into October!

I have spent time this spring working on the yard, weeding and picking up sticks and trimming the bushes. I spent time cleaning out the raspberry patch: taking out the spent stalks and the weaklings which would not amount to anything. And, having done that, the daffodils are much more visible.

The flowers in the raised bed, being annuals, were not going to bloom again, so two of the sisters of the church worked with me to get that raised bed cleaned up. Then, I purchased mulch from a local nursery and planted a Vanilla Strawberry Tree Form Hydrangea. They say it will bloom from June into the fall, but it hasn't happened

yet. Too early. I can only imagine how beautiful that tree will be this summer. At this time, I can only imagine how it will look when it is in full bloom.

In our reading from Acts today, we hear about a church that was in full bloom. When people see **your** church from a distance or when they hear about **your** church or when they visit **your** church when we come back together, what do they experience: a church in full bloom and a church that still has life or a church of last year's dried up flowers ready to be cleaned up and thrown away? The dead flowers of the last decade or the last century?

How clear is it to others that the primary identity of your church is in its relationship with God? What makes that identity clear? How is that identity communicated? How is your congregation marked unmistakably as members of church of Jesus Christ when compared to other groups in your community? What sets it apart as followers of Jesus Christ is critical work for the church today.

It is essential that we are about the work of being a church of Jesus Christ, but it's not all about us. Prayer and the Holy Spirit can put the bloom back on the church. Prayer and the Holy Spirit can give your church all it needs to be a church in full bloom. Can you imagine what your church could look like if it practiced the essential marks of a church? Can you imagine what your church would look like if it practiced the seven functions of a biblical community which I talked about last Sunday? Can you imagine how your church could grow and what it would look like if it were a "divine furnace" in which God's Spirit set hearts on fire?

Our reading from Acts today closes with the Lord adding to their fellowship each day. The growth, Acts declares, comes from God. The word from Acts reminds us in all times that whatever strategies or efforts or plans may come, growth is a gift of God's grace, nurture, and feeding. Those are the gifts God offers.

Let us try to devote ourselves to the teaching of the apostles in this church and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.

May awe come upon all of us because of the many wonders and signs being done by the apostles in the church!

May we believe together and have all things in common.

May we sell SOME of our possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as they have need!

Day by day, when we are able again to spend time together in our own local temples, and break bread in each others' homes and eat food with glad and generous hearts, may we praise God and have the good will of all people in our minds! And day by day, may the Lord add to our numbers those who are being saved.