

“Unbelievable Gifts”

Acts of the Apostles 4.32–35 and John 20.19–29

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 19 April 2009

Sometimes the lectionary, our appointed cycle of scripture readings, deals us an interesting hand with what's going on in the larger community. Last Wednesday I was having lunch with a friend in Old Town, right near the courthouse, and as we ate lunch we saw a throng of protesters, about a thousand of them according to the local paper. I wondered where they were when our government invested future generations' money in two expensive wars, and where they were when the bank bailout was crafted by the previous administration in Washington. I wondered if they knew that 37 of the 50 states have higher state and local taxes¹ than we do in Colorado. And I wondered if they knew that our income tax rates are the lowest among developed nations.² It's a truism that nobody likes to pay taxes, but isn't this economic crisis making us realize that we are all this together?

I think of those thousand people marching near the courthouse and I wonder what they think of what is happening to higher education in our state... at CSU, just six blocks south of where they were marching. Are they aware of the desperate measures being pursued in the state capital to find funding for our state colleges and universities? Are they aware of what a fabulous investment public higher education is for Colorado, and that we are consistently right near the bottom two or three in state appropriations for higher education funding? Do they understand that high-tech firms like HP, Intel, and Advanced Logic located themselves near CSU? Do they know the message this sends to our brightest young women and men?

I confess my bias as a graduate of the University of California. When I was an undergraduate, I earned enough with my summer jobs to pay my entire annual tuition, which was a whopping \$750. I am reminded how fortunate I have been when I think about those protesters. I think about the generosity of donors who provided a full academic scholarship for me to attend seminary. And I give thanks for the people who share their wealth through taxation and through philanthropy, which literally means “love of humanity.” And I've certainly seen philanthropy and faithfulness in action here at Plymouth in the past few years. If you don't believe me, just look around!

I think about all those tax protesters and wonder how many of them are Christians – and how many in that subset claim to take the Bible literally and see it as the inerrant words of God. And I wonder what they do with that passage from the Acts of the Apostles. It doesn't say to tithe 10 percent of your income to the church; it says something far more radical: “No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” (*Sean Hannity would clearly brand those early Christians as socialists.*)

We are all in this together. On the level of family, of faith community, of city, state, and nation. It's time for us to start seeing our destiny as a planet as being inextricably linked together. We are all in this together. Yes, we are individuals, I celebrate that. But, who among us is prepared to say, “I have no need of you?” When in reality, “There are many members, yet one body.”³

We are told that the early Christian church got that message. Can you imagine what it would be like if every member of Plymouth held none of their property privately,

¹ <http://money.cnn.com/pf/features/lists/taxesbystate2005/index.html>

² <http://www.kqed.org/w/youdecide/incometax/03.html?panel=0>

³ 1 Corinthians 12.14

but instead shared all their wealth with the church, which could then redistribute wealth to any of us that were in need? I'll bet that sounds pretty good to some of us who have lost our jobs or face uncertainty in our employment. Would you be willing to opt into that system?

We have over 600 members in roughly 300 households. If each household owned a home in Fort Collins, which has an average value of \$250,000, that means that collectively we own \$75 million in real estate...and that doesn't count anyone's second home. And the average household income in our zip code is about \$72,000 a year, so our collective income is probably about \$21.6 million a year. (Gee, with that kind of money, we wouldn't even have to have a capital campaign!)

Well, it would certainly be an interesting challenge to try and manage the redistribution of that wealth, but I can imagine that it would be helpful to some of us to have that kind of security net.

Do you think that utopian, proto-socialist ideal was ever really put into practice by the early church? We don't actually know. (Thomas the apostle would want to see it for himself before believing it.) We're given the idea that there may have been some resistance, however. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is almost never heard in worship, and it doesn't occur in the lectionary readings, but you can find it in the fifth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Here's the story:

“But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ‘Ananias,’ Peter asked, ‘why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!’ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

“After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, ‘Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.’ And she said, ‘Yes, that was the price.’ Then Peter said to her, ‘How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.’ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.”⁴

You'll notice that this wasn't the text we chose to accompany the capital campaign. But, it does provide another illustration that the community took seriously the sharing of their wealth.



What kind of faith – what kind of trust – would it take for each of us to share not some, but **all**, of our wealth with others in this congregation, knowing that none of us would go hungry? Would you go for it? What would hold you back, if you don't think you'd opt in?

I doubt that we have the collective will to do that, but I could be wrong. That word I just used, *doubt*, is one that Christians associate with Thomas the apostle. You know...“doubting Thomas.” In fact, I think Thomas should be the patron saint of critical thinking, which for many of us is an essential part of our faith.

⁴ Acts of the Apostles 5.1–10

I also object to demonizing the concept of doubt, and I disagree with the NRSV translation that is rendered as “doubt.” The Greek word used in John’s gospel is “*apistos*,” which means unfaithful. Thomas doesn’t believe what he hears from the other disciples. And when Jesus appears, he floats through a closed door, but his body is tangible enough for Thomas to touch.

Doubt – the searching, critical, inquisitive wondering and speculating we do – is an integral part of our faith; it is not being unfaithful. A mature faith can only be born of times of questioning. . . *Did it really happen Was it really like that? Is that what he actually said? She didn’t mean that, did she?* As William Sloane Coffin once quipped, “Jesus came to take away our sins, not our minds.”

Doubt is one of the critical stages that we visit from time to time in our faith journeys. It’s not a very productive place to stay all the time, nor is it a useful final destination. But, it can be constructive to ask questions and engage your faith.

So, whether you think the first Christians literally shared everything in common or whether you *doubt* that it happened quite that way, what does it say about the nature of Christian community, both in theory and in practice? Are we meant to emphasize individual prosperity or collective well-being? And what impact does that have on your thinking about the money you share with the church?

May the spirit of the early church continue to reside with us as a Christian community grounded in love, generosity, and concern for one another and for our neighbor. Amen.