

Meditation I: “Glad and Generous Hearts”

Acts of the Apostles 2.42–47

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 17 April 2005

The Acts of the Apostles is a fascinating book. It’s the companion volume to the Gospel According to Luke, and both books are addressed to a character named Theophilus, which in Greek means “God lover,” and we might presume this was a pseudonym for a Gentile patron who read these two books. Those of you who are familiar with the book know that it tells us what happened in the early church after the crucifixion and resurrection. It tells of Paul’s conversion on the Damascus Road, his travels and his trials. It records the authority of both Peter and Paul.

So, if you were a literary critic, what genre would you assign to the Acts of the Apostles? It’s not poetry, essays, short stories, songs, mystery novel. But, it’s not quite history in the modern sense either. Modern historical research uses primary source material to document and support hypotheses. Even though a history may have a point of view, dates and quotations need to be referenced in exacting detail. At its best, modern history tries to shed light on a past event with balance and backs up supposition with fact.

But, the Acts of the Apostles doesn’t do that. Its author isn’t out just to set out an *objective* recounting of the facts. Rather, he is trying to persuade, and he uses a fair amount of literary license in doing so. (For instance, he builds up Paul’s credibility, saying he was a Roman citizen from Tarsus, but we never hear that from Paul himself.) One of my seminary professors identified the genre as historical fiction, but if you’re not willing to go quite that far, perhaps you can categorize it as history *interspersed with wishful thinking*.

So, what the author is trying to do is set before his readers an account, a somewhat idealized account, of the early church. And this morning’s lectionary text does just that. It lays out a beautiful vision of a community that shares everything it has with one another: not just a tithe here or a special gift there. The author tells us that they sold all property and possessions and redistributed their wealth according to the needs of those who formed the community. That may sound vaguely Marxist to you, but it was the ideal that the first Christian community strove toward. I doubt whether they actually accomplished that ideal, because the author of Acts later tells of a couple who did not share all their wealth. And there are still communities who do hold all their wealth communally. The Bruderhof movement, some Amish, and members of Roman Catholic religious orders all reject personal ownership of property. Even though he lived like royalty, Pope John Paul’s will revealed that he died without personal property.

Does that mean that those communities have no wealth? Of course not! They just don’t hold it individually. And that is a radically countercultural ideal for 21st century Americans. Some of you know a bit about the Iona Community in Scotland, as I often use their resources in worship (including the *kyrie* we chanted during Lent), and those of you in our “Living the Questions” class know one of its leaders, John Bell, who is featured in the series. They are an ecumenical community that has a Rule by which they operate. It has five parts:

- 1) *Daily prayer and Bible reading*
- 2) *Sharing and accounting for the use of our money*
- 3) *Planning and accounting for the use of our time*
- 4) *Acting for justice and peace in society*
- 5) *Meeting with and accounting to each other*

That financial accountability part is kind of scary, isn’t it?! After all, we’ve been conditioned to think that our money is the most personal aspect of our lives (even more so

than our sexuality), and it's none of your business how I earn, invest, or spend it. But members of the Iona Community (who are non-monastic folks like you and me) are asked to account to one another for the use of their income. And then in family groups, to agree to individual baseline commitments, expenses (including a tithe to one's local church), and special circumstances, thus arriving at personal disposable income, which is not socked away by the individual, rather it is given to the community and then used for the wider work of the church (including justice and peace) and the work of the Iona Community itself.

Would you find that approach scary or invasive? Wouldn't it be weird to turn over control of a good part of your income to a group? Clearly, this is not the American way! It may not be American, *but it is very deeply rooted in the Christian way*. Christians are meant to give of ourselves not so that our individual needs will be met, but so that our collective needs will be met.

I imagine such sharing and accounting would be like going out onto a high-wire for the first time, not knowing if the safety net below you would hold if you fall. I'll bet that a lot of us worry about our economic safety net – I know I do. *Will I be safe if I fall?*

And here's the key: *it only works if every member of the community is holding the net*. If I fall off the high-wire and someone isn't participating, the safety net may not be dependable.

The early church knew something that we 21st century Americans have forgotten – in fact, it's been erased from our collective consciousness: that we are *one body*, that we are a community, not a random assemblage of individuals.

I'm not quite ready to take on the Iona Community Rule, but I invite you to consider what it might be like if we did. What impact would that five-fold rule have on our community here at Plymouth? And what effect would it have on our community goals for renovation, expansion, and outreach? If we chose to move forward with that vision, it will take *every member* of the community; none of us can do it alone.

Perhaps the first Christians didn't fully meet their ideal of communal living, but they *did* understand something we don't: it's not about **me** – it's about **us**. May we, individually and communally, have glad and generous hearts. Amen.

Meditation II: The God of Distributive Justice

It's wonderfully amazing that this text came up in the lectionary on this Sunday when we, as a community, are making decisions about how we use our collective wealth and how we hold ourselves accountable, in terms of justice and peace. The scripture reading has only five sentences, but it contains ample wisdom for both issues.

A little over a year ago, Liz McGrew and I took the confirmation class to the MacKenzie Lecture at First Congregational in Boulder to hear John Dominic Crossan, a renowned biblical scholar. That evening, Crossan spoke a lot about justice in the world and in our country. And he made a claim that really made me stand up and take notice. It was a deeply countercultural claim: that God's justice is almost never retributive justice (that is, a system of punishments for wrongdoing), but rather that God's dominant form of justice was distributive justice (or economic justice in the community).

I wasn't quite ready to make that leap with him – after all wasn't it God who drowned most of the world when he spared Noah and his family, who introduced the word "plague" into the Egyptian vocabulary, who ensured victory against the Canaanites (who, after all, were guilty only of living in Canaan.)

But, justice is also defined by God in the laws of debt forgiveness and the manumission of slaves every seven years¹ and by the Jubilee year (the redistribution of wealth every 50 years). Clearly, that's distributive justice.² These were laws designed to protect the most vulnerable members of society. "There will never cease to be needy ones in your land," the Lord says in Deuteronomy, "which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy."³

This is fairly radical stuff, involving the redistribution of wealth, presumably earned fair and square. (If you ever want to stump a fundamentalist banker, as if she takes literally the forgiveness of all debts every seven years!)

And we haven't even touched the Hebrew social prophets whose mantra seemed to be "Care for the oppressed, the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan."⁴ Those were the persons who were the most economically vulnerable members of their society. It also makes me pause when I think of the so-called Minute Men who are patrolling the border between Mexico and the United States, and when I hear about some of the priorities in our national budget.

The Hebrew prophetic tradition, of course, continues through the ministry of Jesus, who spoke not of the rich being blessed, but rather the poor; who told us that if we have two coats, we ought to give one of them to someone who has none; who told the rich young man to give all his wealth to the poor.

Last week, I looked at a website recommended in an Episcopal stewardship magazine. The website is called globalrichlist.com, and you can enter your annual income and figure out where you stand among your fellow inhabitants of God's earth. So, I ran our annual household income, and it turns out that there are only 46.7 million people richer than I am, but there are 5.9 billion who are poorer than I am. In other words, I am in the **top 8/10ths of one percent** of the wealthiest people on the planet. If we lined up 100 people in this sanctuary and had each person represent a portion of the planet, I'd be the wealthy one

¹ See Deuteronomy 15.1–10

² See Leviticus 25.8–17

³ Deut. 15.11

⁴ For a few examples, see Isaiah 1.17, Jeremiah 7.6, Zechariah 7.10

in a hundred. If we laid out the wealth of the earth on a football field, I'd be on the one-yard line.

I wish I could say that this information made me feel better. But, when I think of the parable of the rich young man, I begin to see my face in his, because I am comparatively quite rich. (I just don't always feel that way, especially around April 15th.) I'm not sharing this information with you so that we can wallow in our collective guilt for being affluent. I'm using myself as an example to give us some perspective and to move us toward action, toward setting up systems of economic justice that ensure we do what God intends: to protect those who are the most economically vulnerable members of society.

When we think of those first Christians, who "had all things in common," who would "sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need," remember that they didn't just dream this scheme up one day. They were listening to the voices of the Torah, the prophets, and Jesus himself, all of which cried out for distributive justice. They allowed themselves to be molded by their scriptures and by the teachings of Jesus, which were in their memories and not yet on paper or in books.

This congregation has long been a force for positive social change in this community and beyond, and that didn't come out of thin air either. Our traditions have come from listening to the law, the prophets, and the gospel.

I see our Peace with Justice Statement as a next logical step in our congregation's life together, not because it says something particularly new or extraordinary, but rather because it shows what we value and how we listen to our biblical heritage, and also because it holds us accountable to ourselves. As we meet to discern where the Spirit is leading this congregation, may we remember where we came from in charting a course for who we will become.

Amen.