

Acts 4:32-35

“...³⁴ For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales ...”

A pastor challenged his congregation to do three things: One, to sell everything they had; two, to get a job at McDonalds; and three, to tithe 10% of their new income (that is, the additional income they got from our recent tax cut, or a raise or other new source of income). He said that if everyone in his congregation did that, the church’s income would go from \$188,000 to over \$293,000. That’s an increase of \$105,000! That increase would mean the congregation could build two Habitat Homes rather than one. And, to have a Habitat Home, the prospective owner must contribute sweat equity- that

is, the prospective owner must commit his or her own time to help build the house. That’s important on so many levels, including the pride that living in what you helped to build encourages the owner to keep up the house and thus the neighborhood is better for it. And, as one who worked at McDonalds during college, that gives you an appreciation for how to treat people and for how important low cost food is to those who have little to spend.

If everyone in the congregation took the three steps outlined, the congregation could also increase its other outreach activities in significant ways.¹ Just imagine what **we** might do if we accepted this pastor’s challenge? Among other things, if everyone in our congregation did this, everyone would be invested in making God’s realm a reality on this earth in ways that are not now true. When you give of what you have, and when you give with an open heart and open hands, you breathe into the world new possibilities for us, collectively, to live a better life. A more peaceful life. A life where people will feel empowered rather than see themselves as victims.

Accepting that kind of challenge seems to be what happened at the time the Church was newly forming. In the reading from Acts today, we are told that everyone sold everything. They gave the proceeds to the community, and *no one was in need. No one was in need.* Everyone in the community gave of their gifts and talents. Everyone who could work, worked. Everyone contributed. No one sat back and thought that they were entitled to receive just because they were alive. All were part of something that was growing and loving. Toxic charity did not exist, at least according to the early gospel accounts because people in this new movement understood they were connected to one another and that each person had value. Seems to be quite a different world from the one we too often inhabit today, and that is beyond sad. God weeps when we see someone who could use a hand up and we offer a hand out, demeaning our brother or sister who is capable of being more.

Why is it so hard for us to give up our “stuff”? Too often, we have so much stuff that we rent a storage space – and then we never go there to get that stuff out.

¹ Forward Day by Day February/March/April 2009. Meditation for April 19, 2009.

It just sits there. Month after month after month— costing us money to store what we can't seem to part with. But we don't seem to need it, either. Why is that?

Or how many of us have driven down a street and seen an open garage – stuffed to the gills with things. So many things that the cars don't have enough room to park inside the garage. Why do we keep all these things? Why are we afraid to let go of what we don't need – and most especially when giving up what we don't need could help someone with that hand up by enabling them to furnish an apartment that is close to a new job?

Maybe part of what happened at the time the Church was newly forming is related to a belief that Jesus was going to come again *in their own lifetime*. If Jesus is coming again tomorrow, then what need do I have for a big house, big cars, fancy trips and dining out? Maybe what really matters when I believe the Second Coming just might be tomorrow is to focus on how I live my life today. I want to be ready when Jesus comes again. I want to live the life he set before us. To love my neighbor. To make sure that no one is in need by offering a hand up.

It wasn't necessarily easy for the people of the first century to give up their stuff, either. Think about the parable of the rich young ruler. He had followed all the teachings of the Torah. But when Jesus asked him to sell what he had in order to follow Jesus, this rich young ruler couldn't do it. He walked away – sad, yes- but he walked away. Stuff mattered to him more than following Jesus did. He was defined by his stuff – and not by what he believed.

This reading from Acts follows hard on the heels of Easter. What does it mean for us, as Easter people? As 21st Century Christians? Is it life “same ole, same ole” – *Oh, that's a nice story but it really doesn't have anything to do with me*. Or is our life transformed as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus?

A transformation that is soul-deep and not just skin-deep. A transformation that means we witness our faith to the world. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ. The Acts of the Apostles tell us how those who lived at that time were transformed by what had happened. They lived into the good news. And sometimes living into the good news meant – and means- radical change.

The Book of Acts shows us what it means to live into God's mission in the world. The Church is the instrument of God to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to everyone. But the Church, itself, is not the end of the story. The Church is, rather, the *means* to a new life, centered in the risen Lord. It is the means *through which* we can ensure that no one is in need. It is the means *through which* we can build a community which witnesses to the incarnation of Jesus Christ – the one who came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

We do not have to do this alone. Indeed, the Holy Spirit comes precisely because we need support. We need a counselor. We need an advocate. We need to know that God is still active in our world.

What do we really need besides God's blessing? In Deuteronomy (15:4), we are told that there will be no one in need among us if we follow all that God has asked of us. We will be blessed by

God if we follow God's commandments. We are told not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted. We are to make sure that those who have a need have that need responded to. As followers of Jesus, we are the agents of change. We are the people called to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are the people responsible for living a life that evidences what can happen when we trust in God. This does not mean that we will each become wealthy, although it might. This does not mean that we will not become sick, because we might. Just ask Kate Bowler, the author of Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved.

Kate is a professor at Duke Divinity School and comes from a Mennonite background. Her area of specialty is the prosperity gospel. Kate's journey with Stage IV colon cancer is a reminder that what we really need to know and remember is that Jesus is with us, regardless of what life throws at us.

What does it mean, as Adam Hamilton asked us this morning to be salt and light? We are change agents if we believe in Jesus. We have the capacity to show the world a new way to live- that we can have nice things, we can be wealthy- as long as our focus is on Jesus and the commandments to love God and love neighbor.

What it does mean is that we live a life with integrity. We live a life that understands the proper place and value of our "stuff." We live a life that has its foundation in love of neighbor so that none might be in need. We live a life that offers a hand up and not a hand out. We live a life that knows from whom our true value comes – from belief in Jesus, the only Son of God, our Lord and Savior. Amen.