

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Measuring Your Spirit”

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Genesis 12: 1-4

12 Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Acts 4:32

32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Keith Wagner tells the story of a little village close to the mountains of northern Italy. The rolling hillsides were covered with vineyards. This land produced some of the finest wine in the entire world. The secret was that each family in the village contributed to the making of the finest wine by bringing a large barrel of their own wine to the center of town and pouring it into an even larger community keg. Even though each of the families had their own special recipe, the result was a wine mixture that was very unique. Merchants came from all over the world to purchase the special wine and the entire community depended on the sale of the wine to help them provide for the next growing season.

One particular year the weather did not cooperate and the vineyards did not produce an abundance of grapes. One of the wine makers decided that since things would be tight that year, he would sell all of his wine elsewhere. He filled his personal barrel with water and then poured the water into the giant community keg. He reasoned that a single barrel of water in the gigantic keg would not be noticed and would not impact the delicious wine. Now the wine in the large community kegs was supposed to age for seven years. At the end of that time period the villagers all gathered around that particular keg to sample the wine. The merchants were eagerly awaiting the results to make their bids. A pitcher was placed at the tap. The tap was turned on. And nothing came out of the tap but one hundred percent stagnant water. It seemed like everyone else in the village that year had the same idea. There was no community wine to sell. No one risked in faith so nothing special was created.

The Scripture reading from the book of Acts is a snapshot of life in the earliest Christian church in Jerusalem. Evidently it was a rather spirit-filled place of life. Wonders and signs that pointed to God's presence were obvious. There were miracles of healing and scores of new members joining each week. There was a spirit of reckless joy and powerful generosity moving within and between the people. Most in the group sold their property and possessions and shared of their assets with the entire community. The strong current of mutual love was not contained inside the doors but spread to their neighborhoods and beyond. People were eager to share with others the story of how God's love in Christ had transformed their lives.

This passage has always been a bit puzzling for me. On one hand, I am envious. I would love the church to be more like it was way back then. It seems nowadays we tend to constantly stuck on following proper order and procedure. We spend more time meeting than worshipping. We get irritable when we are asked to change. While we like visitors and new members we tend to be skeptical of their new ideas. We are prone to take our gift of fellowship for granted. We assume that the church will always be there and forget that our life together needs constant care and nurturing in some new and creative ways. We are more shy than joyful about sharing our faith with others. Our church experience tends to be more menial and ordinary and we tend to live our faith in restraint rather than wonder. We are careful and cautious with what we have. Instead of sharing without restriction we give from an attitude of scarcity that insures that all of our other present and future needs and desires are cared for first.

Yet on the other hand, this description of the early church scares me. I'm not certain I would want to be part of a group where everything is community property. I have trouble sharing my Lazy-Boy recliner. I find it easier to be responsible for myself and the judging others on their own ability to be responsible. I am not so sure I could be one who lives so recklessly, offering up all of my assets without a worry about tomorrow. I would probably grow weary of those who weren't giving as much as I was. And I find some security in routine. I can be flexible but only if I know how long I have to have to be that way.

I found some comfort this week in reading the notes of the Abington Commentary of this passage which informed me that before we idealistically yearn to return to such a simpler time, we should remind ourselves that the church in Jerusalem, the one described here, quickly exhausted their shared resources and needed financial and material support from Christian congregations in other regions.

But the point of this passage is not in a call to relive the past. It is the hope of gaining such a spirit of joy and excitement and generosity in our worshipping community today. The early church knew that how they viewed their community and how they used their time and treasure and talent was a barometer of their faith in God and their experience of Christ. What they did and how they acted-in worship, in fellowship and in stewardship was a serious statement of their faith. God's goodness was expressed in concrete terms in the life of the community. God's goodness freed those early believers to become truly Christ-like in their praise, in their giving, and in their attitudes toward one another. Like that early church, we need to be a place where we all can live out the promise of our baptisms, bearing the fruit of our faith, called not to "get" but to "give."

Yet perhaps the most important point of this lesson from the book of Acts is how our faith is authentically measured by our everyday actions. Everything we do is weighed in the context of our participation in the building of God's Kingdom. Today we lift up the opportunity of stewardship: the giving of our treasure to place some visible, tangible expression to the importance of our Christian faith in our life. Today we get to get to make a statement about the importance of our spiritual impulses upon our material commitments.

From a Nazi jail cell in 1943, theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his parents. He ended the letter with these words, "It is Monday, and I was just sitting down to a dinner of turnips and potatoes when a parcel you sent me arrived. Such things give me greater joy than I can say. Although I am utterly convinced that nothing can break the bonds between

us, I seem to need some outward sign to reassure me. In this way, material things become the vehicle of spiritual realities.”

So it is for us today. Nothing can break the bond of God’s goodness toward us. Yet the giving of our treasure reflects the reality of our spirit in response to God’s goodness. We use this moment as a measure of our faith. We use this as a way of giving back to the God who has so graciously given to us.