

GENEROUS AND GROWING
Acts 2:42-72; Psalm 23

Several years ago (more than 20) we experienced several days of snow and ice that led to days without electricity in Danbury. Schools were closed. Living in the county seat of government, offices were closed but emergency vehicles had to navigate the snow covered roads. The three restaurants in town were closed. The kids gathered on the back street to enjoy the perfect sledding conditions, but after the first day, the shortage of heat, running water, and groceries in surrounding homes became a concern. My mom always has cabinets filled with excess goods, and summer canning provides an abundance in the basement and freezer. Gas logs, gas grill, wood stove in the basement, allowed cooking and heating around the clock. And so, everyone was invited to come to mom's...the more the merrier. There were some in town not able to leave their homes, but we prepared their meals and the children delivered them with hot coffee and tea and warmed blankets packed in "cooler". Since these homes had no way to prepare food, they sent any groceries they had on the return trips. The kids loved pulling their sleds as the delivery people. By lamplight we played games and slept in sleeping bags by the gas logs and wood heater. It was a grand four-day party.

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

This reminds me of that time in Danbury. When we put everything we had together and did for each other what needed to be done. And everyone was happy. My daughter and her adult friends, when together, still talk about those days as the days they most remember, the days that mean the most to them. On one visit home, one of the young men said it was those days that helped him to understand what real community was about.

The earliest days of the church must have been a time of experiencing the best, the most exciting, the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The passage we read this morning describes the Christian community as it began, and oh my goodness, it is beautiful. They are doing theology, they are living together, they are eating together, they are praying together – this is a kind of community that most church leaders would give their left foot for. And while this part of the story is not as noisy as the revival on the Day of Pentecost – it has its own reckless beauty – the new Christians are literally giving everything away that they have so that no one will be hungry or homeless and doing it all in awe and with gladness and joy – and the community grows in number every single day.

This story of the beginning of the Church is glorious. This is the Church alive. This is the Church on the move. This is the Church as the bride of Christ.

However, I must take a moment to be really honest. This is not how I have experienced the Church. And when I look around to my brothers and sisters who have been cut out or left behind or excluded from the church, I can see that they have not experienced the glorious church either. When we think about the Church on the move, we don't usually think about

good news proclaimed to the poor or giving away all that we have. Historically, we look back at a church that has committed systematic genocide against people groups – participated in power struggles with other nations – that has all too often wrapped itself up in the power of the state and used that power for oppression and injustice in the name of God.

And for many of us, it's more personal than that. Maybe it happened in our individual church community – the moment that the pastor said that we could do children's ministry or women's ministry but not preach. Or the day that the new worship leader was asked to step down, in a letter full of code words about the worship music, like "repetitive" and "showy" and "too ethnic" or not "reverent enough." Or the time the congregation chose sides; fought their sisters and brothers using the Bible as a weapon, until one day half of them took their toys and went home – left – gave up on the community and called it a day. We have been part of churches full of corruption, greed, abuses of power, abuses of people, churches full of gossip and backbiting, churches that have told us they loved us and then silenced our voices because of our gender, because of our race, or because of our sexual orientation. If we are the bride of Christ, we are not wearing white.

The Church is supposed to be the answer to our woundedness; but instead, many of us sit here and the Church is the reason we are wounded.

I think that the word "wounded" is appropriate here. A wound is ordinarily a physical problem – a cut, a bruise, a breakage. Paul says that the Church is *a body* – the Body of Christ. We, the individuals in the church, are the eyes and ears and hands of Christ on earth. Our diversity of roles and personalities and gifts and problems work together, moving in one direction, towards exhibiting Christ. We are one body, many parts. We are diverse, but we can be united. And we are called to be united; we are called to enter into intimate, inter-dependent relationships with people who are ridiculously different from us – a hand and a liver, a kneecap and the lungs. And this also means that when the Church fails to live into that unity, when she excludes or eliminates or hurts individual people, the whole body is wounded, just like breaking an arm or having open heart surgery. One part does not suffer without the whole body suffering.

And the bad news is that we have failed at living into that unity and will continue to fail-- every single one of us. Someone will enter our church, and they will be messy in a way that we cannot cope with – or maybe beautiful in a way that our ugly and our messy can't handle. Every single one of us will come face to face with the person that we will refuse to love. We will be excluded from communities, yes, and we will also be part of communities that exclude.

But the news does not end with the bad news, friends. It never ends with Good Friday. The Good News is that it is not up to us. We do not need to be perfect for God to work in the Church. We do not need to have our stuff together before God starts to move in our midst. God is still working. The Church is God's Beloved, and God is not done working with her, either in the structures and institutions or in the individual people that together make up this Body of Christ. The Spirit is at work when other people fail us and when we fail other people.

Because, here's the thing; we go back to that beautiful, inspiring passage from Acts. And then we step back and look at the whole story in Acts of the early church. And yeah – it is exciting and it is a wild ride of a young Church just leaping off into the world empowered by the Spirit and loving people and preaching the Good News of Jesus – but it's also full of stories of embezzlement, church conflict, racial exclusion, leadership failures, congregational self-destruction, and infighting.

And yet. And yet. Here we are today. We are still moving. The Church is still moving. The Spirit is still moving. The horrible, heartbreaking failures of the early Church didn't stop the Spirit from continuing to move and spread the Good News that "the blind see and the lame walk" for nearly two thousand years. Our current heartbreaking failures cannot stop the grace of Jesus Christ from continuing to move in us and between us. Because the main character in the book of Acts is not Peter, even with his fantastic preaching, and it is not Paul, even with his radical missionary work, and it is not even the Church with her radical expansion. The main character of the Book of Acts is the Holy Spirit and the way that the Spirit sweeps through our lives, whether we want it to or not, and sweeps through our churches even when we can't see a way that things can be made new, and the gates of hell cannot stop it.

And so our good news is tremendous news, it is the best news of all, that Christ cannot be stopped by our sin and our failures, whether those sins are communal or individual. And the good news is that we are all welcome in all our messiness and diversity. This is us. This is the Church. One body – different parts. And while we mourn the pain the Church has caused us and others, here we are again, through Christ and in the Spirit creating a place for others and ourselves that we can serve and love in all our beautiful messiness.

Here we are, gathered together in this place. I invite you to listen to the Word of Our Lord:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

What do these words say to you this day?