# A shared life

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

April 12, 2015

Will Fitzgerald

Acts 4:32-35

32Now 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.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Also, Acts 2:42-47

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day 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, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Founding stories

During the Easter season, instead of the Old Testament reading, we get the story of the early church in Acts. And today’s reading shows us a *glowing* story of the early church. We’ve read not only the description from chapter four in the official reading, but also a similar passage from chapter two.

These stories give us the earliest picture of the church. If you read the whole book of Acts, you’ll see that Luke does not hide the flaws in the early church. We see disagreements between the apostles, tensions over the inclusions of Gentiles in the church, hard discussions over the ethical requirements of new converts, even some downright dastardly deeds. We’ll mention one of those later on.

But at first, things were very good. The two accounts we have this morning are from this honeymoon period. Not a single thing is described as bad until chapter five. There are pressures from without, but in the church, things were great: they were “of one mind and soul.”

What does Luke have to say about those early days?

1. The leadership of the church was clear. Miracles happened, and and the apostles’ message about the resurrection of Jesus was winning converts to the movement.
2. The church met together often to listen to the apostles, to share meals and communion together, to praise God together.
3. People gave up their possessions to ensure that no one went needy.

It must have been a grand and exciting time! The practical and theological question I want to ask is this: what does this mean for us?

## Common leadership and message

In those early days, the apostles “with great power” testified to the resurrection of Jesus. They had, themselves, known Jesus, watched him die, and saw him in his resurrected state. Thomas, as our gospel lesson states, felt the very wounds Jesus had suffered. Just this testimony was strong enough, but God helped to kickstart the church through miracles and signs.

It is tempting to either ignore this witness, or to attempt to adopt it too exactly. We might ignore the witness. After all, we are not apostles, and that was a long time ago. We might attempt to adopt it too exactly, and assume that because this is how God acted in the early days, God will also act this way in these later days.

I don’t claim to understand all of how God wants to act “in power” these days. But I can testify that God is still at work in the world, healing and forgiving. The Spirit is active, convicting people of their need for God. The Son still stands ready to receive all who come to him for relief.

And I know that we should witness to this, as well as be the conduits for God’s word and work of healing, forgiveness, grace, conviction, and relief.

## Common Worship

The second thing is the frequent meeting together. They got together to listen to preaching. They got together to eat. They got together to pray, probably some kinds of set prayers. They got together in homes and in the Temple. And this made them glad.

And these are the kind of patterns that continue to this day. This is one of the reasons we have found it valuable to eat together, along with other patterns of common worship and prayer and preaching.

It’s interesting that the early description doesn’t mention some other things we might want to include in our life together, such as singing together, common work, raising our children together. But that’s ok; we’ve got plenty of reasons to do these things, and just because Luke didn’t mention them, didn’t mean it didn’t happen; and even if it didn’t happen, it wouldn’t me they wouldn’t be good to do.

And that leads us to the third pattern.

## Common purse

In those early days, people were so happy to be together that it led, naturally, to sharing their possessions together. If someone had a need, they met it–sacrificially given their own lands or homes to be sold in order to meet the physical needs of their sisters and brothers. The great example is Barnabas, who sold a field that he owned, and gave the proceeds to the apostles to redistribute.

So, should we do the same? Anyone willing to sign over their houses and lands to Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship this morning?

Some Christians have said yes to this. People like the Bruderhof; people we have known at Reba Place Fellowship or Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco; monks and nuns who live in common life; the Catholic Worker movement and movements based on these; and so on, all of these attempt to do something just like that.

But most Christians in most places at most times have not done this. And I think that is ok.

Remember those dastardly deeds I mentioned? The first betrayals in the church came as a result of this common sharing. A married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, conspire to sell some property and conspire in a lie: they tell the church they gave all the proceeds to the church, but they only gave part. Their punishment is pretty harsh: God strikes them dead. Their sin was *not* that they didn’t give the full amount, but that they lied about it. They were free to sell the property or not, free to give the whole amount or not; they were not free to lie about the amount.

And so, I think, it is with us. We are free to give or not, but of course, not to lie about it.

An important reminder though: elsewhere in Scripture we are reminded not to favor the rich, and to live and give generously (James 2). And we have the testimony of Jesus himself that he wants us to treat those without, especially our sisters and brothers, as we would treat him (Matthew 25). So, when there are people with needs among us, those needs are real. And when they are the needs of brothers and sisters in the Lord, these are people who are in our family. And so we are called, but not coerced, to live generous lives.

And, of course, the church lives in the midst of a world with great needs, and one of the ways we are called to meet those needs is with our time, money, and effort.

Later in the book of Acts, the church realizes they need proper structure for handling requests for money, and so they set up the first group of deacons. And ever since, the church has been working on structures and processes to do this well.

What is our structure here?

We are pretty unstructured. We should each be paying attention to the needs of others in our fellowship. If there are specific financial needs that you find yourself having, you should talk to me or one of the council.

Of course, we don’t currently have much of a budget, though we do take a collection. Most of this money will go out to people and organizations who need it, although we continue to wonder whether we might need to spend some money on staff or a place to meet. (And today, we’ll start paying a babysitter).

And I urge you to be as generous as you can be, as your conscience leads you, to be generous with your own money, your own time, your own abilities. And I urge you to take delight in the ways that others in our congregations are choosing to serve others through their vocations, too. Who are you especially thankful for?

Conclusion

So, as we finish up, let us look to the early church as an example and as an inspiration: to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus, to gather for worship and fellowship together, and to share our “possessions and goods” with one another and with others in need.

1. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Ac 4:32-35). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Ac 2:42-47). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)