

“Sharing” (Acts4:32-35; John20:19-31)

I’m kind of an ideal communist.

By that I mean I like the idea of communism (and I’m using a lower case C, if that matters). But I haven’t ever had to give communal living much of a go, except with family.

I was reading an article by somebody who’d grown up in a commune, and how it involved doing each other’s dishes, and being raised by multiple adults, and so sharing not only responsibilities but also joys. She said in spite of the benefits, she hasn’t chosen that as her lifestyle or way to raise her own children.

Along like lines, I think of myself as quite generous with finances and sharing money, but I get pretty stingy when it comes to having to share my peanut butter. Go figure. I might be very giving of my time, but insist on some quiet personal space.

This sort of the thing is in the background of our Acts reading. Those couple verses appeal to me, that “the whole group of believers were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed any possessions to be their own, but held everything in common.” As an ideal communist, I take that to be ideal community. Or maybe more directly: ideal church.

It doesn’t say those early Christians were living in a commune, nor that they didn’t have any individual property, but that they were willing to sell them when help was needed. In a book that calls Acts “The Gospel of the Spirit,” Justo Gonzalez says “it describes a community in which mutual love is such that if someone has need others go and sell their real estate in order to respond to those needs” (p72). So we don’t have to idealize it as giving up everything we have to move into a monastery in order to be like the early believers.

But it does perhaps invite us into a generous commitment to each other, as they were described “of one heart and soul.” We are invited to practice love, practice God’s shalom of wellbeing for our mutual lives and for all creation.

That’s also an ideal, of course, to think we could meet all needs and always agree and fulfill God’s purposes as church. But it’s not just us who

have problems living up to that ideal and who have trouble giving our lives away.

These little verses in Acts are followed by a strange story of Ananias and Sapphira, a couple pseudo-communists, sort of participating in the church. Ananias sold some property to give the money for others’ needs. But he said that it sold for a lower amount, in order that he could keep some for himself. The story makes clear he didn’t *need* to sell the property or give the money, but wanted to retain some personal benefit. Essentially he was lying to the church about how loving he was. And with his lie, instantly he fell over dead. And then his wife came in and with that lying lower amount she also said that they had given fully, and she too keeled over.

That strange story could clearly seem like a threat: in church, you better be really, fully loving, or you’ll drop dead.

But the challenge is that practicing love can’t be motivated by threats. I can’t coerce you to care for each other or to give more. I probably can’t convince you that doing this church thing of sharing isn’t about your personal benefit, but is simply the ideal way to be together.

On the other hand, mostly I don’t have to cajole you into it.

This year especially has reminded us of how important community really is. As we haven’t been able to be together and share life in ways we’re used to, it’s been a challenge and maybe even disheartening, hurting our soul.

Still, much remains of practicing love together. We may not be the ideal community or ideal church, but we practice. We try to carry each other’s burdens in prayer and compassion, striving to be attentive to the struggles shared among us. We try to help. That can be a listening ear. It can be a meal delivered or caring cards. At times, it’s more directly financial assistance when somebody has needs.

Not only in crisis, it’s also simpler things. We are engaged in helping raise each other’s children, including as we opened the position for the Director of Children and Families Ministries this

week, and as we received from Confirmation students at their market yesterday.

Or this: for the Perspire guys' happy hour on Thursday, Graham McLeod brought his home brew to share with the group. For offering as any has need, that's a pretty ideal church to me!

Certainly not restricted as a clique-ish in-group, we also want to extend love to meet needs. Since this passage is about giving financially, we celebrate that 15% of your offering dollars go for emergency support and help in our community and around the world.

On the other hand, we also do have to confess we're no ideal community. We really do pretty little for meeting needs. Partly, it may be that we don't have the same need of the church as in Acts. Those who require help can turn lots of other places for relief. Besides food pantries and such, we have assistance programs like unemployment benefits we've heard so much about this year, or efforts to help refugees at the border. Beyond broad impacts of charity, then, there's also taxation that serves to share and help (which I suppose *is* sorta coercing the practice of love, after all).

So there are needs that the church doesn't meet. And you don't share all you have, selling possessions to support others. Your offerings do some small things to meet needs.

Still, the biggest single piece of the budget is paying for me. I try to be honest about that and I really strive for it to serve a need of yours, as well. The central verse of the Acts reading is that the apostles "kept giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," and that's maybe what I'm mostly paid to do. (Though yesterday, Simon Sellwood asked what's part of my job, and it's never simple to answer.)

In testimony to our risen Lord, we have today the powerful story about Thomas wanting to touch Jesus. There's commissioning you as followers to offer forgiveness. But what stands out to me is the repetition—three times—of Jesus saying, "Peace be with you." He seems to feel that's important, if he repeats it so much.

Peace be with you. Perhaps he knows you long for this peace. As you miss relationships and others

from this community and so much more, he shows up to offer himself in peace. As you know what's lacking for yourself and the needs of others and the hurts of this world, he gives even more than reconciliation and healing. After this year while you've been trapped behind locked doors and maybe with too much fear, he comes to speak peace and be peace into the upset and sorrow.

Even as he offers you himself—body and blood, heart, soul, he is offering you that wellness and fullness of life, the guarantee and the practice of God's goodness. He delivers the peace that is God's shalom, the wholeness, wellness, and will that isn't just an absence of tension but the presence of justice. In appearing even today for you, Jesus is bringing more than a casserole, more than a lesson on life, more than even an ideal communist can expect or dream. He is bringing the assurance that fear, force, isolation, individualism, wants, needs, death itself cannot stop his gift of life. Peace be with you. It means "all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (Julian of Norwich).

We shouldn't idealize our capacity or our community. But we don't need to. With assurance, Jesus comes for the afraid and those who feel things are scarce and are hoarding life. But in his own abundance, he comes to open us up, even before we sing, "Come and fill our hearts with your peace" (ELW 528). As you are invited to practice love, it is made possible, is enabled first and foremost by God's peace as Jesus gives himself to you in love. And that is why we bear witness to the resurrection. Alleluia! Christ is risen!