

## MISSION: POSSIBLE – A WELCOMING COMMUNITY

SHERARD EDINGTON

Acts 2:41-47

Our reading for today is from the second chapter of Acts. This book, properly known as Acts of the Apostles, is the continuation of the gospel of Luke. As we read at the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus was crucified and buried. He has risen and presented himself to his followers.

The book of Acts then picks up with Jesus' ascension into heaven. As he ascends, he instructs his followers to wait together in Jerusalem. They do. Then, not much later, the Holy Spirit appears to them during the Jewish festival of Pentecost. The commotion of the Holy Spirit draws a crowd and Peter preaches to the crowd and three thousand people are baptized. The community of believers begins to coalesce in Jerusalem. The members of this community live together and eat together and pray together. They are a true community. *They devote themselves to fellowship and the teaching of the Apostles.* Acts tells us that all in this community are of *one heart and soul*. The apostles, meanwhile, continue their work and conduct many *signs and wonders*.

What you might find most astounding here is that these believers undertook the radical step of merging their belongings. We are told that *No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.* They shared with those in need. We are told that *day by day, the people spent time together in the temple praying and worshiping.*

So, what we find is this community of believers worshiping together in the temple, praying together, eating together, and sharing their money and possessions. The members of the community not only pooled their possessions and shared what they owned, but those who owned land or houses sold their property and brought the proceeds to the apostles to be redistributed to those in need. The result was that *There was not a needy person among them.*

Take a moment and wrap your head around the concept of the Christian community in Jerusalem living as one and sharing everything. What a powerful witness it must have been. It is truly kingdom living—living in God, loving neighbor as we love ourselves—caring for one another, sharing all they owned, setting aside jealousy, pride, and covetousness. Is this not the ideal model for Christian living? Yes. After all, what could reflect the kingdom more than a community giving everything to care for one another in the name of Christ? What a joy it must have been to be a part of that community.

However, is a community like that truly attainable? Can we really live in selfless harmony with one another? Yes, but the hurdle is sin, the sin that pollutes

all our lives, the sin that only God can erase. In fact, immediately following our reading, Acts tells about Ananias and Sapphira. Ananias and Sapphira are a married couple and Christians. They are part of the community. They own a piece of property which they sell. However, instead of giving 100% of the proceeds to the community they secretly hold back a portion for themselves. Peter confronts them about this and says to them, *Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?* Upon hearing this accusation from Peter, Ananias and Sapphira drop dead.

It is a vision that Christians are capable of living in a shared community, but it is difficult, and it only takes one person to spoil it. Tragically, we are victims of our sin.

Through the ages, many attempts have been made in communal living and with varying degrees of success. To pull off this particular type of society requires selflessness, a shared vision, and a strong commitment to the common ideals.

One of the more successful of these endeavors is the Koinonia Farm in south Georgia. It was founded in 1942 by Clarence and Florence Jordan and another couple. The goal of Koinonia was to be an intentional Christian farming community where all were treated equally regardless of race. Remember, this was 1942, in south Georgia, and race. The Farm rejected violence and embraced ecological stewardship and common ownership of possessions.

The Farm continues today as a Christian community which honors people of all backgrounds and faiths, which embraces peacemaking, sustainability, and radical sharing. They invite visitors to come for a day or for an extended period to experience life in their community. One of the by-products emerging from the Koinonia Farm is the wonderful organization Habitat for Humanity which builds homes for people.

Not all of us are willing to live in such an intense communal environment. But we can still be the church. We may not be that post-resurrection community described in Acts, but as the church we can still be an example of living as Christians in this world. Through the church we can practice the ideals set forth by Jesus—love, compassion, forgiveness—in a relatively safe environment. From this community we can branch out into the world, demonstrating God's kingdom.

Is the church perfect? No. Is the church full of sinners? Absolutely. But despite our weaknesses we can still do our best challenging ourselves and supporting one another in our shared quest for God's kingdom.

I'd like to shift gears here and talk about mission statements. I am not a great fan of corporate mission statements. I generally find them to be too long, too

complicated, and too vague. They usually sound like they were written by a committee. And then promptly forgotten.

And church mission statements can be the worst. They can be everything but the kitchen sink. For example, here is one mission statement from a Presbyterian church in Louisiana. It's a little wordy.

“Our purpose is to be a welcoming family of faith, bound together in its Christian love for God and one another. Under the guidance of Scripture and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, its mission is to faithfully employ its every resource in ministering to the needs of its members and the communities in which it lives, sharing its faith in God and promoting spiritual growth through Christian fellowship, study, service, worship, and the personal witness of joyful obedience to the love of God in Jesus Christ.” 87 words. That's a lot.

So, I would like to propose a mission statement for our church. Not an official statement for the website, but a working definition of who we want to be. And then, over the next three weeks, I want to preach on this statement taking it line by line. And then in the coming months, I will refer back to this statement.

Here is what I propose. It is just 13 words. A welcoming community of disciples of Jesus Christ striving to demonstrate God's realm. It is concise but I believe that everything we should be can be found here.

Today, we are talking about being “a welcoming community.” Next week we will look at how we are “disciples of Jesus Christ.” And then we will tackle “striving to demonstrate God's realm.”

We've been looking at the biblical ideal of communal living. I'm not sure we can attain that ideal, but we can come close. We can use that ideal as a goal to strive towards. And we can ask ourselves what it is like to live in such a community?

Well, what does it say in Acts? What was the community like there? We read that they devoted themselves to the gospel as well as to fellowship. We may downplay fellowship because we don't want to risk becoming a social club. But fellowship is crucial to the life of a community. It is part of the glue that holds us together. The Holy Spirit moves through our fellowship. Sadly, fellowship took a knock under COVID as we had to restrict our gatherings. But we are starting to pull ourselves back. For example, on Tuesday, ten of you will take a VanGoes' trip to Kentucky to visit a former Shaker community. The Shakers, in their day, truly emulated a Christian community. If only they had remembered to procreate. The VanGoes trips are nothing but fellowship. We always have a good time.

[And a moment ago, Mickey told you about the summer fellowship meals that are being planned. We all enjoyed these meals and the opportunity they bring for us to spend time together—just like the ancient church.]

That early Christian community also prayed together, they ate meals together, and did so with *glad and generous hearts*. They also shared with one another—a practice that is not as unobtainable as you might imagine. Just look at all the ways that you freely give to those in need. We collect food for the hungry. We share our facilities with the homeless. You are generous when you are giving to the church as well as to special occasions for giving. Looking at all that we do (and not even beginning to account for what each of you do quietly and personally), I would argue that we do fulfill that Biblical vision of community.

However, in the mission statement then I presented, there is also the word welcoming. A Christian community cannot be a closed community (although some are, but that is another discussion). As Christians, we must welcome and embrace all who come into our sphere. We do this for more than just to be hospitable and polite. We do it because God wills it. Scripture is full of instructions to welcome the stranger.

For example, as Paul writes to the Romans, *Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God*. In the letter to the Hebrews, we read this well-known command, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*. We should treat each person in our midst as an angel. I could go on, but I want to end with this parable told by Jesus. *When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just*. We are to welcome the stranger because that is an expression of how we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Or maybe, it is these words of Jesus which guide us to be welcoming: *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me*.

In the mission statement that I laid out, the first three words say we are to be “A welcoming community.” My charge for you this week is, 1) to memorize that phrase (all three words), and 2) to reflect on how it is that we as a church can better fulfill those words. How is it that we might we be a welcoming community?