

PROVING GROUNDS

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Acts 4:32-35

In 1923, General Motors purchased 1300 acres of land outside of Milford, Michigan. This location was chosen for two reasons. One, it was equidistant from GM's manufacturing plants in Lansing, Flint, Pontiac, and Detroit. Second, the site contained hills. Most of Michigan is flat, but this piece of property—a farm—contained a section known as the Bluffs. GM wanted this land so that they could build a proving grounds to test out their automobiles. Today, every automobile manufacturer has their own dedicated proving grounds. But in 1923, GM's was the first in the world. Up to this point, testing of new vehicles had been hit-or-miss. Engineers would test the cars on public roads. There is one story of an engineer who was tasked with driving a car a certain number of miles. He was discovered to have jacked the car up and then left the engine running in order to run up the odometer while he spent time in a dance club. The Proving Grounds in Milford was built for more controlled and scientific study of GM's new products.

Today, the Milford Proving Grounds covers 4000 acres (three times its original size), has over 100 buildings and 5000 staff. It has a total of 132 miles of roadway and specialty surfaces. The roads include a 3.8 mile oval track, a 4.5 mile banked circle track with 5 lanes, a 6.2 mile straightaway, a short course with 7 tight curves (they call this the Seven Sisters), and much more. There is a 67 acre pad of blacktop they call Black Lake which is used for handling and dynamics testing. In other words, they like to make cars skid. In 2009, GM opened a second facility—the Desert Proving Grounds in Yuma, Arizona.

I also discovered that in the town of Milford there is a coffee shop called The Proving Grounds.

Every car company today has its own proving grounds somewhere in the world. The purpose of these facilities is to test and compare vehicles for safety, handling, and reliability. It is a laboratory where engineers and designers can formulate new ideas and improvements in relatively safe conditions. It is where they can stretch their imaginations and push their vehicles to the limits.

Our scripture reading today is about a proving grounds. But it is not for automobiles, it is for Christians. This proving grounds is for those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is for those who gather together and proclaim "Christ is risen." It is for those who want to try out new ways of serving Christ. This proving ground is the church.

Our reading is from the fourth chapter of Acts. This book, The Acts of the Apostles, is the continuation of the gospel of Luke. As we read at the end of Luke's

gospel, Jesus has been crucified and buried. He has risen and presented himself to his followers.

The book of Acts picks up with Jesus' ascension into heaven. After Jesus' final departure, the Holy Spirit comes to the apostles on the day of Pentecost and thousands are baptized. During this time, a community of believers begins to form in Jerusalem. They live together and eat together and pray together. Acts tells us that all of those who were in this community were of *one heart and soul*. They took the radical step of merging their belongings. *No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.*

This communal living produced two results. One result was spiritual. The second was practical. The spiritual result was that because of their living in resurrection community, *great grace was upon them all.*

Here is the situation. In his few years on earth, Jesus proclaimed a message of salvation. He told of the coming of the kingdom of God. He attracted followers in Galilee and Jerusalem who believed in what he preached. His words gave them hope. Eventually, Jesus is arrested and executed. His followers believe all is lost and they begin to disperse and return to their homes. The resurrected Jesus appears to them for a short while teaching them how to go forward before he ascends into heaven. The followers continue on together proclaiming and testifying to the resurrection. They are filled with the spirit and *great grace was upon them all.*

The second result of their community was far more practical. The members of the community not only pooled their possessions and shared what they owned, 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 that is. It is truly kingdom living—living in God, loving neighbor as we love ourselves. Is this the ideal model for Christian living? Yes. What could reflect the kingdom more than a community giving everything to care for one another in the name of Christ? However, is it doable? Not really. I would like to say that this utopian dream works, but it doesn't. The very next paragraph in Acts tells of Ananias and Sapphira. They are a married couple and Christians. They sell a piece of their own property for the community. However, instead of giving all the proceeds to the community they hold back a portion for themselves. Peter confronts them about this and asks, *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.

I would like to think that Christians are capable of living 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 intent of the farm was to be an intentional Christian farming community where all were treated equally regardless of race. They rejected violence and embraced ecological stewardship and common ownership of possessions.

One of the by-products emerging from the Koinonia Farm was Habitat for Humanity, the organization which today builds homes for the poor.

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.

Not all of us can 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 a proving ground for 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 it 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 the kingdom.

During Lent, I preached a sermon series on the I Am statements of Jesus that we find in the gospel of John. In one of those passages, Jesus says, *The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these* (John 14:12). It is astonishing to think that Jesus says that his followers will surpass him in works of greatness. Individually, we won’t, but as the whole body of Christ we can. When the people of Christ work together as a community we can do *greater things*. We can change lives.

This past week, on Wednesday, our nation marked the 50th anniversary of the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was shot in 1968 in Memphis at the Lorraine Motel. Through his short life, Dr. King worked for racial equality in this nation. He preached, he spoke, he organized, he led. Like any great leader, he set forth a vision of what he believed and what he hoped would happen. His most

famous speech is the one delivered in August 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. It is the “I Have a Dream” speech. In this speech King outlined his vision of American racial harmony. He shared his dream about “the sunlit path of racial justice” and “the solid rock of brotherhood.” He shared his dream “that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘...that all men are created equal.’” He shared his dream that “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” He shared his dream that his “four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

¹King’s dream was a vision of equality and community. And 50 years later it is still just a dream. We are not there yet. But that shouldn’t stop any of us from giving up on a quest for equality for all. And we should not give up on the kingdom either.

We must continue to make the church a Christian proving ground. The church isn’t just to be a place where we worship and sing and pray, it should be a laboratory where we push our faith to the limits, where we continually try out new ways of serving.

Maybe you have an idea for a prayer ministry for the incarcerated, or you want to try urban farming and a community garden, or you are interested in a day center for adults with disabilities, or you see a need for a grief support group, or social services for refugees.

Or maybe you want to start a homeless shelter for women and children (oh, we already do that).

Or you have an idea for a quality preschool that emphasizes education (oh, we already do that).

Or maybe we should organize a food bank for the poor (oh, we already do that).

Or maybe we could organize giving gifts to needy seniors (oh, we already do that).

We do these things and more because someone had an idea and they bounced the idea off of other people in the church and they treated the church like a proving ground to get their idea going.

As a church, we are not meant to be a static house of prayer, but an exciting, messy, creative community of faith always trying, always learning, always serving.

¹ King's last speech was to striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tenn., on April 3, 1968, a day before his assassination. The speech is prophetic in tone. "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop...I've looked over and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land."