

“Day by Day”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship

May 23, 2021 – PENTECOST SUNDAY!

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Acts 2:43-47

*Day by day,
Day by day,
Oh, dear Lord, three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day...*

How could a sermon on Pentecost Sunday based on this text from Acts *not* begin with this song from the 1971 Broadway hit, *Godspell*. Sorry, if it seems trite but I just could not resist the temptation! Based largely on the parables of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, *Godspell* was a hit show on Broadway in the 1970's and has enjoyed several revivals since then. In doing some reading on it, I was surprised and delighted to find that it began as a class project for some theatre students at Carnegie Mellon University, located in my hometown of Pittsburgh, PA. By the mid 1970's it was a huge hit, and I was briefly in the cast during my college years when the music department there mounted a production. Alas, I was not able to remain with the production until the performance because of my course load, but I always loved this song. In fact, the chance to sing it, even as a member of the chorus, was why I tried out for the show in the first place.

The simple truth is, I just love these lyrics. For me, they have always embodied the essence of what it means to follow Jesus every day of one's life. It is a song of aspiration, of encouragement to try to do these three things – Seeing Jesus more clearly, loving him more dearly, and following him more nearly – every day of one's life. That is the essence of the Christian life, distilled down to its most basic form. If each of us were able to offer God this prayer every single morning, and then really try to live as though we believed it was possible to do as the song asks, what a different place the world would be.

I had originally planned to preach on the text from Joel which the Apostle Peter is quoting from a little earlier in this chapter of Acts when he is giving his famous sermon to the crowds in Jerusalem, after the tongues of flame have come upon the disciples gathered in the upper room once again, signifying that the Holy Spirit of God had truly come into their very beings to empower them to carry on the work of Jesus, now ascended to God in heaven. When this happened, all the disciples began speaking in tongues so that all the people gathered from all over the Roman Empire heard what they were saying in their own languages. This remarkable event was then followed by a powerful sermon preached by Peter who had arisen before the crowd to assure them the apostles were not drunk but filled with the Holy Spirit of the Living God. His sermon was essentially a recitation on and expansion of a text from the Old Testament prophet Joel. While we are not usually all that pre-occupied with Joel, this particular text is a more well-known portion of his words, especially the part about God's Spirit being poured out on everyone, so much so that the young will see visions and the old will dream dreams. A beautiful text, and a different spin on the usual Pentecost Sunday sermon about tongues of fire.

But then, I read to the end of Chapter 2 in Acts and I came across this text at the end of it which is also one we remember well, and not just because it is so inspirational. We remember it because it is also one of the scariest texts in the bible. Why do I say that? It's not about hellfire and damnation. It's not about fiery furnaces or crucifixions or dead guys coming out of tombs. What is so scary about *this* text? Because of what it says average folks, people like you and me, did when they heard the Good News of Jesus Christ. It's right there in verse 44: "All who believed were together and had all things in common." Uh-oh. All things in common? Does that mean what I think it means? No more "my stuff" and "your stuff," but just "our stuff?" But wait, it gets better. "They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceedings to all, as any had in need." Say what, now? They sold their stuff to make sure that everyone in their group – their congregation, their church – had enough? Does it really mean that? It can't really mean that. I mean, who could do that? Really?

Well, yes, it does mean that. The text doesn't go on to tell us how long this particular way of being a church lasted but we do know that just a few

chapters later there is a story about a husband and wife selling their property but trying to keep some of the money for themselves, “just in case.” That did not work out well for them. But it does show that this was an ideal, grounded in the earliest moments of the earliest churches that no one has ever really lived up to. There have been plenty of attempts – most notably in the religious orders which started to take shape as early as the 6th century. All of those orders required a vow of poverty as a condition to admittance, a vow still required of postulants to religious orders today. Then too there have been numerous utopian groups dating back to just after the Reformation where this goal of holding things in common for the betterment of the community was attempted but seldom lasted for long. The Shakers are one of the best examples of this mindset that we are familiar with still today. And there are more examples of these communities we could talk about, but that’s not what I want us to focus on this morning. I don’t want us to think about why this whole notion of “all things in common” is so impossible for us to contemplate. Instead, I want us to consider what aspects of this ideal for living as a congregation composed of people who aspire to follow Jesus might be able to do.

So, let’s look at this text more closely. That’s where this phrase “day by day” really becomes important. In verse 46, we see a more detailed explanation of what this whole ideal notion of what holding all things in common really looked like on a day to day basis. These followers followed several pretty basic steps:

- 1) They spent a lot of time together;
- 2) They broke bread at home (so they were not living together!)
AND they ate their food “with glad and generous hearts”
presumably because everyone had enough, since the community made sure that happened;
- 3) They praised God;
- 4) All of this earned them the good will of the people SO THAT day by day God added to their numbers.

Okay then! They weren’t living in some sort of ancient commune! They still had their own homes and their own lives as families. BUT, they ate their food with glad and generous hearts. Now this would have referred both to their family meals AND to the sacrament of Communion. This tells

us that the most important thing to this community was not stuff and whose stuff belonged to who, which is where we too quickly get off track with what we think this text means. At its core, this text is about love – loving God as made real in Jesus, and being empowered through that love to love each other enough to be sure everyone had enough to live life without hunger, without fear, without loneliness. This text tells us that they came to love each other so much that they *wanted* to spend time with each other. They enjoyed spending time with each other.

Now this sounds more familiar to us, right? Of course it does, especially after our long enforced isolation from each other during the Pandemic. We know now what it is to really miss each other. We know what it is to ache for the chance to be together in the same space at the same time. We know what it is to worry about each other and to want to be sure everyone has enough of what they need. We know what it is to be a community. In fact, we've known that for a long time. What the pandemic has done, though, is remind us of just how very important being together with each other – holding this experience of being a part of this church in common – truly is for our souls. We know this in entirely new ways as we emerge from the pandemic and I think it is safe to assume we have been changed as a church and as individuals as a result of that experience.

So, how are we – in our almost post-pandemic church – able to see ourselves in this description of the ideal earliest gatherings of Jesus' followers? Let's think about that. Do we spend a lot of time together? For many of us YES – on Zoom, via emails and texts and phone calls, and in person on Sundays and at events like we had just this past week – the Dine to Donate at Stonington Pizza and the yard sale yesterday. And we love being with each other! Yesterday at the yard sale, we saw folks we haven't seen in over a year and it was like nothing had changed. But it sure was wonderful to be in the same physical space together! And yes, we eat at our homes in our family groups and in our one-ness but we are still able to eat those meals with glad and generous hearts, as we learn and practice gratitude together as a congregation, as a family created out of our common faith. And it is that common faith that leads us to praise God. When do we do that, you wonder? We're not exactly a praise band, hands raised to heaven kind of congregation are we? Well, we are, but in a quiet, more

unobtrusive sort of way. We sure do miss singing together on Sundays and hopefully that will change soon. But we're really good at – exceptionally good at actually – is praying together. Prayers in worship are important in this church and they have been long before I came here as Pastor. And our Prayer Tree team is simply amazing. Best of all, our prayers really do make a huge difference in the lives of the people we pray for. How do I know that? Because people tell me. People thank me for our prayers. People can literally feel our prayers which is why we get so many prayer requests. One of our customers at the yard sale, a family we don't know at all, asked for our prayers this morning, I suspect because the ethos of prayer in this church is almost tangible. Thank you, Jesus.

So, perhaps now you can see that we actually have a lot more in common with those early groups of Jesus' followers than we might have initially thought. We love each other. We take care of each other. We pray for each other. For that community, "day by day the Lord added to their number." Well, that's certainly what we're hoping for too. If our Sunday morning visitors through our Facebook Live worship streaming are any indication, we are reaching people, touching their lives as they spend time with us, virtually at least. We are giving them a hint of what it means to be a part of this faith community, a unique congregation of people who dare to believe that with God's guidance and help, they really can make a difference in the world. As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, I am hopeful we will be able to take the lessons we have learned about what it truly means to be church together and create even more ways for even more people to become involved with our church, even if they live thousands of miles away. I am hopeful we can find new and innovative ways to expand our mission, vision and our outreach to even more of our community, especially to children and youth and their parents trying to negotiate a world which becomes more anxious, more fearful and more worrisome every day. I urge any of you joining us virtually to send me your ideas and suggestions for how we can do this via PM on Facebook. Let's see how we can figure out how to be a new kind of church together! It won't be easy, but it won't be that difficult either because all we need to do is take it – day by day. A joyous Pentecost to all! May the Holy Spirit burn within each of us, guiding us into God's future together. Amen.