

SCRIPTURE: Acts 4:32-35

Now 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. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There 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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

SERMON: "The Beloved Community: Sharing and Caring" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Today I am up in a familiar place along the coast of Camden, Maine, a place with which my mind and heart have become so familiar. It is a place that is full of memory and comfort every time I return. It is a delight.

It is hard to believe that virtually exactly one year ago today that I was supposed to be on a completely different coast in a place I had never been before. In Maine, I stay in a beautiful, well-appointed condo in the center of a village. The place I was to go in Scotland was called The Teacher's Bothy. It was a two-room cabin with no electricity, with only cold running water. You had to hike multiple miles to bring in the coal if you wanted to warm up that water, and to bring in all of your provisions. And when you got there, the only thing you could see was the expanse of ocean and the tiny island rising behind you.

When I first made plans to go there, I was going to stay for a few days. Just a couple of days, because I thought didn't that sound nice. But as I read the reviews for The Teacher's Bothy, they were all clear that it wasn't until you got to day 7 or week 2 or maybe even longer that the reviewers started saying everything changed. It took days and days and days, you see, to drop the habits we're used to, to let go of everything we thought we knew, so that something new could come in. And so the reviews said if you're going, stay for at least a week. But stay for as long as you can, because the longer you stay, the more transformation is really possible. And friends, isn't that true? We all need time if real change is going to come about if we are truly going to be changed.

By the time we get to the Book of Acts, the community had spent some time with Jesus. He was with them for some time. And then by the time we get to the familiar stories of Pentecost and this particular story this morning, Jesus has left and ascended. But that faithful group -- emboldened, inspired, brought to new life by the resurrection -- gathered, and they did both what Jesus told them to do, but also what they had seen Jesus do over and over and over again. To read the Book of Acts is to read daily routine of utter simplicity that led to complete transformation. It is to sit seaside in Scotland and allow the change to come to you.

What did they do? The Bible is clear: they prayed every day. They devoted themselves to prayer together in an upper room, praying for themselves, for the community, for the world. Praying to God, giving thanks, they spent the whole day praying.

What else did they do? They spent time in fellowship. They shared meals together. I imagine they would have been simple meals, but I imagine they would have been engaged as joyful feasts. Last week, my family got the chance to be outside with some extended family, and there was joy everywhere. I imagine that that spirit of an Easter dinner permeated every day, the people gathering, coming out of their prayers and into a time of fellowship. Acts says they ate together in joy and in thanksgiving.

And just like the reviews for The Teacher's Bothy, they prayed and prayed and prayed. Jesus said pray until the Spirit comes. And they did. And for days and days and days, they enjoyed their time together. They made room for the Spirit. They found out what it meant to be the beloved community and why it mattered. You know what I think? I think that as they sat there in all of that time, they had a chance to remember every way they saw Jesus: the way he always prayed, the way he always extended himself in generosity, the way that those fish were shared and multiplied. And as they imagined their own life together, they imagined how that could come to reality through us in the sense of this community.

It would have been fascinating to imagine which of the truths unfolded for them first. And I love, quite frankly, that the very first story is about sharing and caring. First in an intimate way with those they already knew, those with whom they felt safe. This first message of this time together in Acts is a time of sharing and caring.

We often use this text during stewardship times. And who can blame the Church, right? For in this passage you hear this story of everyone sharing everything that they had. They came with their land, their property, everything they had, and they gave it to the apostles that it might be shared, with the magnificent outcome that no one ended up having any need. I think that's important, but even more important is the mindset of it, which is that what I have, if it's what you need, then may we use it together. It was the giving up of what I'm holding, that we may all lean into this shared endeavor forever.

I think that the beauty of the caring and sharing piece that we get this week, and as we think about our own beloved community, is that at the root it suggests relationship. It is a jumping off place. If we can first learn to care and share with the people that we love and know, it invites that caring and sharing beyond the people we know. And that's what the beloved community, in the time after Jesus, discovered.

I wanted to talk about the beloved community through that lens of a hug in the Children's Time earlier this morning, because, quite frankly, when you are locked in a hug with somebody, you need both parties to be fully satisfied. Otherwise that hug becomes less than ideal. Imagine hugging someone for 36 hours, 36 minutes and 36 seconds, like the record-breaking hug I told the kids about. Let's just let go of the logistics of it all and the bodily needs you might have. But let's also imagine that within that hug, you were literally uplifting each other, you were literally caring for one another. If there is an itch, it is the other person who will need to scratch. If one is tired it is the other one who will need to find strength. Those two record holders said this: that the hardest times were in early morning, both because they were physically tired and because the crowds of people who gathered to watch this spectacle waned a bit and so they lost that energy.

But what does it mean to be in an extended hug of caring and sharing with one another? It is at the heart of what it means to be church.

You know that I'm back up in Maine, and I had taken another trip up there after Christmas. Those high holidays, well, they take a bit out of you. Last time I was there, I stumbled across a book by Tim Sorens. The book was entitled "Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are." It's about the Church existing in the beloved community in the places in which we live. I say I stumbled across it because literally I had enough time up there in Maine to just browse book after book after book. And this one literally and sort of accidentally came in my audible feed.

In the book, he makes two fundamental assertions which are on display in the story today. First is that whatever we do as church, we have to be guided by the Spirit. We have to let go enough of what we think or we know and slow down enough to make room for the Spirit to come in, just as they did back then. His other fundamental question of the book is, when we are guided by the Spirit, what is this thing of church for? Why do we do this? In the end, why bother?

Right now, there's a small group of people who have read that book. And when I return from my time in Maine, we are going to gather to have a discussion about that book and about how it landed for them. Did it resonate for them? Did it ask questions? Did they feel that this book could benefit this church? Not as a book study, but as a frame, a lens, a way of encountering the Spirit, that we might find new direction, new purpose, new calling, just as this church in Acts did. I have no expectations for what will come out of this conversation. The group of people includes members who have been part of this church for decades and members who have been part of this church for months. It includes people who are members and people who are friends. It includes old and young, male and female. It includes every kind of person that we could invite. Because in the end, just like that community in Acts, I don't want to dictate where we go. I don't want anyone to. I want all of us together prayerfully to consider where God is calling us to go.

I don't know what will happen with that book. We will have to wait and see. And I can tell you with our sermon series here in Easter. This idea of thinking about what it means to be the beloved community, and how we will regather at church won't be accomplished this week, the next one, or even in the one after that. It won't be done when we stop preaching about it. Instead, then will be the time that we start gathering to talk and dream and imagine. Like those reviews for *The Teacher's Bothy*, we need to settle in long enough, until we let go of the things that need to be let go, retain the things that have meaning for us, and discover things we never imagined.

You see, the people of the time of Jesus knew that enough of the world had already changed around them, that they could not remain the same. They knew from their journey with the earthly Jesus, and from their time with the resurrected Jesus, that the whole way they saw their life together and how they saw the world had radically changed. They knew that they wanted to create the beloved community. The love that God shared with Jesus, and that Jesus shared with them, they knew that they now wanted to share that love with the whole world. And so they recognized that change needed to begin with them. Quietly, slowly, through prayer and fellowship.

We face a dramatically similar moment. So much has changed in the world around us. And when we come back together as a whole church -- I can't wait. But when we do, we need to remember that each of us has changed, too. We will both need to let go of some things and embrace one another, if we are not just going to come to this church, but if we, like the church before us, are going to become the beloved community. It is a high and holy calling.

When we set out to design this season of Easter, I can't believe that four amazing people – Ron Hanft, David Anderegg, Tracy Wilson and Jack Brown – came together to imagine how we sing about these fundamental themes. We scoured hymnals from every tradition, and we couldn't find one that told this story of initial caring and sharing. And then, like this church always does, someone stepped forward. David did, and said, well, if one doesn't exist, I will write one. And so he did.

As I close my sermon and wish you farewell for this week, let us rise together that we might sing these words that David has given us, to a tune you will know, and in doing so, we might find the sound track for becoming the beloved community. Amen.

*HYMN: In Love They Came Together*

*In love they came together to form their sturdy band,  
And gave their own possessions into each others' hands;  
From then on they owned nothing, but guided by the Dove,  
In the sweet act of giving they gained a world of love.*

*Those blessed with ample riches dispensed with them instead,  
And thus the poor and helpless were clothed and amply fed;  
Their goods no longer mattered, their finery forsworn,  
Their old lives now forgotten and into new lives born.*

*So set us free from having, and set us free from greed,  
And break the chains of owning while others are in need;  
Let riches be our servants, not masters; let them be  
The means for us to make our beloved community.*

*(Lyrics: David Anderegg, 2021;*

*Music: Neuvermehrtes Meiningisches Gesangbuch, 1693/Felix Mendelssohn 1847)*