

First Sunday After Easter
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
The Rev. Canon Douglas Edwards
April 11, 2021

Today we have a cornucopia of wonderful scripture readings, a virtual embarrassment of abundance for any preacher. Where to begin, where to end? In Colonial times, the preacher had an hour glass to start and finish his sermon. In the Facebook era, plenty of folks would prefer I bring an egg timer. But then again, those at home can also employ the pause button and then fast forward. Instead, enjoy your coffee and let's start.

This morning's sermon has three themes: **UNITY, FORGIVENESS OF SINS, and MY INDIVIDUAL RETIREMENT ACCOUNT.**

UNITY

The dominant theme throughout the readings is stated by the psalmist, "Oh how good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity!" Luke tells us in Acts that "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." John's letter reiterates the message in one of my favorite verses. "We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us, ...so that our joy may be complete."

Each of these tells us of people living in unity, having a oneness that creates joy. Unity is our first theme.

The second theme is FORGIVENESS OF SINS. Continuing from John's Epistle: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Now to the Gospel According to John (a different John than the Epistle writer.) Today's Gospel summarizes the whole of the New Testament: "These (words) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Sin is forgiven in order that we might be in right relationship BOTH with God and one another. Again, our Lord is calling us to unity. But more than mere aspiration, he grants us authority and the means to achieve unity through the forgiveness of sins.

For believers, those who actively trust in Jesus, today's Scripture readings are pure balm. Such purity and simplicity.

This is how it was, until it wasn't... which takes us to my final theme—**MY INDIVIDUAL RETIREMENT ACCOUNT.** Let's return to our first lesson from The Acts of the Apostles: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul (unity), and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions (WHAT?), but everything they owned was held in common. (REALLY?)"

It's true, the first generation of believers reordered their lives around the renunciation of private ownership and the nascent Church began to transform the world. So let's be clear, the Early Church, led by Peter and the other 12 Apostles, practiced Christian communism. Scripture says, "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." This is Christianity's most radical self-understanding of what it means to live in unity.

So how did it go and why do I have a retirement account and own my home with no call by the rector or the bishop that it is my moral and spiritual obligation to liquidate and present my financial all to the vestry for distribution? And why do so many Americans claim that they believe in the inerrant word of Holy Scripture but summarily dismiss this straightforward call to sell all that we have and, come, follow Jesus? These are serious questions. To answer them we need the rest of the story.

The Church in Jerusalem exploded its membership under this doctrine. But, aspirational as Christian communism was, it failed within a generation. Out the gate, we are told that there were mummings of favoritism in the daily distribution of bread. Apparently, the Hebrew women from Jerusalem got more bread, more often than the Greek speaking members of the community. It seems that our country's original sin of racism was part of the Church's earliest days. The apostles recognized and abhorred the mistreatment of what the locals deemed second class Christians, but they didn't want their attention consumed by this daily dispute. So they acted, selected seven men, all with Greek names, to take charge of the distribution of assets, to serve the hungry. It is the first evidence of Affirmative Action in the Church. These seven were the first ordained deacons.

Shortly thereafter a story emerges that a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, sold a piece of land but gave only a portion of the proceeds to the Church while representing to Peter that they gave all the sale proceeds to the community. God intervenes directly in the matter as the Holy Spirit kills the couple for holding on to the money. Talk about a strong collection agent! Why is this dreadful story in the Bible? It's a cautionary tale which suggests the Ananias and Sapphira weren't outliers, but reflected concern from wealthier members that Christian communism was deeply flawed.

Next, from the Letter of James we learn that large numbers were negligent and would not work to help the community earn money to feed the people. So out comes an edic: If you are able handled and choose not to work, don't expect to be fed. These were all serious obstacles for the new Church to overcome, but not the biggest.

The biggest problem facing the communist Church was TIME. What happens when the means of production are liquidated and wealth is not being created, but always spent? With time the assets are depleted unless more and more people with wealth convert their assets for the communal pot. The Apostles thought that the end of the world was imminent, so who cares what happens in six months or in six years. To plan for the future was to deny the need to live in expectancy of Jesus' immediate return. Jesus' teaching are chocked with the message that the end of time is at

hand. But Peter and the Twelve were wrong. The daily expectation of Jesus' return and the establishment of his reign on earth had not come, and now they had a crisis on their hands.

The Church had a booming membership of persons with no assets and many with no paying jobs. The poor were especially attracted to the early Church because of its radical message of equality. The Jerusalem Church treasurer was approaching empty. All it took was a drought followed by political instability for the whole Church system to collapse. And the drought came.

A new vision was required but the leadership was suspicious of any ideas that would undermine the core expectation that Jesus would return within their lifetime. Into this fiscal quagmire comes a new voice with a new vision for a sustainable Church. He shares many of the same beliefs but he has some new ideas. Distrusted by the Apostles, he nevertheless is granted permission to travel outside the Holy Land for the purpose of preaching and securing famine relief for the Church in Jerusalem.

This distrusted new visionary is St. Paul and he changes everything. He is a great fund raiser for the Mother Church, but he does so by dropping the notion of communism and instead embraces the Greek philosophy of philanthropy and caritas, of love gifts. He urges that Christians in faraway lands he visits donate from their individual wealth, which is seen as God's blessings, to support their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. He never tells anyone to sell all they have in order to gain unity. To underscore this philosophy, Paul maintains his one man business, tent making, and sets up shop on his stops so as not to be a burden on the Church communities he builds. Paul tells the Greek churches (and us) that there is no need to sell our homes and businesses, but we are responsible for sharing with the less fortunate. Capitalism and philanthropy win the day and to borrow a phrase from the late, great American story teller, Paul Harvey, that is the rest of the story.

So, I own my home, my car, and for 40 years have saved into my Individual Retirement Account. Unlike the first Christians, I was taught in seminary the importance of saving for my retirement, to have my own means. The Jerusalem experiment in communism, based on the belief that Jesus was returning at any moment, was a failure.

But our current approach is not wholly right. I struggle having lots of surplus assets while 25% of our country's children live in poverty. So, for our own sanity, Lynn and I practice the Biblical tithe, 10% of our income going to God's work, and we save 15% of our income, regardless of the amount. Money has too much corrupting power when hoarded or used for unabated self-indulgence.

I fear that much has been lost in the Church with our current model. We, as a community of faith, are far less likely to find joy striving for the common welfare, and far more likely to define ourselves through our jobs. We spend our energy cultivating our personal portfolios. And this comes at a great cost.

Unity, that precious quality finer than the finest perfume has given way to self-sufficiency. Thinly veiled greed is now treated as a jewel in the crown of righteousness.

Unity, Forgiveness of Sins, and my IRA.

God, give me the Courage

to change the things
which should be changed,

to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,

,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Amen.