

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Second Sunday of Easter

Year B

RCL



Acts 4:32-35

Psalm 133

John 20:19-31

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation:
Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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.

Psalm 133 Page 787, BCP

Ecce, quam bonum!

- 1 Oh, how good and pleasant it is,
 when brethren live together in unity!
- 2 It is like fine oil upon the head
 that runs down upon the beard,
- 3 Upon the beard of Aaron,
 and runs down upon the collar of his robe.
- 4 It is like the dew of Hermon
 that falls upon the hills of Zion.
- 5 For there the LORD has ordained the blessing:
 life for evermore.

1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 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. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “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.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be

with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these 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.

SERMON

Have you noticed that the Bible is just full of things that make you uncomfortable? You're going along in your reading, then all of a sudden you come upon a passage that is the equivalent of a big greasy thumb print right in the top of your morning Cinnebun, and what are you supposed to do about that? Our passage from the Acts of the Apostles is one of those times. We're Americans. We're really invested (no pun intended) in capitalism. Then we bite into the Acts of the Apostles and find half a worm:

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...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.

We're looking for the Good News, and we find, instead, a Biblical endorsement of Communism? I've heard a lot of clever wiggling by preachers trying to dispute this passage's clear meaning, but before you go too far down that path, remind yourself of what happens in the next chapter:

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.

'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!'

Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, ‘Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.’

And she said, ‘Yes, that was the price.’

Then Peter said to her, ‘How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.’

Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Like it or not, Luke portrays the early church during the Apostolic period to have been organized along the

lines of Haight-Ashbury ... without the drugs, and with more dying. That's pretty awkward if you ask me.

We spoke last Sunday about the need, when studying the Bible, to avoid getting wound up in words, but instead to submit yourself to the narrative of the Scriptures to experience

...the tectonic shift that happens in the heart when the reality of God's kingdom crashes over us, "tsunami-style."

"Hear and understand," says Jesus. But to understand, we have [to] "stand under" the story, submit to the story, let it have its way with us... not just alter our life, but live a new one. It's an invitation to extravagant transformation, to let the Scriptures touch your very heart¹.

That's a bunch of words – easier said than done. The way to actually accomplish that is with passages, like this one, which challenge your comfort. One of the most informative things you can do in your Bible study is to

¹ Father Mike Blewett, rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Bowling Green

find a passage like this, which I believe will step on a lot of toes here in Bellefonte, and then ask yourself, “What about this annoys me? What important thing have I held back from the Apostles that I am trying to protect by being annoyed with this passage?”

Since I wanted you to be annoyed, I described this passage as a Biblical endorsement of Communism. It isn't, of course. Karl Marx was nearly 2,000 years in the future, and, in any event, the passage isn't speaking about a form of government, but rather the attitude of those in the early church towards property. Still, I wanted you to be annoyed by it, because the passage gives us a chance to look at what we may be holding back from the Apostles, as Ananias and his wife Sapphira did. What limits and conditions do we put on our reception of the Gospel?

I have a very good friend who I dearly love. He is

very, very conservative on social issues, though. His position is that he worked hard and made a success of his life, and no one helped him, therefore taxing him to help others is just wrong. Many of you may feel the same way. On the other hand, his personal generosity exceeds my own. I have seen with my own eyes what he has done for those in need who have crossed his path.

My friend will defend his position by insisting that God helps those who help themselves, so if you are poor and in need, it is because you haven't even tried to help yourself. He's very big on that. He believes it is in the Bible. It isn't, of course. "God helps those who help themselves" is from Aesop's Fables, later picked up by Ben Franklin. I don't want to characterize my friend as an evil fellow, for he is not, but what does my friend hold back from the Apostles?

I think the most obvious thing he has held back from

the Apostles is his sense of entitlement, the one that goes, “I worked for it, I earned it, I’m entitled to it”.

Well, that’s not such a radical thing to say. If we’re honest, we all feel that way to one degree or another, but does it really make Biblical sense? What we’re really saying when we insist that we are entitled to that for which we labored is, “By virtue of my labor, I’m entitled to carve out a part of God’s Creation for my exclusive use.” Do we really believe that??

I want to be perfectly clear here, so that you don’t start sending letters to the Presbytery complaining that I’m a Communist. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles isn’t about establishing a government in which private property is abolished. It is about our attitudes toward the things we fancy we own. More precisely, it is about forcing us to confront our attitudes about the things we fancy we own. The New Testament is all the

time going on about life and death. This leads to life. That leads to death. This passage about common ownership of property and distribution according to need, along with the later story of Ananias and Sapphira, illustrate that attachment to private property leads to death, whereas wholeheartedly focusing our efforts on the good of our brothers and sisters leads to life.

Isn't that remarkable? None of us wants to give resources, either our own or those of our charitable outreach, governmental or not, to someone who will use it to harm himself through alcohol or drugs. That's perfectly reasonable. But, don't we then hide behind that worthy decision and deny aid to those who truly need it? The way we numb ourselves to the need of those who we might help is to paint them all as lazy with the broad brush my friend uses. Well, some of them are. Some are not.

The sense of entitlement which we attach to those things we have can be a tremendous stumbling block to our reception of the Gospel. Everybody thinks that the Bible teaches that money is the root of all evil. Actually, the Bible doesn't teach us that money is the root of all evil. The Bible teaches us that:

For the **love** of money is a root of all kinds of evils².

The **love** of money, that which would lead us to believe and defend the notion that our labor or our goodness is sufficient to grant us ownership of part of God's Creation is the root of all kinds of evil. That's quite a different thing. Money is neutral. It's just pieces of paper. It is the sense of entitlement we attach to money and goods where the problem lies. Our sense of entitlement, the view that I worked for it, I earned it, I own it, demands that we blind ourselves to the needs of others,

² 1 Timothy 6:10

for if we saw, even for an instant, the grief in others' hearts as clearly as did Jesus, if we shared and responded to the pain in our brothers' and sisters' lives in the way we do with our own children, we would collapse into powder and be blown away in the wind.

God's love for His children isn't alloyed by the limitations we impose on the reception of the Gospel. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?³

I think you can see now why I started this talk with the suggestion that one of the most informative things you can do in your Bible study is to find a passage like

³ Matthew 7:9-11

this and to ask yourself, “What about this annoys me? What important thing have I held back from the Apostles that I am trying to protect by being annoyed with this passage?”

How are we, who live in comfort, to relate to property? More importantly, does the way we do relate to property advance or retard the Gospel of Jesus Christ? If I decline to give a handout to someone who asks because I just assume without proof that they will use it on alcohol or drugs, have I followed the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself? More tellingly still, if I oppose social safety net programs which might equitably distribute aid to the poor, am I advancing the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself?

Those in the early church are giving us a powerful lesson in how we are to relate to property, and particularly how we are to relate to God’s property. That which

comes into our hands, the early church teaches, does not cease being God's property. It may be entrusted to us, but it is entrusted to us for the purposes of the owner, God. This is a hard lesson to hear in a country as rich as this one, for as I noted last week, the same Gospel which speaks comfort to the poor speaks sacrifice to the rich.

A Christian is one who follows Christ. It is rather easier to be enthusiastic about Christ than it is to follow Him. Our words and deeds as Christians reflect not only upon ourselves, but upon Christ Himself to the rest of the world, which is watching. When it comes to the unsettling passages in the New Testament, like this one, are you a Jesus fan or a Jesus follower?

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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