

“We’re Gonna Need a Bigger Table”  
2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Acts 2: 42-47  
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As I look back at my own life, I know that some of the most powerful moments, the mountain top experiences, of my faith took place during my childhood and teenage years. Having grown up in a devout Christian family, I often went away to Christian camps and conferences in the summer and on weekend retreats. I remember in those times, in addition to the laughter and the play, that there were meetings and worship services of storytelling and singing songs together that strengthened my faith and lead to a kind of euphoria in the days that followed. I suspect that if someone had taken the time to write the story of my life in those days they might have testified to a boy or young man who was devout in his faith, who read the bible faithfully, who prayed regularly and sought to share his faith with others. But I confess that there has certainly been an ebb and flow in my faith over the years. The mountain top experience does not seem to last very long. It’s a problem that perhaps the first believers faced and we hear a bit about it this morning in our second scripture reading from Acts 2: 42-47.

These first disciples, following this Pentecost experience, seem to have lived out a radical discipleship in community: praying together, studying together, breaking bread together, and sharing their goods with one another. It’s a beautiful vision. And before we wonder how long it might have lasted, lets consider it was no accident that were equipped to live out this kind of radical discipleship given the way that Jesus had taught and lived as an example for them.

Describing the new disciples that we encounter in Acts, author and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “The disciples were going to need something...that they could bump into on a regular basis, something so real that they would not be able to intellectualize it. So essentially untidy that there was no way they would ever gain control over it. So Jesus gave those things that they could get their hands on that would require them to get close enough to touch each other. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and to share a meal together? With all the

conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, Jesus did not give them things to think about when he was gone. Instead he gave them concrete things to do; specific ways of being in their bodies together that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them. The disciples became apostles, witnessing of the risen Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit, and surprising things began to happen. They began to say things that sounded like Jesus and they began to do things that had never seen anyone but Jesus do before.”

Luke, we note in this passage in Acts, does not spend any time listing rationale—any spiritual principles that undergird the actions of the disciples in this community living. Indeed, the actions that they take in faithfulness seemed to be spontaneous. There is no pressure here, no guilt or obligation that is being adhered to in their choice to live out this radical discipleship. It is, instead, a true expression of celebration, “God has been so good to us how can we not be good to one another?”

And yet, the challenges that face this fledgling church come all too soon. After all, its one thing to break bread and to share resources with one another within *our* particular group, even acknowledging that this step pushed people beyond their most nuclear clan. New questions and struggles will soon arise for the church in the chapters that follow as they encounter the needs of widows and of orphans. These questions will turn to near schism and chaos when they are pushed even further to include—gasp—the Gentiles, people who are way outside the lines of historically, and they believed theologically, drawn borders. The tangible practices of love and community that they have been taught and that they were expressing became strained.

Perhaps it is not surprising that by the time Paul writes his letter to the church in Corinth, he begins to take a more multi-pronged approach to living out radical discipleship. In our second scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians 9, Paul’s instructions include an appeal to spiritual virtues. He writes “God loves a cheerful giver...God provides an abundance so that you too can share an abundance...Your generosity not only meets the needs of others, but it also over flows with many thanksgivings to God. It glorifies God.”

It seems that this appeal to our mind and our heart was needed to further reinforce practical actions of our bodies so that we might be able to live out the discipleship that Christ had called us to. Despite the challenges and shortcomings that the church faces over the centuries that follow, it seems to have worked, at least in part. In the online resources that we are using in our small group bible studies this month, Daniel Clendenin writes about some of the testimonies of the church in the centuries to follow. In the second century he quotes Justin Martyr, a theologian who summarized the appeal of Christian community this way, “We who once took pleasure in accumulating wealth and property now share with everyone in need. We who hated and killed one another and would not associate with people of different tribes because of their different customs now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them and pray for our enemies.”

A century later, the third century, Tertullian wrote about Christians’ well known and well deserved reputation for socio-economic generosity that built bridges of community rather than walls of separation, “Our care for the derelict and our act of love have become our distinctive side before our enemy. See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for one another.”

Later, in the fourth century, the Pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate, who had been raised a Christian but renounced his faith had to admit that the godless Galileans feed not only their poor but ours. Those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render to them.

Now, twenty-one centuries later, the approach our church takes is not so different. For we too gather for worship, for bible studies, and for small groups, so that we might appeal to our hearts and our minds, so that we might better understand the Christian faith in which we have believed in the expressions of that faith to which we are called. And, at the same time we provide numerous practical and tangible ways to express that love to one another—ways that really work, in real community.

This week, during a men’s meeting, one of the men shared with us the story of how he had moved away from this community for dozens of years because of

his work. He moved back a couple of years ago, shortly before his wife passed away and after she passed he received in the mail a card from our men's Friday morning Bible study. The card was signed by each of the men, expressing their sympathy, their care; reminding him that they remembered him and that they were praying for him. He said it was the sole reason why he decided to come back to this church.

Yesterday morning, at our Deacon retreat, one of the women shared with us the story of her mother who has been in the hospital. A group of Presbyterian women here who knit prayer shawls sent her a card and a shawl in the hospital. When she took them to her mother, she opened the card, carefully read it, traced her finger slowly over each name that had signed the card: a reminder of God's love for her. She slowly unfolded the shawl and wrapped it tightly around her shoulders and clung to it. For though not physically present, it was a real reminder for her that God's love and God's community were surrounding her in real ways.

Yes, we both practice and proclaim in ways that are tangible and ways that are intellectual and spiritual, this radical discipleship that Christ has called us to. And yet, in times like ours, in times when the economy and so many situations and circumstances around us are difficult, it can be tough even in this Christian community to remember and to practice the Christian faith. It's tempting, at times, isn't it to retreat into ourselves, into our most nuclear clan for protection and security; to ride out the storm in our little boats?

This morning, maybe we can reaffirm both the practices and virtues that have anchored our faith for centuries and even find new images, new ideas to compel us forward in the days and years to come. For me, one of the most powerful images for my faith came from an experience several years ago. As many of you know, I spent two years living abroad as an international volunteer for the Presbyterian church, first in Northern Ireland in Belfast, and then in west Africa in Ghana. When I returned from those experiences I was welcomed back into my local church, here in the US, with open arms. It was wonderful to be home and to worship and pray and praise together; especially in English. Later in the service, we came to the time of sharing joys and concerns and over the weeks that followed, I became first alarmed and then

concerned as it seemed that almost exclusively the prayers that were offered were for children and parents and grandparents, for ourselves, for our aunts and uncles (all of which were entirely appropriate) and yet people never seemed to be praying for any of these folks I had met and lived with and shared meals with around the world. There seemed so much that we were leaving out of our prayers, so many people who were never mentioned. I began to wonder, “why is it that we only pray for our family?”

I stewed about that for a long time, wondering what the answer was, and then a couple of years ago I was up late one night watching tv—one of those news magazine programs like 20/20 or 48 Hours or 60 Minutes, there was a story about two women in their forties, women who had been born identical twins but the mother was unable to keep them. So they were separated at birth and adopted out by two different families, growing up in two different parts of the United States. As fate seemed to have it, at about the same age they began to inquire about their family of origin.

Through records and online searches and private investigators they discovered not only who their mother was but they discovered they had a twin, an identical twin. The highlight of the news magazine feature was the reunion of the two sisters, this made-for-tv-moment. The first sister is standing in an airport (this was in the days before 9/11 when you could stand at the gate), she’s holding a bouquet of flowers and some balloons and a stuffed animal. People have crowded around because there is a camera and lights there and they’re wondering what is happening. Then a plane lands on the runway and taxis around on the tarmac, the ladder goes up and the door opens and another woman, who looks surprisingly like the first, pops her head out, comes down the stairs, into the terminal and the two women run and embrace each other and kiss and cry and a huge cheer goes up from the crowd.

I thought to myself as I was watching, “This is a very odd scene—a curious reunion because these two women had never met; they don’t know anything about each other. They don’t know anything about each other’s histories or families. They don’t know about each other’s religion or even if they go to church or about each other’s politics or education or socio-economic status. They know nothing about each other, and yet here they are embracing,

hugging, crying together. Why? Only because they have the knowledge they are sisters, separated at birth and now finally reunited.”

There is a story in the old Hasidic tradition of a Rabbi who once asked his pupils, “How can you tell when the night has ended and the day has begun?” “Could it be,” asked one of the students, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?”

“No,” the Rabbi said.

“Could it be,” asked another student, “that when you look in the distance and see a tree, you can tell whether it is a fig tree or a pear tree?”

“No,” the Rabbi replied.

“Then when is it?” asked the students.

“It is when you can look into the face of any man or any woman and see that it is your brother, see that it is your sister, because if you can not see this, it is still night.”

Or, in more contemporary language, from Anne Lamott’s recent book, Further Thoughts on Faith she writes, “We have to sit in our own anxiety and funkiness long enough to know what the Promised Land would look like, or to put it another way, what it means for us to be saved. Which, if we are to believe Jesus, specifically means to see everyone on earth as family.” Amen.