

“Koinonia and Change”

- I. Introduction: Koinonia and change: Giving away the store. My parents were working people and whenever they could, they'd look for a really good deal. So when it was time to buy me new clothes, especially around Easter, we often went to a store called Miller's Menswear. Mr. and Mrs. Miller had come from Eastern Europe, started their own business, and they, like my mother, knew how to bargain. I was a kind of pawn in this game because I said very little, but tried on what seemed like thousands of pairs of pants and suits and shirts, none of which both fit and were the right price. Several times my mother would get ready to leave and Mrs. Miller would say “Wait, wait, I have one more thing that I think you'll really like. It just came in today.” In the end, my mother and Mrs. Miller would agree on the item to purchase and a price, and Mrs. Miller would say “Today, I'm giving away the store, But because you're such good customers, I don't mind. Please don't tell my husband.” Even as a young child, I knew that Mrs. Miller wasn't really giving away anything. She knew how to make a sale. In contrast, the early Christians in today's reading from Acts really were giving away the store! They were living through two life changing experiences, metanoia and koinonia.

Metanoia means change of heart, repentance, and conversion. Metanoia is the inner change that takes place within a person or community when they accept that Jesus is Lord. Koinonia is another Greek word that means fellowship and communion. Deep Christian koinonia results from metanoia, and it is koinonia that I'd like to focus on today – koinonia in the early church and koinonia at the Church of the Ascension. It's koinonia that prompts us as Christians to “give away the store.”

- II. Last week in the Acts lectionary reading we saw and heard a new Peter. He encountered the resurrected Lord Jesus and left the tomb of his past failures. As a result of that encounter Peter was changed. He experienced metanoia and became more courageous, bold, and obedient to the Great Commission. Today we read about the early disciples who continued to meet in the upper room after Jesus ascended to heaven. What happened to this small band of people that turned them into the founders of the Christian Church? What happened was that they, just like Peter, experienced the profound power that comes from encountering the resurrected Christ.

III. There are several important things we need to understand about this power! First, the very same power that was available to the first generation of Christians is available to us here and now. There is no magic about this power – only the question of whether we are willing to ask for and to accept the full power that the Spirit will give us. Second, Acts documents the key ingredients to seeking, acquiring, and living out this power: Prayer, worship and teaching, fellowship, and generosity . . . prayer, worship and teaching, fellowship and generosity. These are the very things we re-affirmed in our Baptismal Covenant last week when Adam Johnston was baptized.

- A. First, Prayer. Before the Holy Spirit came to the New Testament church, the first Christians went to the Upper Room and prayed. Acts refers at least 26 times to the early church praying. They prayed when they needed help, they prayed to thank God, and they prayed to praise God. The early Christians prayed with their hands outstretched like this because they wanted to be in a physical stance of receiving answers to their prayers. And they prayed with their hands like this because they were praising God in heaven. They prayed for healing, and people were healed. They prayed for Peter and John to be released from prison, and even while they were praying, Peter and John rejoined them. Now lest you think that this only happened 2000 years ago, read the story of the founding of the Brooklyn Tabernacle and its growth from a poor storefront with a handful of people to a massive church ministering to the extensive needs in that part of New York City (Fresh Faith, Break Through Prayer). Or read the little book *The Church On Its Knees*, the story of Holy Trinity Brompton and its transformation from a church of almost no corporate prayer to one that prays together and experiences powerful answers, such as the growth of the Alpha Program, which that church began. Now it's important to understand that we are talking about corporate prayer – praying together – as well as individual prayer. There is power in praying together as a community.
- B. Secondly, Worship and Teaching: There is also power in worship and teaching. The church in Acts worshiped with enthusiasm. Our reading says that they came together each day in the temple and one another's homes and were engaged in the Apostles' teachings. Their worship was filled with awe for who God was and how God had blessed them. Their worship was also filled with signs and wonders.
- C. And lastly, Fellowship and Generosity. The fellowship or communion is "koinonia." Koinonia includes the kind of love and generous sharing that we read about in Acts. It is a love that goes deeper than our own affection would allow us to experience. Koinonia love comes out of our ability to see Christ in one another. This happens when we are transformed by the resurrected Christ and see others through his eyes. Roger Lovette describes this transformation as "a change of focus . . . a whole new way of looking at things," including a new way of looking at one another and a new unconditional generosity toward one another. We

begin to give away the store – to be aware of what others need and to willingly share what we have, without being asked and without expecting something in return. Koinonia involves a new way of seeing each other with eyes of love as sacred beings who God has created.

Some years ago, Peg and I were in the early stages of building a family in Evanston, Illinois. I was working two jobs to build up a down payment for our first house. Many days I left in the morning at 7:30 and came home at 8:00 at night. I would not do it that way again, but at the time it seemed the right thing to do. Peg was left with two young children in a third floor walk-up during long snowy Chicago winters. Our families were far away – Tennessee and Pennsylvania. We had friends, but they were going through the same stuff. We were isolated.

Then we joined a church in Winnetka, IL that really understood koinonia. We became part of a young couple discipleship Bible study group. The relief of having a faith community had a phenomenal affect on our lives. They were there for us, and we were there for them, in the celebrations, the worries, and just when we were lonely. I will never forget when I had been accepted to a doctoral program at the University of Alabama and we put our house on the market. We needed a good sale price but literally couldn't do all we needed to do to get the house ready. That group dropped what they were doing and came to finish off two rooms on the third floor of our house -- put up dry wall and painted. This is how koinonia works – over and over again, holy fellowship flowing out of our shared faith in Christ.

These characteristics of the early church in Acts – prayer, worship and teaching, fellowship, and unconditional generosity – have been lived out in the Christian church for 2000 years by millions of followers of Jesus Christ. Political parties have come and gone, empires have come and gone, philosophies have come and gone, but the church and the Gospel it has proclaimed have lived on.

IV. Conclusion: Where do we see koinonia today at the Church of the Ascension? The Holy Spirit empowers us to have deep, loving fellowship with our Christian brothers and sisters. Through the love of Christ, our capacity for generosity, for caring for one another, will increase dramatically. We will want to give away the store, not to make a sale, but to be Christ to one another. We are asked by Christ to take in what he has given us and then turn right around and give it away. Consequently during this Easter season I have a request of you. Please invite at least one friend to come with you to share the worship and teaching, love, and fellowship we have here at Ascension. I'm asking you to do this during the Easter Season as a part of our intentional process to share the resurrected Christ with others. As we do so, we, like Peter and the early church, will find ourselves increasingly transformed into Christ's likeness. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*