

Sermon: Glad and Generous Hearts!
4 Easter, Year A
Acts 2:42-47

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They ate their food with glad and generous hearts!

In today's reading from the Book of Acts, we get a glimpse into the church in its infancy. The Book of Acts, attributed to the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, is written in an historical vein that shows how the church came to be, how it blossomed and how it grew.

The passage begins, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." We have heard those words before in our baptismal vows. They are so central to the Episcopal "take" on what it means to be a follower of Jesus and part of a church or body of faith. The four elements of devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, breaking bread together and praying together – doesn't that sound like a typical Sunday morning here at Emmanuel when we gather together? We listen to the apostles' teachings through Scripture and I hope through the sermons; we gather together in fellowship to be part of this community in Christ; we emphasize the importance of the Eucharist by having it each week, sometimes enjoying coffee hour (as we are doing today at our new Holy Grounds Café) or soup lunch, and we pray together.

Then notice what seemed to grow out of these practices for those first followers: "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." And what was the resulting feeling? Joy! As they shared themselves, as they spent time together and ate food together, they had "glad and generous hearts."

Today is the third in a series of sermons focusing on joy. Sharing and joy seem to be intimately connected. Often when I hear the word, "Sharing" I recall a conversation from back when I was in my mid-20's (not so long ago), when my priest had asked me to teach Sunday School to the 4 year olds. I had little to no experience with that age group. I went in feeling hopeful one Sunday morning and said, "Boys and girls, today we are going to talk about sharing." At that, one of the little boys in the class responded, "Sharing, Sharing, all I ever hear about is Sharing!"

It seems that not everyone is joyful about sharing! I wonder if it is even a natural occurrence or if it must be taught. I wonder if in the case of these early Christians, they came to realize it was a fruit of their faith that bubbled up out of a sense of gratitude and awe in God.

This learning to share is one way of learning to love, and a deep expression of God's love for us. When we share ourselves and our possessions so often a certain joy comes with it. When we share our selves and our gifts with our community, something opens up within us that allows the community to flourish more deeply and to grow richly in ways unimagined.

Last Sunday afternoon there was an event that took place right in our neighborhood at Booker T. Washington Center; it was called, “Breaking Bread to Build Bridges.” It was not billed as a religious event but simply as a way to build community, which grew out of a desire to reconcile the divisions both within the community but also in the nation between black and white folks. The hope for the organizers was that our community of the greater Staunton area would bring a bread or dessert from one’s family or cultural tradition to share and then talk. As people arrived we handed over our bread or dessert and then were asked to sit at a table where we didn’t know anyone. For some of us that is a mildly terrifying prospect. (Can you be “mildly terrified?”)

So people sat at tables with people they didn’t know and waiters brought food to the tables, lots of it. And they kept bringing it! And people talked. Prompts were given such as “name a time when you didn’t feel welcome, didn’t feel were included” and conversely, “name a time when you felt wanted, genuinely welcome or included.” Within seconds the room was buzzing with conversation. Almost two hundred people were listening and opening themselves up for authentic conversation over really good food! And in this sharing of food, of words, of experience, there was a communal joy! With strangers. This may not have been billed as a religious or spiritual gathering but this was such a God thing! God was up to something in the neighborhood. Such a powerful example of how God works through community sharing. And the resulting joy.

If God wants us to be joyful, what keeps us from that joy? What are some joy inhibitors? Perhaps inhibitors include focusing only on ourselves or being close minded or close hearted or tight fisted. Joy can be inhibited when we allow fear or shame or guilt to rule in our lives. Perhaps joy inhibitors include the assumption we have nothing more to learn or that we have no need to connect with others.

The Acts passage reminds us that giving of ourselves generously is one of the deepest and most profound ways we can express the unity and love of God. In a culture that often values self-sufficiency and the acquisition of wealth, we as Christians, have to be willing to swim upstream sometimes, to say that we aren’t even fully ourselves unless we are sharing with others. An authentic faith in God stirs up a generous and glad heart.

May is Name Tag month. I wonder if as a first gesture toward sharing and possibly finding the joy that accompanies it, we could each reach out to someone we either don’t know at all or someone we don’t know very well after the service and talk to them? Better yet, ask them to share something of themselves and listen. And later today, can we think about ways in which we might reach out to someone who we consider different than us and invite them out for coffee or for lunch? (You might even let me know how it turns out!)

The early church understood the freedom that can go along with sharing with others and they experienced the joy that resulted from their willingness to share generously. May our faith in the risen Christ result in that same generosity and that same gladness of heart! Amen.

