

“Life is Good”

Acts 4:32-35

You have heard the words spoken from this pulpit by me and other preachers, “God is good all the time.” We believe God is good as our Creator – Jesus is good as our Savior – and the Holy Spirit is good as our sanctifier. God is good! But you’ve never heard me say, “Life is good all the time.” You have heard me say, “Life is good,” which I believe it is most of the time but not all of the time.

“Life is bad” might be a better way to describe what the early Christians in our Acts text were experiencing. There were 11 disciples, one had just committed suicide – hunkered down in Jerusalem together, wondering what was next after their beloved friend and rabbi had ascended to heaven. While Pentecost brought new power, it also brought new persecution.

Acts reads like a police report from the east side of Cleveland. In chapter 4, Peter and John get arrested. In chapter 5, all of the apostles are jailed, flogged and given a preaching restraining order. In chapter 7, Stephen is stoned to death. In chapter 8, the church is persecuted and driven out of Jerusalem. In chapter 9, a bounty is put on Paul’s head to have him killed. In chapter 12, James is beheaded. And on and on through the first 3 centuries.

We might assume that if we asked those early Christians whether life is good or bad, they would say, “Life is bad, bad, bad. Really bad.” Just like when I visit with some of you, you give me story after story about how life is bad, bad, bad. Right? Many of you have heard me respond to you after listening to all the bad things going on in your life, that “Life is Good.” Then because you look skeptical, I give you examples that I’m aware of, of how your life is good.

I would even say, life for the apostles was good. And you will ask as you ask when referring to your own life, “how can life be good for anyone who’s part of a group that’s been arrested, threatened, put in prison, beaten, and killed?” In referring to your own life, you might say something like, “How can life be good when I hate my job, my kids are a pain, my doctor wants me to cut down on calories, and my spouse snores all night long?”

I would say life for the apostles was good and life for us should be good when we rediscover the three distinct values that made life good for the first century Christian community in spite of being arrested, threatened, beaten, and sometimes killed. Those 3 values are reflected in our short text from Acts that describes how Christians lived together.

Despite facing dreadful religious persecution, the early church had a common purpose, a common place, and common possessions.

Their common purpose replaced individualism with shared biblical values.
Their common place replaced isolation with a renewed focus on community.
Their common possessions replaced consumerism with a voluntary sharing of resources – with a voluntary resource interdependence.

They lived in a community in which life was good. It can be good for us too, when we take these Christian values to heart.

First, a common purpose that replaces individualism with shared biblical values. Verse 32, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” This opening verse makes everything else possible.

“One heart and soul.” I share with you a quote from historian Wayne Meeks who believes that this verse is the defining characteristic of early Christian unity. He writes, “One peculiar thing about early Christianity was the way in which the intimate, close knit life of the local groups was seen to be simultaneously part of a much larger, indeed ultimately worldwide, movement or entity.”

The “one heart and soul” of the early church as it needs to be today, was telling the story of Jesus and his teachings, giving local groups of Christians the mission statement around which they organized themselves. Like the “Rules” that guided the monastic movements centuries later, commitment to shared values made these early churches radically different from their culture.

And they welcomed absolutely everyone. Paul wrote to the early Christians in Galatia, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This was revolutionary because Christians were saying that despite all the human and societal things that would divide us, we “are all children of God through faith.” These words were so important to the early church that they were often used as a baptismal formula, during the induction of new converts into the life of the community. “All of you are one in Christ Jesus.” The old divisions of race, sex, and class would not hold sway in the new community of Christ. Their authority and power were broken because a new humanity was coming into being – still diverse, but equal and reconciled. You are all one in Christ Jesus with a common purpose.

As the new converts gathered together, they began sharing life in new ways governed by a new purpose. In Acts 2, they took in the teachings of the apostles, fellowshiped in the temple and one another’s homes, witnessed miracles, praised God, and saw daily additional converts. First, they had a common purpose as do we.

Second, they had a common place where isolation was replaced with community – as do we. The challenge for me and for many of us is that our

common place has been unbelievably expanded by computers and other technologies. Jay Gamelin, the Lutheran campus pastor at Ohio States, uses words like email, facebook, texting, and other words that I don't even know what they mean, to describe how he communicates with his parishioners. I'm old fashioned enough to believe that all this technology has made us more fractured people than connected people. I believe we need to emphasize Christian community within geographic community modeled after the early church.

There are four relational characteristics of geographic community modeled after the early church that we are slowly losing because of technology. We are losing spontaneity in our relationships when we cross paths unintentionally or drop in on short or no notice. We're losing "availability" in our relationships where we're close enough to lend an ear or a hand to an immediate need. We're losing the frequency of coming together when so many only worship on Easter and Christmas, and the early church met daily. We're losing the hospitality of the early church where shared meals were the centerpiece of the closest relationships – although here in Divinity we do pretty good with the shared meals.

We need to give thanks for this common place in which we gather to develop deeper relationships that have more spontaneity, availability, frequency, and hospitality in building up this community as part of the Body of Christ.

First, a common purpose. Second, a common place. And third, they most controversial value of the early church, common possessions.

Common possessions is what our text primarily focuses on. To the early Christian there was one thing that made it clear that God was powerfully changing people. Believers disregarded private ownership in favor of a common purse.

There's no way that happens apart from God. Shared stuff. Give as you can. Take as you need. I own nothing. We own everything. That's a radical community where life is good in the early church.

Today, that concept feels idealistic at best and socialist at worst. It certainly isn't taken seriously outside of the church. But look around at what we own together and give thanks. We give thanks for those of you who give as you can, whether it be in the form of time, talent, food, money, or whatever. We pray for and try to motivate those who are not here and choose not to contribute.

We do know that developing an Acts 4 community requires Christians to believe that they are not owners of things; instead we are managers of what God has entrusted to us. We are open to God's leading on how we should use and share what he's given us. Money and possessions are God-given tools to be used to serve others, not just for self-indulgence and self-serving needs.

So today in Acts 4, we learn from our early Christian ancestors whose

common purpose replaced individualism with shared biblical values; whose common place replaced isolation with a renewed focus on community; whose common possessions replaced consumerism with a voluntary sharing of resources.

We know that life always seems to have plenty of difficulty and suffering. It's easy to say, "life is bad" or "the cup is half empty." What we need is a community of people around us to shoulder the burdens of life with. We need people who will draw us into Christian community and interdependence and away from individualism, isolation, and consumerism. We need biblical community. We need Christ-centered community. Then Life is Good.

May the peace of God . . .

Contemporary - They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love

Traditional - Sermon - #655 - Son of God, Eternal Savior

Recessional - #654 - The Church's One Foundation