

Ann Pettit  
Massanutten Presbyterian Church  
November 2, 2008

Intentional Generosity  
Acts 4:32-37

As I was getting ready for this morning's service I talked with a friend about this passage and what I hoped to say about it today. I have a great story about faith, giving and sharing and I was sure it was just the thing to introduce the passage. It's all about our dining room table and its travels from one family to another. This table was first used by good friends who passed it on to Patrick and I in the early days of our marriage. We used it for a number of years then discovered the house had become too small for the table the kids and that big dog we loved. So we put the table out in the garage and there it sat. Not long after that another couple we knew needed a dining room table we sent ours on its way.

A few years later we found ourselves moving to the Shenandoah Valley, and into the Mossy Creek manse in Mount Solon; sure enough – we needed a dining room table. The table we'd given away would have been perfect – it would have fit just right into the house we now live in. As we wondered what to do, again, friends came to our rescue mentioning a table they had in their basement that wasn't being used. They offered it to us and our dining room quandary was over.

For me, this experience has served as a mundane but tangible reminder of God's provision. Yes, it's just a dining room table – and certainly not a necessity – we'd gotten along without one just fine. However I can't quite shake the meaning of the experience of giving something away and later receiving that which we needed – at just the right time.

But, as I was telling my friend about this experience, it was very gently pointed out to me that while there might be a point in it, it may not quite reflect what Luke is trying to say about the early church in Jerusalem. After all, what we gave away was essentially something we'd discarded because it didn't have value for us any longer.

After sulking just a little bit, I had to concede my friend was right. And though it's still a valuable experience to me, I decided not to tell the story after all.

The narrative of the early church – the Jerusalem church in particular, is striking on many levels. Right from the start we are drawn into it by the community's unity: *they were of one heart and soul*, we read. There was a deep sense of purpose to who they were and what they were about and so they went about:

*telling the story of Jesus at work in their lives with boldness.*

That's what Luke tells us about their ministry together. They'd been filled with the Holy Spirit; the power of God at work in their lives was palpable and they were all in agreement

about that power and what it was prompting them to do and be.

There were no discarded dining room tables waiting to be given away by happenstance. Rather *everything was on the table*, so-to-speak. Everything that they had was made intentionally available for the ministry of that early church – because they were convinced that Jesus had called them to himself and into lives of worship and service.

Now we might wonder as we look around the myriad denominations that make up the church, the places throughout history that Christians have struggled to find agreement and the choices made through along the way to leave, why being of ‘one heart and soul’ seems so far out of reach. It’s a good question, and one that I’m confident Pastor John will be glad to answer as you leave this morning. But it’s also helpful to remember that in not too many chapters hence we’ll see in Acts that remaining ‘of one heart and soul’ became a challenge for those early believers as they explored what it meant to be the church in a world calling them in many different directions.

Despite that, Luke has recorded this piece of the early churches life together for us, to help us we consider what it means to be the church in 2008 and beyond. And part of what he’s recorded is the active commitment – what I see as the *intentional generosity-* of these early believers toward the ministry of the church because of the ministry of Jesus Christ to them.

And this is where my friend’s point hits home:

*Intentional generosity is a far cry  
from an offering of the leftovers in our lives.*

It’s clear from what Luke writes here in this part of Acts, and also in other places that money and wealth are ongoing sources of challenge within the lives of the faithful. In the parable of the Rich Fool Luke records the story of the man so preoccupied with his possessions that he builds new, bigger and better storage barns to hold all his things. God’s response is cutting:

*“Fool! This night your life is required of you.  
And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”*

This parable and many others lift up Luke’s concern for the investment of our hearts in what we have and not in the work of the kingdom.

These early Christians that gathered together were of one heart and soul because they had been inspired, changed and empowered by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Their unity can best be lived out in our day not necessarily in our agreement about the color of the carpet or Sunday School curriculum or Mission initiatives, but rather in a unified response that Jesus Christ has Risen. Remember how it goes:

*The Lord is Risen  
He is Risen indeed!*

So what does that mean as we walk away from the empty tomb with joy and enter the world of hard choices and challenges? How does the energy of what we believe to be true play out in the Church at work in the world? William Willimon writes:

*When you think about it, the quality of the church's life together is evidence for the truthfulness of the resurrection. The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or well-orchestrated pageant on Easter Sunday, but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no other explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.*

For the early church this truth meant that they were intentional about their life together. They were generous with their all the resources at their disposal, and everything they owned was not theirs, but first and foremost, God's. The early church lived out this understanding in the way the community cared for one another and reached out inviting others into that same community. They understood that both their possessions and the life changing hope of the Resurrection were not to be held onto, but rather shared with *intentional generosity*. The words of the old hymn come to mind:

*We give they but thine own,  
what e'er the gift may be;  
All that we have is thine alone,  
A trust, O Lord from thee.*

That's a message that is radically different from what we hear on the streets or in the news or on the campaign trail. But it's the message that endures. 2000 years later it's the message that still bears fruit and carries weight when everything else is crumbling. The resurrection is as certain and life-changing now as it was when the believers first started gathering together. The challenge for us is to make that known by how we live together and how we offer ourselves, our resources and our very lives to the work of the church in the world. Let us pray,

*O God, make us mindful of our wealth, both in that which is tangible and intangible. And then, Lord, through the power of the Resurrection, make us intentionally generous toward your call to us in our lives. Through Christ, our Risen Lord we pray. Amen.*