

Message for May 3, 2020

Acts 2:42-47

Once upon a time there was a man named Joe and Joe was not a Christian, indeed he despised everything to do with Christianity. If the Bible taught that you should do something, he would make a point of not doing it. And if the Bible taught that you shouldn't do something, then that was all the more reason for Joe to do it. Joe became famous, or perhaps I should say infamous, for his scandalous behaviour. As he got older though, his conscience began to trouble him. He decided that he'd better mend his ways and he became a Christian.

Predictably many people were very surprised and quite a few were very skeptical. This was especially true of Joe's long time buddies and one of them decided to pay Joe a visit and test the sincerity of his new found faith.

"Well" said the friend, "I hear that you've become one of those Christians, that you've now got religion." "That's right" said Joe, "I certainly have!" "Oh" the friend replied, "well, I guess that means that you will be going to church every Sunday then." "I already am!" proclaimed Joe proudly, "why, I haven't missed a Sunday in the past six weeks!" Joe's friend simply couldn't believe what he was hearing but he wasn't ready to give up. "Well" he said, "I guess that since you are now a Christian you won't be joining the rest of us for any more of our wild drinking parties." "You are absolutely right" replied Joe, "Count me out!" Joe's friend was now in an absolute state of shock; why it sounded like Joe really had turned over a new leaf! Even so he decided to make one last effort to test his sincerity. "Well Joe" said the friend, "now that you are a Christian I guess that means you have to be honest. So how about paying me back all that money you owe me?" There was complete silence for a moment but then Joe erupted. "What?" he shouted, "Now you just wait a minute! That's not religion you're talking about, that's business!"

This story of course is meant to be humorous but it also raises an important point. Contrary to what Joe may have thought, we cannot divide our lives into different unrelated spheres or compartments; here is religion, there is business and so on. Religion isn't just a matter of worshipping God on a Sunday morning; nor is it restricted to just "religious" or "spiritual" activities either. A true faith should have an impact on every aspect of our lives. The big question then is how do we, or how should we live our lives as God's people and the disciples of Christ? One answer is found in one of the lectionary's suggested lessons for today.

This morning's scripture passage describes the very first Christian congregation in its earliest days. Luke tells us that those first Christians thought that five activities were crucial to their lives as Christ's disciples. First of all, they sought to learn about God and Jesus. Secondly, they devoted themselves to worshipping God on a regular basis. Thirdly, they sought to have a genuine fellowship amongst themselves. Fourthly, they sought to deepen their prayer or spiritual lives. Learning, worship, fellowship and prayer; these were the hallmarks of the first Christians and their church and who could possibly argue with this? So far so good but Luke didn't stop there, he simply had to add the detail that "All the believers were together and had everything in common."

Have you ever been at a party or some other social occasion where everyone was just standing around talking and having a good time and then someone, trying to be clever, funny or perhaps not even thinking about it, said something totally inappropriate? It may have been about politics, religion or another person perhaps. Suddenly the conversation stopped dead in its tracks and there was that awkward silence; people were embarrassed and no one knew quite what to say. Finally someone else said something to break the silence and that was followed by some nervous laughter mixed with relief. Everyone started talking again but all the while though people were thinking, "What did he mean by that?" or "I can't believe she said that!"

This describes how the church down through the ages has felt about Luke's statement that the earliest Christians had all things in common. It is

one of those things that many people would like to cut out of the Bible and ignore altogether. Those early Christians, while not realizing it, started a debate that has never ended; what type of lifestyle does God expect his people to follow? Did those people in Jerusalem so long ago embody the example that all of us should be following? Or were they an aberration, something out of the ordinary that we can and perhaps even should ignore?

Historically the church has said that those first Christians did not provide the example that the rest of us must follow; God does not expect us to give up all of our possessions and have everything in common. To be sure, some people such as monks and nuns may be called to live such a lifestyle but God does not expect most of us to do so. This view however has been challenged in every age; in virtually every generation there are those who say that the church is wrong and that we should be following the example of those earliest Christians. So what are we supposed to do? Do we dismiss those earliest Christians and those who have chosen to embrace such a lifestyle today as being impractical dreamers? Or do they have something to teach us?

To return to this morning's scripture passage, setting aside how they lived, what was the ideal that motivated those early Christians to choose the lifestyle they did? It was love. As God loved them so they in turn sought to love, both one another and the world around them. And they thought that the best way to love and care for each other was by sharing all things in common. And this perhaps is what today's passage has to teach us. The important thing isn't *how* they lived but rather *why* they chose the lifestyle that they did. It was an incredibly strong sense of love, care and compassion. Indeed, it was these qualities that distinguished them and made them different from everyone else in their society at that time. As a writer in the ancient world named Tertullian said of those first Christians, "See how they love one another!" It was their love for one another and the world around them that distinguished them from everyone else and therein lies the importance of their example to us.

Can you really imagine all of us spending all of our time together and sharing all things in common? Honestly I can't but the same values that motivated those people of so long ago to choose the lifestyle that they did should still characterize the life of Christ's church and his disciples today: a genuine sense of love, respect, care and compassion for both one another and the world around us.

Indeed these qualities are needed even more today than ever before given the world that we are now living in with all of its needs, fears and uncertainty. I like the way a quote I read during the past week put it. "We are not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm". And so we are. Wouldn't it be wonderful though if the people around us said the same thing about us that that ancient writer said of those early Christians? "See how they love!" Truly lifestyles may come and go out of style but qualities such as love, respect, and compassion never will. To quote the chorus of the hymn "We are one in the Spirit", which would have been one of this morning's hymns if we had been able to gather together to worship:

"And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,

And they'll know we are Christians by our love."