

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

**November 24, 2019**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina*

**Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37**

**Stewardship Dedication Sunday**

## **RESURRECTION LIVING AND GIVING**

***Let us pray: Gracious God, as your Word is read and proclaimed today and your grace fills our hearts, may we be stirred into action to demonstrate your love for all the world and for all creatures that live and move on this earth. Amen.***

Was the Apostle Peter a “Prosperity Gospel” preacher? After all, following his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, three thousand people “joined the church” and “sold their possessions and goods and laid the proceeds at the apostles’ feet.”

The “Prosperity Gospel” (also known as prosperity theology, the health and wealth gospel, the gospel of success, or seed faith) is alive and well in the United States and especially in other countries around the world. In a nutshell, the “Prosperity Gospel” promises that God will pour financial blessings on believers if they will make (sometimes substantial) contributions to a particular ministry or minister.

The “Prosperity Gospel” is a particular problem in Zambia. Dr. Dustin Ellington, the Presbyterian mission co-worker our congregation has supported for several years, is particularly concerned about the prevalence of the “prosperity gospel” in the churches in Zambia and across southern Africa. Faculty members at Justo Mwale Theological University have presented panel discussions, written extensively, and teach the students about the dangers of the “Prosperity Gospel.”

In one of his letters to supporting congregations back in the U.S., Dustin wrote this description of the “Prosperity Gospel”: “In Zambia and neighboring nations newspapers keep eager readers up-to-date on the latest whereabouts of prophets. People hang their hopes on powerful ‘men of God’ who come to town announcing blessings and prosperity. In contrast to Rev. Jankens [one of Dustin’s former students who now serves eight congregations, the smallest of which has 1,600 members!], who rides a bicycle between his eight congregations, the last such article I read said the visiting prophet arrived in Zambia from impoverished Malawi by private jet. Zambian military and police escorted him to a large stadium, where he allegedly worked miracles of healing and foretold the future. His organization claims to have raised over \$100 billion for development in Africa, though evidence isn’t available. Another prophet promised in the past month that everyone who came to the stadium would receive an automatic deposit in their bank account.” Dustin included a parenthetical comment — “Sorry, but Sherri and I didn’t attend, so we can’t really say whether it happened!”<sup>1</sup>

Or was the Apostle Peter, along with the other apostles, an early socialist, or even a communist? After all, under their leadership following the Day of Pentecost, “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." (Acts 4:32, 34-35)

Doesn't that sound a lot like these definitions of socialism and communism?

- \* Socialism: a system of society or group living in which there is no private property.

- \* Communism: a system in which goods are owned in common and are available to all as needed.

For it was Karl Marx, the socialist revolutionary, who said, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

No, indeed! Far from being a "Prosperity Gospel Preacher" or a proponent of some 20th century political ideology such as socialism or communism, the Apostle Peter, along with the other apostles and believers, experienced the power of God's Holy Spirit and the promise of the resurrection in such a life-changing way that the community that was born was Spirit shaped and remarkable in its practices.

Listen again to what the early believers did as a new community of faith:

- \* They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship.

- \* They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

- \* All who believed were together and had all things in common.

- \* They took care of any who had need.

- \* They spent much time together in the temple.

- \* They broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.

- \* They praised God.

- \* They were of one heart and soul.

What those early believers practiced in response to God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives was not short-lived. Three hundred years later, in a letter to a priest of the Romans state religion in Galatia [which is modern Turkey], the Roman Emperor Julian outlined his efforts to provide help for Roman citizens, the poor, strangers, and beggars. He commented on what he thought was a poor effort on the part of the priests throughout Galatia and compared their work with that of the Christian community: "Why then do we think that this is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause? For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [Julian's name for the Christians] support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us."<sup>2</sup>

So, how did this Christian community come about? And what does their life together have to say to us as a Christian community 2,000 years later? Did Peter and the other apostles get together one day and say, "We ought to start a new community that is diverse, outward-looking, caring, and dedicated to the glory of God?" No, according to Acts 2, the Holy Spirit came upon them with the power of the resurrection. The same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead was given to them to fulfill the Lord

Jesus' command to spread the good news. What follows in Acts is the story of the resurrection living and giving of that first group of believers. In his commentary on these verses, Matt Skinner writes, "It is important to underscore that Acts 2:42-47 describes a community of faith that operates in the power of God's Spirit. The virtues of justice, worship, and mutuality are not accomplishments of extraordinary folk; they are signs of the Spirit within a community of people who understand themselves as united in purpose and identity — not a dispersed collection of individual churchgoers. This is not to say that the members of a community of faith bear no responsibility for living in a way that displays God's reconciliation. The audacious claims of a resurrection faith demand such boldness from us."<sup>3</sup>

As part of our worship during our session meeting Tuesday night, the elders and I discussed the following three questions. As you think about your commitment to the mission and ministry of the Wallace Presbyterian Church in the coming year and beyond — financial, service, participation, prayer — consider how you would answer these questions:

- \* Why do we exist as a church?
- \* What would be lost in our community if we ceased to be?
- \* What are we willing to let go of so the mission will continue?

Those questions are another way of asking, "How will our church show resurrection living and giving?" The early group of believers were a Spirit-filled church, and they showed it by: repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus; devoting themselves to the authoritative teachings of the apostles; emphasizing fellowship; being a caring community; being a joyous community respected by the society; and praying.

There are plenty of articles and studies these days about the demise of the church and Christianity, especially in mainline Protestant churches. At the same time, studies indicate people have a deep hunger for a spiritual connection in their lives. Also, there is a crying need for true community. There are also many programs designed to "turn your church around" in the 21st century. I don't say that dismissively, because many of those programs contain hard truths we need to hear about how to be the church in the 21st century and how best to bear witness with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

One of the best resources I have looked at is from the Presbyterian Mission Organization and is called "7 Marks of Congregational Vitality." Interestingly, in the introduction, the authors clearly identify what this is NOT. It is not:

- A universal program instructing churches and assuring vitality and sustainable life
- Another plan that promises an immediate fix
- A guarantee of revitalization for every congregation
- An attempt for the PC(USA) to tell churches what to do

- An institutional survival guide for membership, numbers and buildings
- An encouragement to tweak, yet remain the same
- A return to glory days gone by, nor a guidebook on calling the young pastor

The 7 Marks of Congregational Vitality are both a good measuring stick of where we are as a congregation and what we can do to be even more faithful and vital in our witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The 7 Marks are:

- \* Lifelong Discipleship Formation vs. complacent “Christian piety” and simply teaching good morals
- \* Intentional, authentic evangelism, which includes intentionally sharing the good news and not just acts of kindness, because Christ is such a part of our identity as a congregation, he overflows into everything we do
- \* Outward, incarnational focus vs. inward institutional survival: this includes awareness and focus on our neighbors and neighborhood and a missional focus on where Christ is already present and active and calling us to join him
- \* Empower servant leadership vs. the pastor’s job or monopolized leadership, helping all members identify their spiritual gifts and use them in the ministry of the congregation
- \* Spirit-inspired worship vs. stale ritual or consumer entertainment worship, where we encounter God, and are challenged, taught, transformed, encountered, convicted, and sent out as different people
- \* Caring relationships vs. any other social club — sharing God’s love and helping people to encounter Jesus Christ, to welcome and extend hospitality to all people
- \* and finally Ecclesial health vs. unhealthy dysfunction: Understanding Why we are a church community? How are we a church community in practice? Clarity in mission and core ministry values, with a budget that reflects these priorities.

Let’s go back to the first century church in Jerusalem, where the people sold their fields and houses and possessions and gave the proceeds so no one would be in need. The question should be asked: Is this descriptive or prescriptive?

It is certainly descriptive, because Luke is describing how that group of believers responded to the power of the resurrection in their living and their giving.

But is it prescriptive? That is, is every Christian community in all times and places supposed to look like that Christian community in all of its practices? There isn’t much evidence in the rest of the New Testament that many other communities went all in, such as the one in Jerusalem.

But I don’t mention that to let us off the hook. The particular practices of those early churches may not have been exactly the same, but their motivation was exactly the same: their strong and powerful faith in the resurrected Jesus Christ is what formed them into a community and guided them to do what they did, in worship, in prayer, in fellowship, in caring, in giving.

In his commentary on Acts, 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 . . . 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 explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history.”<sup>4</sup>

So, my friends in Christ, on this Stewardship Dedication Sunday, as we hear how the early Christian community of believers lived out their faith in the risen Christ, the question before us, the question that makes all the difference in our living and our giving, is this: How shall we live out our faith in the risen Christ today?

***Let us pray: God of mercy, help us look past the walls and doors of this church. Help us to open our doors to walk alongside the vulnerable to whom we have been called. As we share through our giving, may all your children feel the love of Christ and share in the justice, compassion, and joy you offer. Keep us unsatisfied with being THIS church on THIS corner, so we shall be known as CHRIST’s church to the whole world. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dustin Ellington, “Be Cautious About Prophets: A letter from Dustin Ellington serving in Zambia,” November 2015 at [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org).

<sup>2</sup>Julian the Apostate, “Letter to Arsacius,” at [www.thenagain.info](http://www.thenagain.info).

<sup>3</sup>Matt Skinner, “Commentary on Acts 2:42-47,” at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>4</sup>William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 51.