

All in the Family
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

<p style="text-align: center;">Acts 2:42--47 (NRSVA)</p> <p>⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.</p> <p>⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.</p> <p>⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Acts 2:42--46 (TMNT)</p> <p>Everyone around was in awe— all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.</p> <p>They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.</p>
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Sermon:

In seminary, I was taught to read Luke-Acts as one book, with the understanding that there was a significant time gap between the writing of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. This time gap could explain the author's shift in his expectations of the return of Jesus in a not-too-distant future in Luke to no reference to Jesus' return in Acts.

The Book of Acts is primarily about the fledgling church and its expansion. It makes the case for the Apostle Paul's more inclusive understanding of the Gospel dominate, which allowed those Jews, who lived as the Gentiles or Hellenized Jews, pagan God Venerators, who later become full-fledged converts to Christianity but not to Judaism, all to be included in the Abrahamic covenant through Christ. The author of Luke-Acts is believed to be a well-educated Hellenistic Jew, who had embraced the Way of Jesus and was writing toward the end of the first century of the common era in Ephesus. But, of all things, let us see the author of Luke-Acts as a devout and conscientious pastor.

The situational context of today's passages, written long after the events they report, is after the initial rush of Pentecost. Things in the post-resurrection Jesus-believing community in Jerusalem have settled into a routine. Therefore, considering the delay of Jesus' return, Luke continues to make his case that the people of the Way of Jesus pose no threat to imperial rule. Luke places the major blame and responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus squarely on the Jerusalem Jewish establishment, and some of the people in the crowd.

In the history of Israel, the abuses of the aristocracy and leaders of God's people became so prevalent at times that God raised up the great prophets to confront the ruling classes, calling them to remember God's standards of justice, compassion, and to change their ways. These prophets, as divine agents of change, saw not only what was wrong but simultaneously envisioned the solution, proclaiming a better way and better times to come. The prophets understood that the ways and

means of change were at hand within the power and presence of God and in the people and their leaders if they kept not only the letter of the Law but its spirit.

After the Romans occupied and took control of the lands of ancient Israel, the ruling elite collaborated with the Romans and continued the abuses and victimization of the powerless. It was in this environment, that we see several new prophetic voices arise at a time when it was believed that the spirit of prophecy had left the land of God. These prophetic voices were in the form of the Zealots as well as a faction of the lower ranks of the Jerusalem priesthood and others. Here again, there was a clear insight into what was wrong, what needed to be done, and a belief that the power and presence of God was available to help and bring about a better day if the people would do their part.

It is into this highly charged environment, filled with the hopes of the end-times, that John the Baptist comes on the scene, calling for the people to repent, get right with God before the kingdom's coming overtook them. He calls for the elite to repent, turn from their abusive ways and for the people to share their surplus with those less fortunate; tax-collectors, collect no more than the prescribed amount, and Jewish soldiers, stop extorting the people to supplement their wages.

John rallies quiet a following and forms an anti-group or faction within the greater in-group of the Jews with an eye on the coming wrath and judgment of God and the establishment of a Jewish theocracy on the holy land. I think John just could not envision the corruptions and abuses of his day continuing as they were without God's intervention.

However, we gather that John and his followers were not revolutionaries in the militant sense because he, like Jesus, expected God, not humans, to initiate and bring the final judgment as a corrective to the people's sinfulness. An interesting side note: Many NT scholars maintain that Jesus started out as a disciple of John and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and his dawning self-awareness launched his own reform movement or extended John's.

Jesus, as did John, saw the abuses and corruption of the religious elite and their victimization of people as one of the major problems of his time. In response to this situation, Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, moved down to Judea, confronting the prevailing religious mindset and its abuses along the way. Later he would confront the religious establishment in its central institution, the Temple.

After the execution of John the Baptist, his group of followers were without their charismatic leader, and Jesus and his anti-group or faction emerged as the dominate voice of God with Jesus understood to be the Messiah, son of God. Jesus, however, understood his anti-group or faction as more than just people holding in common political-religious-economic gripes.

What we see in our passages today of people pooling and sharing their resources I think has often been erroneously called Christian communalism. I tend to see it differently and would rather see this early Christian community as Jesus' anti-faction maturing into what modern anthropologists call a fictive family or a surrogate family, a family not bound by blood ties or marriage but a common cause in God. In other words, this is a family you choose to belong to, not the one you are stuck with.

I point out that in the Ancient Near East and much of the Modern Near East religion, politics, economics, and family are all one in the same thing. Even in the greater, collective dimension that we modern people would call the nation or state, politics, religion, and economics were simply an extension of the family model in the main. This understanding may give you some insights as to what was going on in this early Jerusalem church and its members holding all things in common.

However, after Jesus' crucifixion, his surrogate family or anti-faction seemed also to be leaderless and about to fall apart until it was reunited and reenergized by his resurrection with the Apostle Peter initially taking the lead, but eventually supplanted by James, the brother of the Lord. Then we see Jesus' Jewish ministry and insights begin to go worldwide and become far, far more inclusive.

Therefore, Luke recalls a time when people of the way of Jesus gathered daily, listened to, and obeyed the teachings and instructions of the Apostles in the environs of the Jerusalem Temple. They gathered to study scriptures, share fellowship around meals, and spend time in communal prayer and praise daily. We read that they, reminiscent of John the Baptist's instructions to share and support one

another, held all things in common and each person was cared for per their needs, not according to their contributions or social standings.

The breaking of bread that the writer refers to here is not the Lord's Supper as we would understand it but rather like the practices of devout Jewish families, sharing meals together following temple worship, which may have included eating portions of the sacrifice of Well-Being they had offered at the Temple. This is not unlike many of us today when we join each other for meals in our homes, in restaurants, or during our regular times of fellowship after worship.

When the writer speaks of sharing food and possessions, he may also have in mind the Old Testament notion of the Years of Jubilees, especially the fifth year. This was to be an idealized time, when things would be put right, debts forgiven, collateralized land released, land that had been sold or forfeited in debt returned to its original, family ownership. It was to be a time when justice and charity would prevail for those oppressed and in need. The Jubilee Years, as wonderful as the idea was, was never fully institutionalized or practiced. I think the Jubilee Years may form a part of the author's thinking along with the idea of a surrogate family.

We see clearly this idea articulated in Acts 4:32-37 (NRSV)

³²Now 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. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There 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. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Later these passages about Barnabas, a member of the tribe of Levi and the priesthood, living outside the holy land and owning property, who sold his land and donated it to the common cause will be contrasted with the story of a fellow named Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who sold land and kept part of the proceeds for themselves, and then lied about it to the Apostles, resulting in Ananias and Sapphira dropping dead.

In this ANE surrogate family, its leaders or patrons looked after the welfare of all the family members. I must also mention that this social arrangement may not have been seen as a long-term solution for the social and economic inequities among the believers, but only an interim arrangement until a fully inaugurated kingdom of God, which was to begin in Jerusalem, came on earth. In the kingdom of God, prosperity, justice, and restoration would be the order of the day for everyone. With the destruction of the Temple and the death of hundreds of thousands of Jews in the great rebellion, we see the demise of the early Jesus-believing community in Jerusalem along with its surrogate family per se.

However, the spirit of caring for those in need within the Christian fellowship meeting in prayer, praise, and shared meals for the edification, support, and growth of the faith remained the social and religious mainstay of the early church and is the Christian ideal today. It was the early Christians' mutual care and concern for one another as surrogate families especially among those who were displaced, slaves, or without families that became a major attraction for the early church. However, the early church and its model of a surrogate family was not without its difficulties.

We see this in the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. In addition, we see it in the sixth chapter of Acts with the widows of the more Hellenized Jews or Jews who lived as Gentiles, complaining that they were being slighted in favor of the more traditional Jewish widows in the distribution of the daily rations of food.

I think one of the major things at work in those early days of the Church that made it survive and thrive is to be found in those devoted familial concerns for people that gave rise to a sense of caring and belonging that transcended ethnic and cultural boundaries. That is, people in Christ

extending themselves to help, to comfort, to feed, cloth, shelter, and console each other out of the common cauldron of the Holy Spirit not out of a common pot of possessions. Yet, as the Apostle Paul points out in 1 Corinthians, this ideal was not always the practice of the day.

Today, as we come together in the common cause of God's world-changing presence in Jesus the Christ to fellowship, praise, worship, and learn, we participate in the fundamental dynamics of Jesus' group of disciples and the early church. We eat together - the Lord's Supper - as well as church potlucks - because eating with one another is an act of familial intimacy and affirmation. We gather to study together, pray together, and praise God together because spiritual, moral, and ethical discernment is the work of the Holy Spirit in the community and the source of our continued growth and maturity in Christ. In addition, we have seen mighty works and wonders of the Holy Spirit as people's lives have been changed and enriched over the years. Therefore, like those early Christians, let us see the center of the Jesus community shift from the Temple in Jerusalem to the Lord's table of fellowship and remembrance.

We may not sell our possessions, placing the proceeds into a common pot to be administered by a group of elders, while we await Jesus' return, but we do pool the strength of our faith, our love, our caring for one another, and make these things available to our family of faith. From this common pool of mutual respect, care, concern, and love, each person may draw upon, according to their needs. This is the substance of a successful Christian spiritual family. Furthermore, until that time when human nature is completely regenerated, according to God's will, and no one's prosperity, justice, and well-being is neglected, this is the model for our Christian life together.

The writer of Acts tells us that how those early Christians lived and worked with one another, how they took care of one another engendered the "*the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved*"; that is, those whose lives were made whole and their honor and dignity acknowledged within a caring community. This care and concern for others becomes the hallmark of the Spirit's expression in the Christian's life and the life of the Christian community. In short, it's all in the family - the family of God in Christ.

So, let us prepare our hearts and minds this morning to gather around the Lord's Table in continuance of Jesus' and the early church's familial, spiritual intimacy and eat together. Furthermore, after communion let us gather around the table of fellowship in the Bloom Center and do some serious eating together as brothers and sisters, knowing that although the food, as well as the elements of communion this morning, were prepared by human hands, the living presence of Christ is our host at both meals and invites us to dine with him.