

May 7, 2017
Acts 2:42-47
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“What We Have in Common”

Good morning! I'd like to begin by saying Thank You to the Youth for their worship leadership this morning. I also want to thank Scott and Angi, not just for being sure that everyone got out of bed and here this morning, but for the weeks and years that they have brought their children and their children's friends to Creekside. They've had to coordinate these schedules with their children's other parents, and most of us are not even aware of the level of planning this takes. I also want to thank Tim McFadden and Anne Griffith, who have led this youth group for all of Chris and Tia's four years of high school. Tim and Anne bring varied and complementary skills, and have adapted those to what works for the kids. As you have seen for yourselves, these are terrific kids, it's been a privilege to work with them, they have kept us on our toes. We wish Chris and Tia the very best as they graduate and move beyond high school, and we're glad to have Katelyn and Alysa with us for a few more years.

I think the folks from the denominational offices of the Church of the Brethren made a great choice of a scripture text for National Youth Sunday; I believe this text from Acts 2 also speaks to other observances in our congregation today, and I hope there is something here for you personally today, as well. As you know, the books of Acts -- short for The Acts of the Apostles -- is the story of what the first followers of Jesus did immediately after his resurrection. The book of Acts was written by the same author as the gospel of Luke, and they were originally one continuous narrative: the story of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus -- Book 1-- and the story of the early church -- Book 2. Acts 2:46 and 47 is the summary statement of what the church was like: “Day by day, as they spent time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the

goodwill of all people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

It's a wonderful vision of what the church was like. In fact, it has a little bit of a feel of “Then Jesus rose from the dead, the Holy Spirit came, and they all lived happily ever after.” Why isn't *our* church like that early church? Well, maybe the early church was like that for a brief, shining moment, but remember, this is Acts chapter 2 and we still have 26 chapters to go. To be sure, the acts of the apostles are positive ones: teaching, converting, healing, but this is no fairy tale: the believers face imprisonment, persecution from a very determined Pharisee named Paul, and the martyrdom of their leader Stephen. They have a big fight about how to include Gentiles -- non-Jews -- as believers of Christ, and they have to figure out how to support new churches financially. These are real people facing real issues of their time and context, and some of those issues are not that different from our own time and context.

Church is not like it used to be: church in most places today -- certainly in the United States -- does not look like that small community of persecuted believers praying and eating together, and sharing all their property in common. Increasingly, the church today does not look like the American church of 50 years ago either when nearly everyone identified as Christian, and sanctuaries and Christian Education wings were full on Sunday mornings, and Sunday evening and mid-week services were faithfully attended. I can say with certainty that when Chris and Tia and Alysa and Katelyn are my age (*I know, that idea is terrifying*) that church is going to look different. (*You might look a little different, too*)

Now, we may want to wail and wring our hands about this -- a little hand wringing is probably inevitable -- but I think we are better served by going back to the book of Acts and looking at what makes the church The Church. What is essential about what we share, or what we have in common. Verses 44 and 45 say, “All who believed and were together had *all things* in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as they had need.” Oh boy. That is a tough sell -- no pun intended.

What does it mean to be a community of mutual support and care in today's world? Many of us, at least if we are fortunate, have a community like that in our families. If we're really fortunate, our families are functional, but I'm willing to bet that none of them are perfect. If we have ideal of the church as a perfect community, than how can there be a place for me? Seriously. It's like Groucho Marx saying he wouldn't want to be part of any club that would accept him as a member. If our standard is that everyone in the church hold all things in common about theology, doctrine, finances, outreach, music, times of worship, menu for church dinners and furnishings for the worship center, then that is going to be a very small congregation -- like maybe one person.

So we need to consider what we have in common that is bigger than our stuff and even bigger than our opinions about our stuff, maybe even bigger than our convictions about other people and their stuff. In fact, what if church wasn't really about *what we want* at all? Consider this quote from theologian and writer Frederick Beuchner: "Whenever people love each other and are true to each other and take risks for each other, God is with them and they are doing God's will." Loving, being true, and taking risks for each other: what would that church look like?

Here is my conviction: Christ is with us *when* we hold love in common for one another, but Christ is also with us *so that* we can hold love in common for one another. Heaven knows that people are difficult and annoying and living and working in community is hard work. Having things in common means that I have to give up exclusive rights to my opinions and convictions and see how those can be held in the context of a group. Romans 12:9-10 says "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." In my experience, this is possible only when we commit to inviting Christ into our speaking and our listening, and are sincerely open to the work of the Spirit: the same Spirit which inspired the early church.

I want to highlight two phrases, each of which is repeated in the NRSV version of these few verses from Acts. The first phrase is "day by day" it is in verse 46 and again in verse 47. This implies that the things we do in community are not singular, dramatic events, they are

simple things which we practice over and over and which shape us over time. Not only do we have these things together -- in common -- but they are common, ordinary things which we do day after day in the name of Jesus Christ -- praying, fellowship, sharing a meal. These are little things that become the character and identity of our community. These are acts of worship, care, and hospitality which I believe bring the good will of people and add to our number those who are being saved.

The second phrase is “breaking bread.” This is a poetic way of describing sharing meal, but it also has the sacred sense of sharing the bread of communion. With the elements of communion, breaking bread reminds us of Christ’s body which was broken for us. When we break bread as part of a meal with other Christians, we *become* the body of Christ: that community of care and support praising God together.

Even the most common act of eating together is a way to recognize Christ among us. We may even begin to consider how other people are fed, and if we can share Christ’s love through hospitality and sustainability and justice. That’s what a community garden is all about: it doesn’t have to start with common theological convictions, it can start with planting tomatoes together to share with our neighbors.

As our high school graduates are preparing to start a new chapter of their lives -- or at least trying to figure out which book they’re going to use -- as Gillilands return to the Fort Wayne community, and as Elizabeth and Cary retire from their respective employed ministries and consider what new ministries lie ahead, I’d invite us as a family of faith to consider what we have in common. What is so important that we would want to be sure to pass it on to our youth and children? What is such a blessing that we would offer it to those sisters and brothers we have known for decades? What is the best thing we have to share? I believe that the best thing is not a thing; it isn’t even ours - - it is something we have been given and are called to re-gift to our youth and those who are moving on and those who are staying here and those who haven’t found their way here yet. It is the gift of loving each other, being true to each other, and taking risks for one another: that is how we do God’s will, and demonstrate to the people we love

that God is with them. That is gift that Jesus Christ gave to us: love and truth and the risk which cost his life and purchased our salvation.

In case there's any doubt, Walt and Marilee, Elizabeth and Cary, Tia and Chris, let me say this straight out: this is not about you. You're all wonderful, but we're called to share this love even with people who are a lot less likable than you are. We offer blessings because we need to do it as an expression of who we are and of what Christ has done for us. Offering blessing to others is one of the ways we live into community that Christ has called us to be -- even as we acknowledge that we're not there yet. Sharing Christ's blessing doesn't make us perfect, it doesn't even keep us from being sad when friends leave us -- but it does remind us that what we have in common are the best gifts of all.

I'd like to offer a final thought, again from Frederick Beuchner. I had our high school graduates in mind, but it's for each one of us. Let us live as people who have come alive, people through whom the light of Jesus is shining. That is who we need to be, and that is who the world needs us to be. Amen.