

Jubilee and the early church

Acts 2:42-47

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“Brothers, what shall we do?” The gathered crowd has just heard a sermon about the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The listeners are cut to the heart. Their desire is to respond. “Brothers, what shall we do?”

There is a theological answer. Peter’s reply spells out the correct response in no uncertain terms: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” But this theological answer does not exhaust the question. In fact, the answer to the question spills over into the lives of the new believers.

“Brothers, what shall we do?” The community that has experienced atonement through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes the community that devotes itself to the teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer.

“Brothers, what shall we do?” These devoted believers explore what a faithful response to that question will be. In a powerful demonstration of Christian community, they share everything in common. They sell their possessions and goods...so that they can give to anyone as they have a need. They meet together on a daily basis, both in the temple courts and in their homes. In their homes they break bread as they share table fellowship.

What they did was to literally embrace the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus embodied Jubilee, he brought to life in his very life. Jesus announced his ministry in Luke 4 with a clear connection to Jubilee, proclaiming that he was the fulfillment of the year of the Lord’s favor. His life embodied the Jubilee themes of belonging, remembering, welcoming, and atonement. The believers asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?” What shall we do? The short answer is, embrace the ministry of

Jesus Christ. To use a phrase popular a while back, they not only asked, “What would Jesus do?” they did what Jesus did!

BELONGING

Belonging in the Old Testament was related to the land. God gave everyone a piece of the land. They were never supposed to be able to lose it, because God wanted everyone to belong, to have a place to be from. By the days of the New Testament land was no longer a means of belonging. But this does not mean the Jubilee theme of belonging is abandoned. Instead, belonging in the New Testament is based on being incorporated into Jesus Christ. By belonging to Jesus Christ, by confessing your faith in Jesus Christ, you belonged. You entered into a community. The community you entered was tight knit, but it was never closed. Anyone could enter the community.

Peter’s sermon at Pentecost proclaimed, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Acts 2:21) Peter is claiming the promise found in the prophet Joel and also pointing to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of that promise. Likewise, Paul quotes Joel in Romans 10. “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” (Romans 10:12, 13) Because everyone who calls, Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, because everyone who calls belongs...then anyone who calls belongs. The early church was a tight knit community with doors that swung wide open to welcome everyone, especially as we discovered the gospel of Luke, “The least, the last, and the lost.”

REMEMBERING

When we looked at the Sabbath command in the Old Testament, the command so central to the Jubilee, we noted one of the profound blessings that came through faithful remembrance of the Sabbath is that the Sabbath day served to re-member the people, to take lives that were broken and fragments and disjoined and re-member those lives, to pull all the fragmented parts together and bring wholeness. The New

Testament is also concerned with re-membering people whose lives have been torn apart. The central image in the New Testament that signifies being re-membered is the Body of Christ. Instead of being dismembered, cut off from relationship with others, isolated and alienated by dividing walls of hostility, those who are in “in Christ” are re-membered into the Body of Christ. Each member belongs to the other. Each member is necessary and important. At the same time, no member is greater than another. Each member needs the other members. Each member is needed by the other members. Central to the whole image is that Christ is the head of the Body.

The believers were re-membered as they devoted themselves to the teaching, as they met day by day in the temple courts, and as they broke bread in their homes. In all these practices of remembrance the community celebrated and nurtured their relationship with Christ, the head of the Body. Although the Body of Christ metaphor is not expressed in Acts 2 and 4, these two chapters provide a beautiful example of the Body working in harmony. They had everything in common. They shared everything they had. When one part of the Body had a need, that need was met by the community. Acts 4:32 describes the unity of the early church in these words, “All the believers were one in heart and mind.”

WELCOMING

Acts is full of demonstrations of the early church being both a keeper of the vulnerable and loving the neighbor. Within the Acts 2:42-47 passage they have everything in common, selling their possessions and goods and giving as anyone had need.

In Acts 4:32-37 we are told no one claimed any possession as their own, but they shared everything. When it says there was no needy person among them, there is a direct connection to Deuteronomy 15, when God promised that if Israel was obedient to his commands, there would be no needy person among them. It is of great significance that Deuteronomy 15 is the chapter that describes the Sabbath year, the

seventh year when debts were to be forgiven. Sabbath truly was meant to be a time when the people of God saw the misery of others, heard their cries, had concern, and came to help. This help was evident in Acts 4. And the act of Barnabas, in selling his land and giving it to the apostles brings to mind images of Jubilee.

Acts 6 shows the concern of the community for the widows who are overlooked when bread is distributed. This budding conflict leads to the choosing of the 7 who do the work often associated with the diaconate, the Deacons. The church in Antioch (Acts 11) responds to a severe famine by sending help to the brothers living in Judea. When Paul recounts his understanding of the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), he writes that his ministry to the Gentiles was affirmed, with one provision. “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” (Galatians 2:10)

ATONEMENT

From Peter’s inaugural sermon, the early church proclaimed forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. Atonement, as found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, was central to everything in Acts. God’s atoning work in Jesus called for a response, a turning, both believing in the power of the name of Jesus and embracing the life he lived. Asked to give account for the healing of a lame man, Peter proclaims that the healing power was in the name of Jesus, the one who was crucified. He also testifies, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch references the sacrifice of Christ. (Acts 8:32) Peter’s sermon to Cornelius witnesses to the forgiveness of sin found in Jesus. (10:43) In Pisidian Antioch Paul said, “through Jesus Christ the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.” (13:38) He continues that theme at Thessalonica (17:3), as well as before Agrippa. (26:18) Paul shows how Christ was a sacrifice of atonement,

specifically stating that truth in Romans 3:25, and making numerous references to forgiveness and reconciliation throughout his letters.

JUBILEE AND THE EARLY CHURCH

Last week we looked at the connection the life of Jesus had to Jubilee. I tried to make the case that the life of Jesus embodied Jubilee, that it was part of all he said and all he did, how he lived and how he died. Now as Luke continues to tell the story of those followers who formed the first church, we find that as Jesus embodied the Jubilee, by faithfully following Jesus the early church embraced Jubilee. Belonging, welcoming, remembering, and practicing atonement, the early church embraced Jubilee. Acts 2 captures Jubilee in words that are inclusive, words like everyone, all, and together. Acts 2 captures Jubilee in actions that led to a community that was inclusive as we note that whenever there was a need, they gave to address that need, to meet that need, to answer that need. And there was joy. Jubilee is about joy, the joy of being a community where every person is loved by God and every person seeks to love others. As they ate meals together, one of the most significant signs of fellowship, of community, they had glad and sincere hearts.

During an earlier Jubilee sermon, I used the image of a campfire. Campfire does not begin to describe what happens in the early church. This is a bonfire, a raging inferno of Jubilee joy, lighting up the sky and bringing warmth to every heart. The early church was literally on fire, as the Holy Spirit filled them, as the word of God inspired them, as the living Lord Jesus empowered them.

I want to use that image of a raging inferno of Jubilee joy to revisit a story I told right before the Coronavirus hit. Peter preaches a fiery sermon on the day of Pentecost. This little story is also about a fiery sermon.

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the

pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited.

The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The Pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said with a tear running down his cheek, "Thank you so much for your fiery sermon."

Everything about this little tale of a "fiery sermon" fits perfectly with the early church. Why were they on fire? They met together every day. They were devoted to the teaching, the prayer, the fellowship, and breaking bread. They met together for worship. They met in each other's homes. They shared meals together. Those embers were tightly packed together. Each one of their hearts burned brightly with the flame of faith, faith that was in Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

But then something happened which threatened to extinguish the flames. The flames were threatened by internal conflicts and crises. Ananias and Sapphira deceived the church and lied to the Holy Spirit. Conflict arose when certain widows were overlooked in the daily

distribution of food. To their credit the early church met those threats and continued to thrive. But then an external threat came that scattered all those embers that once were so tightly knit, so tightly packed together. Persecution arose. Believers were put to death. The church scattered. Only a remnant remained in Jerusalem. The rest escaped and moved away. How can an ember continue to burn bright when it is far removed from its source of heat, from the fire that sustains and strengthens them? Like the little story I like so much, won't that ember grow cold when it is removed from the fire?

Surprisingly, the embers did not grow cold when the early church scattered, when that raging bonfire of Jubilee joy was dispersed. What happened was those early believers carried the fire within them, in their heart, in their spirit, deep in their soul. And when a man like Philip got to a Samaritan village, he preached a fiery sermon and lo and behold a flame started there, among Samaritans. There was a bit of Jubilee joy as Samaritans found out they belonged in the Body of Christ. Then out in the middle of the desert Philip met a man from Ethiopia. Philip told him the story of the Suffering Servant, the story of Jesus, the Son of God who gave his life as an atoning sacrifice, and right there in the desert, just like with old Mr. Moses, the flame came on. The embers burned bright. It turns out the fire was burning in the hearts of each one of the disciples, and though being together was ideal, was necessary, when they could not all be together, when they dispersed, when they scattered, all it did was light a whole bunch of other fires in villages where Samaritans lived and deserts where an Ethiopian was traveling and towns like Caesarea and places like Asia Minor and expanding to the Roman city of Philippi and then Thessalonica and Berea, to Athens and Corinth, back to Ephesus, and then to Rome. It turns out there was a fire in Rome long before the Emperor Nero, and even when kings and emperors try to extinguish the flame, they have no luck.

I told the story about the fiery sermon right before the Coronavirus, and then on a Friday the 13th of March we heard the crushing news that we could no longer gather for worship. To protect ourselves and to

protect each other, we had to stay home. Remove the ember from the fire and it will grow cold...that's what my little story told us. But all of you were removed from the fire, all of you had to stay home, all of you had to isolate and distance, and despite the isolation, despite the distance, despite the restrictions and despite the limitations, something wonderful and amazing happened. The fire went out here...no worship, no bible study, no fellowship, no coffee...no coffee...the fire went out here, but instead of the fire dying...it just burned brighter in all the places where you faithful followers of Jesus were hunkered down.

Sewing machines began to hum, ovens lit up, phones began to ring, letters were written, bears were sent in the mail, prayers were offered, compassion was extended, frozen meals were delivered, a not so technologically savvy church began airing services online and then livestreaming. Young people got caught up in the effort to pursue racial justice and they started a series that has been truly inspiring. When we heard about needs for food or rental assistance...we did what they did in Acts, we tried our best to give to anyone as there was need...and even when loved ones died we searched and struggled to find ways to show the depths of our love. And then a pastor who was wandering the halls of an empty church realized the fire had not gone out here...for the fire was never about a place...the fire was about the people...the fire was in the hearts of the people, in the spirit of the people, in the soul of the people. And all of a sudden, the joy of Jubilee that early church experienced did not feel so far away...did not feel like a scene from a setting 2,000 years ago. This pastor came to realize in a deep and profound way that when the fire of the Lord burns in the hearts of his children, Jubilee joy cannot help but break out.

So today, in the midst of an ongoing Coronavirus crisis, and in the midst of numerous other threats to the flames of our faith, internal and external threats, real and imagined threats to the flames of our faith, hear again how those first believers were filled with the fire that would not only burn in Jerusalem, but because that fire is in the hearts of believers, that fire would burn in places near and far, even reaching all the way to a

little community called Dunn's Corners, where there is a passionate group of believers who carry a torch, who carry a flame, who carry a fire that has been lit and has been sustained by the love of God that was given in Jesus Christ.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.