

## “Not a Needy Person Among Them”

Acts of the Apostles 4:32-35

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The Biblical description of those earliest Christian communities makes them sound like something that wouldn't fly too well today in many suburban locations. The idea that everybody shared everything they had, for instance, doesn't really square with our notions of private property and the economics of capitalism. The idea of selling your land and bringing the proceeds to the apostles' feet for distribution to the poor is where the Biblical literalists don't like to dwell. Yet, this particular passage comes up in the lectionary just about every year right after Easter. So, we have to take a look and see what wisdom is offered here for the western church in the modern age.

I read this text this week and it took me back to the month of June in 1987 when I spent three weeks in St. Louis at Eden Theological School studying Stewardship and Evangelism. A classmate from Denver knew about the municipal opera in one of St. Louis' local parks. He urged me to go with him to one of the summer productions. We found out there is one section way in the back of this outdoor amphitheater, roped off from all the other sections, where there is free seating on a first-come, first-served basis. We needed a diversion from Stewardship and Evangelism, so we headed to the city park hours before curtain time, with simple brown bag suppers. Neither one of us had much money for opera tickets or gourmet meals, so we packed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a piece of fruit, maybe something sweet, a package of M&M's.

Very soon after our arrival, the free seat section filled up! And out came the picnic baskets, checkered cloths, and ice chests. Someone called out needing a bottle opener; a guy in row A had one! Someone spreading mustard on corned beef shouted out an offer of Grey Poupon! Soon, I was holding a cold diet soda and a bag of bar-b-que potato chips! My friend was eating liver pate on a Ritz cracker. One thing led to another. The sharing among total strangers left no one hungry; everyone was satisfied in a way we could not have anticipated! My friend and I felt we had just participated in the Feeding of the Five Thousand!

We had gone there to escape our academic concentration on Stewardship and Evangelism; but we ended up enjoying a first-hand experience of both! As my clunky, unappetizing sandwich became a feast, I had this epiphany! So, THIS is what stewardship is all about...the sharing of resources, the joyful sharing of the resources God has made available to us, such that not one person is left needing anything! It was the shift in thinking from it being MY sandwich to it being OUR meal that made all the difference!

And then, returning to the Eden campus, we had a story of good news to share with our summer school community. That's the evangelism part, the telling what good thing God is doing in our lives.

As I read this passage from the Acts of the Apostles, what I see is those two themes: Stewardship and Evangelism. I see that we are challenged by this passage to figure out how God is calling us to share our resources today, such that no one is left in need; and how we can find a vocabulary for telling what good things God is doing in our lives.

We heard Ollie Jones make an announcement two weeks ago about a young woman who is about to give birth to her first child. Our Covenant to Care social worker tipped us off. She has almost nothing to equip her apartment or to nurture her baby. So, we have decided to have a mother/baby shower for this woman whose name we may never know, but whose circumstances are all too familiar. I see from the poster in the connector area that Gail and Betty have already indicated resources they are willing to share. No doubt others will add their names. Perhaps, one day, this young mom will find herself telling a neighbor what good thing God is doing in her life. We'll be the stewards; she'll be the evangelist.

Last Saturday morning, I met the Haitian Connection! Several of these compassionate people stopped in to pick up the mountain of suitcases and hand lotion and tooth paste and other personal hygiene items that our youth had solicited and gathered. One of these women from Haiti marched right up to me, shook my hand, introduced herself, and then said with an enormous smile, "God is good!" It was clear to her and it became clear to me that this was no secular transaction; this sharing of soap and shampoo was one of the mighty deeds of God. It felt like a living out of that scene described in the Acts of the Apostles.

One of those invited to Sam and Amy's wedding in Tucson last month was a woman named Lorie Steinhauer. In 1976, Lorie stood up as Sam's sponsor on the occasion of his baptism into the Christian Faith. She lives in Custer, South Dakota, in the Black Hills, with her husband and children. Her son, Josh, is a Downs Syndrome child. He has reached the junior high school age and he was hoping to be chosen as the basketball student manager. This was his wildest dream. The coach of that team heard about Josh's passion for basketball and suggested he not be the manager but actually play on the team!

For a couple of minutes in every quarter of every game, winning takes a back seat to what his teammates describe as a higher value. They have a special in-bounds play. Three teammates form a barrier, the in-bounder passes the ball to Josh, and Josh shoots. So far he hasn't scored. But he has had a dream in which he does score and his teammates lift him onto their shoulders and carry him off the court! A reporter for their local newspaper, The Custer County Chronicle, writes,

“This good news story couldn't happen without the perfect combination of athletes, coaches, and parents. In this day and age when, even at young levels of basketball, winning is the only thing that matters, what is taking place on the Wildcat eighth grade team wouldn't, and probably couldn't, happen in most places.”

Sam's Godmother just happens to believe that all things are possible. And when those eighth grade boys decided to share the joy of basketball with one who might never master the art of dribbling, they were, perhaps unwittingly, modeling what it means to be the church. In that town, on that gym floor, there is not a needy person among them!

I share this story with you because it broadens our thinking about what it means to share the resources we've been given. We may not choose to sell a piece of land and bring the proceeds to the apostles' feet, but we can find ways to live into the spirit of the stewardship of the early church. And whenever that happens, there is a story to tell, a story of what good things God is doing in our midst. These two themes, Stewardship and Evangelism, were central to building up the church after that first Easter morning. In my view, they are still the keys to building up the community of faith. That is what I wanted to share with you all this morning, in the greatest of hope! Amen!

