



The Promised Day

Rev. Chandler Stokes – Westminster Presbyterian Church

On Acts 2:43-47 for Pentecost

Pentecost & Heritage Sunday

May 23, 2010

Scripture Introduction: Today is the fourth and final in our Series on Mission. And today we dedicate the Peggy Hertel Mission Legacy... This second mile giving has been a way for us beyond our first mile pledged dollars this year to raise the final \$38,000 to complete our planned mission budget, and to build a Habitat House and maybe do a little more.

In this series we have been reminded of why we are in mission. If we look to the developing world, we see 30,000 children who die each day from extreme poverty. In this series we have been reminded of those whom we are sent to serve and how daunting sometimes the call is.

In this series we have read John's gospel, Acts and Revelation to find theological and spiritual resources for our calling to be a mission church.

We have learned that, in spite of many appearances to the contrary, the Promised Day is sure. That day is promised by the One Who is faithful. It is as sure as Dr. King's declaration that we will get to the Promised Land, as sure as Desmond Tutu's declaration that love is stronger than hate, as sure as John's declaration that God will wipe away every tear. The Promised Day is sure. It is promised by the One Who is faithful.

Today we ask, "What does that Promised Day look like and feel like?" On Pentecost it must have felt so real. So today we return to Acts. We will pick up the story in Acts 2 immediately following the dramatic events of Pentecost.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day 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, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Did you hear that? After all the mysterious hoopla of Pentecost, the miraculous speaking in tongues and hearing in their own language—after all of that drama, this is how they lived out the gift of the Holy Spirit day by day. This is how they lived out the Spirit of the resurrected Christ day by day:

[They] *had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.* This is the Pentecost Church Monday through Saturday.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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According to Luke this is the Church imbued with the Holy Spirit. *They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds . . . as any had need.*

The first time that I clearly remember reading this text was in seminary, and I was amazed. It is an amazing text. At that time I said, “Wow! This sounds more than a little like “from each according to their ability” and “to each according to their need.” That’s Karl Marx—the gospel according to Marx? This sounds like communism! Yikes! The Pentecost Church looks like the apostles are commies!

Clearly, this experience of the church was long before either communism or capitalism was developed as an economic theory—many centuries before. It is not obvious at all that Luke is trying to describe a systemic approach to the economy. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says, “Luke wants to show the sharing of possessions as a spontaneous outgrowth of the Spirit, rather than as an institution.”¹

A spontaneous outgrowth of the Spirit it is—the Spirit first confers the gift of speaking and hearing and then, sharing possessions, which Luke also describes as the day to day life of the community. That’s certain. The tenses of the verbs in this passage communicate regular, repeated activities. Their giving might be a spontaneous outgrowth of the Spirit, but it was an habitual outgrowth of the Spirit. This is what they did and how they did it: *They would sell their possessions and . . . distribute . . . as any had need.* There may be no systematic program for economic life here, but there is a challenge to us nonetheless. *Day by day [they gave] as any had need.* This is the Church in the Spirit.

I spent a year on a fellowship in Scotland after graduating from seminary. This was during the Cold War. The Berlin Wall was still up, still cursing the world. And there were real live communists on the other side of that wall. Though we used to forget this, even though the Church was suppressed in the Eastern Block, it was nevertheless still alive back “behind the curtain.” There were people of all sorts of faiths—Christians and Muslims. Most were Orthodox, like the Russians, but many were Catholic, like the Poles. East Germany was the only predominantly Protestant nation behind the Iron Curtain. The East Germans were mostly Lutherans. That provided a unique lens through which to view communism and to view our world in the west.

When I was on my fellowship at New College in Edinburgh, one of the great opportunities in being there was to have more contact with people from behind the Iron Curtain. One such opportunity was to hear the head of the church in East Germany at the time. In a lecture at New College he said, “Every time I come to the west, I am asked by serious and well-meaning church people, ‘How are you able to be a Christian in a communist society, with so many pressures and

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Acts*, Sacra Pagina series volume 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1992, p. 59.

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impositions from the state?’ My usual response,” he said, “is to ask, ‘How are you able to be a Christian in a capitalist society—with constant pressure to self-centered consumption, self-gratifying indulgence, and individualist self-serving?’” Good question...

I give you a hard time about the weather here, but you do know what Mark Twain said, right? He said, “The coldest winter I ever spent was one summer in San Francisco.” They get some seriously bitter and drippy fog and wind. And the weather in Berkeley, especially during the summer, is greyer and foggier than San Francisco. So, they say that the only reason there are any Marxists left in the entire world is because of the lousy weather in Berkeley, and they all live there. Now, the reason we think grey weather creates Marxists and communists is because we imagine the ethic of “from everyone’s ability to everyone’s need” as a dour, joyless, unimaginative oppression, which it has often been known to be. And when we imagine “to everyone’s need,” in our mind’s eye, we see a row of heavily coated Soviet Cossacks stomping heavily in their boots through the snow, having never worn any color other than black or grey as proof of their joyless existence, and we imagine their watching a huge demonstration of military might under grey stormy skies—or moping somewhere in Berkeley.

Dr. Johnson said, “Luke wants to show the sharing of possessions as a spontaneous outgrowth of the Spirit, rather than as an institution.” But he’s saying something more. When Luke says, [They] *had all things in common; they would sell their possessions . . . and distribute the proceeds . . . , as any had need*, he does not see dour communist juntas of depressed, totalitarian legalism, exploiting people for the Party. He says instead, [They] *distributed the proceeds . . . as any had need, and day by day . . . they broke bread . . . and ate . . . with glad and generous hearts*.

Clearly this is not oppressive, dour Soviet communism. It is gladsome and generous and joyous giving to all, as any has need—day by day.

There may be a system that works in this world. There may be a system that will fix all this sorrow and suffering in the world. There might be systemic solutions, because surely there are systemic problems. There are systemic inducements to oppression or to greed or to violence or to self-centeredness, and such systemic evil is addressed by the gospel. That is the Biblical paradigm—to address failures of systems as well as individuals. Marxism wedded to totalitarianism, without freedom or private property fails. And capitalism without a heart, without compassion and without generosity and accountability is a scourge. And the global conflict between capitalism and communism, between nations and corporations and systems has left a world where 30,000 children die each day from extreme poverty. If there is a system that will not lead us to such evil, we have not found it, or we haven’t been able to make it work yet.

And Luke’s world in the first century was at least as harsh, at least as full of suffering.

He is not unmindful of the world’s suffering. And he’s talking about the way the Spirit lives in that context. He talking about the way the Spirit finds expression in the church no matter the system in which it exists. He says: The Pentecost Church, the Church in the Spirit, the Church

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ruled by Resurrection power looks like this: a glad and generous and joyous giving to all, as any has need.

Pentecost follows Easter. This is our Eastertide series on mission. If in Christ's resurrection at Easter, we no longer fear death, we do not fear giving our possessions in the Spirit of Pentecost. If we no longer fear death, glad and generous hearts follow as surely as Pentecost follows Easter. If we no longer fear death, then there is hope and a way to live toward a world transformed by loving generosity.

Luke describes a resurrection church in the dawn of Pentecost selling their possessions and giving to those in need with glad and generous hearts. The Promised Day is sure. God has defeated death, but what does it feel like to live in that Spirit holding things in common with glad and generous hearts?

Let me tell you the story of two shoes.

In the film, *The Game*, the main character is Nicholas Van Orten. He is, at the start of this movie, perhaps the single most unhappy and isolated rich man ever shown on film. He is a devoted capitalist, a business man, orderly, driven, successful: all business and no life. As a birthday present (What do you give to the man who truly has everything?), Nicholas' younger brother gives him the gift of a game that interrupts his orderly world. His little brother's hope is that in the end through all the quite frightening disruption and change the game brings, his big brother will have a life, more than gain and more than acquisition. There is one scene near the beginning of the movie that is on point here.

As Nicholas' life begins to be disrupted, he finds himself running frantically down an alley with a woman, whom he has barely met, trying to escape from the police incomprehensibly. The police send a dog down the alley after them. The two scurry up a chain link fence, with the dog howling at their heels; Nicholas is behind and a bit slower. The dog chomps onto his foot and holds him back from getting all the way up the fence and away. Finally, Nicholas wrenches his foot free, but the dog runs off with his shoe. As he pulls himself up onto a fire escape, disgusted about losing his shoe, he snorts, "There goes a thousand dollars!" His female companion reacts, somewhat stunned, "Your shoes cost a thousand dollars?" "That one did," he says. Then, they hobble off, Nicholas in his one shoe.

We have a friend, actually named Peggy, who spent many years working in northern India as a teacher and missionary. Of course you know the profound economic need which suffocates much of that part of the world. Our friend, Peggy, was part of a fairly small and close-knit group of foreign workers, teachers, and missionaries, all of whom worked in India for some extended time. India was where many of them raised their children. Peggy told us a story about the son of one of her close friends in this group of educators. This young man had spent his formative years growing up in India. This is where he was formed in this context of missionaries and servants of the church. After college in the United States, he went back to India for a visit.

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Near the end of his tour, as he was preparing to return to the States, he found himself frantically trying to catch the last train of the day, which would get him to his destination on the eastern seaboard and to his flight. He had his ticket and few belongings in hand and was running at full speed to catch the train. He literally had to jump onto the departing train just at the front of the last car. But when he jumped, he lost one of his shoes. Without a moment's hesitation, the young man ran through the last car of the train until he reached the back and in one motion flung his second shoe after the first.

One shoe is not much good to anyone... , but two shoes? Two shoes that someone might find together?

What does that promised day feel like? It's something like flinging our second shoe without hesitation. It's nothing like dour, Soviet communism nor is it anything like the lonely, desperate, and extravagant capitalist life of Nicholas Van Orten.

⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and . . . distribute the proceeds . . . as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together . . . they broke bread . . . and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God . . .

That young man running through the train threw his shoe, without hesitation, as if he had learned day by day to be... a blessing, of some good to someone, to live in the Spirit of Pentecost.

And after this tantalizing picture of the church gladly sharing by habit and giving to those in need, Luke adds, "*praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*"

I guess glad and generous hearts are kind of attractive. What could be more attractive than running to the end of the train and flinging that second shoe? Could the giving in our second mile here have the same élan, the same charisma, the same lure and winsome grace of the gospel?

The Pentecost Church shows the joyous gifts of the Spirit; that Church witnesses to the Promised Day; it lives out the character of the Promised Day, day by day. *Day by day, they broke bread and ate their food and threw their second shoes with glad and generous hearts, they gave that second mile gift, praising God and . . . day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

It must be Pentecost. Mindful of all the witnesses, like Peggy Hertel, who have formed us in this missionary context, this mission church, we give our second mile gift today. And mindful of the fifty year members' legacy of faithfulness, we receive sixteen new members to our fellowship as the Lord adds to our number this day. It must be Pentecost.

Let all of God's people say, "Amen."

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