

Ben Lattimer
Stone Church of the Brethren
Sermon
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On Acts 2
Utopia

Sermon

It's always a little bit dangerous, talking history in a room that includes esteemed professors of history. This is the way I heard it - it may not be exactly right. But as Cindy says - never let the truth get in the way of a good story. :-)

As I understand it the founders of American democracy were deeply influenced by a vision of the Roman Republic. They were drawn to that society and its values of self-determination and equality of opportunity. Granted - that vision of equality came with blind spots. "Equality" and "self-determination" were conspicuously lacking for women and persons of color in the founders' society. Nevertheless, the idea of the Roman democracy inspired the founders - it was a model on which to build a society upon the ideas of liberty, equality, and justice.

Only, here's the thing... As I understand it - that utopian vision of Roman society on which the founders relied, never actually existed - or at least not for long....

Back to the Scripture / Series

After the arrival of the Spirit and Peter's proclamation - the crowds asked, "What should we do?"

The crowd is moved. Maybe they sense the Spirit at work... I can imagine the disciples looking around... What should they do? "Uh... Jesus usually answered that one..." They are figuring it out.

Peter says, "Change your hearts and lives..." It's not enough to *hear* the good news. Our lives are supposed to look different. "Repent and be baptized. The promise is for you - it's for your children, and for everyone..." And, so the story goes, on that day the community of the faithful grew by about 3000 people.

So what happens next? The church family is growing. What do they do? They devoted themselves to the disciples' teaching. Those who were with Jesus begin to pass on what they have learned.

As Daniel Clendenin puts it, the disciples came to a realization. "After their initial pattern of desertion, doubt, despair, confusion and enough raw fear to hide behind locked doors, and then their eyewitness encounters with the risen Christ, the first Jesus followers began to develop a growing awareness of the enormity of what had happened. They began to unpack and query just what it meant to live and think in a specifically, intentionally "Christian" manner. Their beginning (and ending) point was nothing short of preposterous—that Jesus

had risen from the dead. The cataclysmic and comprehensive implications of that simple, three-word confession—"Christ is risen!"—began to dawn on them, imposing itself upon them, making claims upon them, and profoundly reordering everything about their lives."

They began to do life together. It says they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching - *and* to the community, sharing meals and prayers. They shared whatever they had so that no one was in need. They shared life together - not just their resources. They did life together, as a family.

And the community continues to grow. Day by day, the *Lord* added to their numbers. Not because of their fancy marketing campaign, or a great notice in the Daily News - but because of the manner of their living.

This is the vision of the early church. It's Utopian - and as we'll see in just a couple of chapters, the reality wasn't always as beautiful as the dream. This utopian vision may have never actually existed - or at least not for long....

But it mattered...

Acts 2 as an Aspirational Vision for the Early Brethren... (Taking it seriously)

After Alexander Mack and the early Brethren were baptized more than 300 years ago - they set about creating a community. They looked to the scriptures for a model on which to build their life and found this vision of the early early church.

They took it seriously. Alexander was wealthy. His family owned a mill. But he gave his wealth away - they looked after each other - any as they had need. People thought they were crazy. Some scoffed and said - those Brethren will fall apart the day after Brother Mack's money runs out...

But of course they didn't. We're still here. They became known - not for their creeds or their doctrine, but for the manner of their living. And the Lord added to their number those who were being saved...

Conclusion - an Aspirational Vision for US... (Taking it seriously)

I'll be honest. This passage makes me uncomfortable. It's one of those passages - and there are a number of them - that seems to invite me to give away all that I have - sharing it... And I struggle with that... My faith may not be as great as Brother Mack and those early Brethren. And I might be missing out.

This passage is a lot harder for those of us who are comfortable - with plenty to eat, a warm home, and a reliable car. Maybe a bit saved away in our 401k's...

Matt Skinner says that "the idea of community simultaneously attracts and repels most of us. We long for the life-affirming benefits that community can bestow, but we resist the

demands that community makes. No wonder that we find it difficult to know what to do with passages such as this one.”

We say it's impossible. But there are many who've done it. The early Brethren, St. Francis, these apostles - loads more... And they changed the world. And it's not just people you've heard of. The Bruderhof community lives like this - the Amish too. I think even Anna Lisa - who pastored here before us grew up in a smaller intentional community that was something like this. Cindy's life in BVS looked a lot like this too...

What happens if we take this story seriously? Whether it actually happened or not - whether it lasted all that long or not - what happens if we aspire to this vision of community. Maybe we don't give away everything we own. PLEASE - I'm NOT asking you to bring your money and lay it at the pastors' feet! 😊

Still maybe this vision of community inspires us to do *something*. Chewing on this story, wrestling with it - having it rattling around inside of us - might just inspire us to keep on doing life together - to devote ourselves to this community. Maybe it looks like sharing a meal with someone around you. Maybe it looks like all the folks that showed up at the Hoslers last week to help them salvage what they could after the fire. Maybe it looks like the folks that used to sit alongside us during the service, to help with our kids during worship. Maybe it *does* mean sharing our abundance with others in need.

I don't know! “It is a bold thing to do,” writes Matt Skinner again. “For the victorious assertions of the resurrection are not easily squared with the despair and violence that characterize human experience. This Sunday's reading describes a state of affairs that looks extremely attractive, yet utterly unrealistic or beyond our reach. Its hopeful vision of justice and service can look more like pie in the sky if we are not honest about the struggles that are part of our efforts to proclaim and embody the gospel in our living. But what better time than Easter to proclaim what God is capable of bringing into being?”

If we commit to this community - if we commit to each other - to *invest* in each other we will be a community that looks different than the world around us. And in so doing, we might just begin to “work out our own salvation” - and be a part of God's saving work in the world around us...

Amen.