

“With Glad and Generous Hearts”

Acts 2: 42 – 47

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2017

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Filled with glad and generous hearts! And God added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Glad and generous hearts...glad and generous hearts....

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, praising God and having the goodwill of all of the people. Filled with glad and generous hearts perhaps because they had heard the resurrection story; glad and generous hearts perhaps because they had felt that resurrection power within their own collective life; a power that moved them from a small band of frightened people to a people of glad and generous hearts; they not only heard the message but embodied the message, stepping out as the Easter people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Did you hear that? A little ‘church growth’ strategy here!)

It seems a little too good to be true, doesn’t it? This scripture passage in the book of Acts, it has the subtitle: “Life Among the Believers”. Oh how good and wonderful it all was back then, sharing possessions, taking care of each other, being united! Those were the days!

Do you remember that theme song from the 1970s sitcom “All in the Family”? Archie and Edith sat at the piano as the show began, singing “Boy the way Glenn Miller played. Songs that made the hit parade. Guys like us we had it made...those were the days.”

Come on, let’s admit it, we all sing that same theme song every now and then. *I remember when we picked up the phone and actually talked using words – those were the days! We thought nothing about walking a mile to school or playing down the street outside until dusk – those were the days! And, of course, ‘Sunday meant going to church, going to Sunday school, the pews were full and kids sat quietly with hands folded on their laps – those were the days!*

It’s a theme song for most of us at one time or another. As we look back we do so very often with rose colored glasses, remembering the good and forgetting the not

so good. Or not wanting to see the not so good that other races or cultures were living while we were living our lives. It's human nature. And today, we see that it's even in scripture!

From the book of Acts, chapter 2: “ All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and at their food with glad and generous hearts, 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!”

(Deep sigh). Almost as soothing as Psalm 23!

Based on other scriptures in Acts, as we read this, as we listen to the words, we know that there's some “those were the days” thinking going on. From those other scriptures, we know that all was not perfect. We know that the early church was not a utopia. We know that people owned private property – some had more, some had less. We know that there was hardship and persecution, disagreements, division. When we read this passage in Acts, chapter 2 and in chapter 4 that is similar, it's important to remember that the writer was looking back with nostalgia: from Merriam Webster dictionary - a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition. The writers were looking back with nostalgia and it's important to remember that because, well, if we don't then we may likely ask ourselves “How can we ever measure up?” and knowing that we can't, we may not even try.

So, it's important to understand this text in a kind of ‘those were the days’ framework. That said, let's not dismiss the power of the story – which is also the power of our story, which is resurrection power!

I can't explain it. There were church squabbles, oh we know them so very well; this person really had a hard time with this other person in the congregation, there were building temple issues; needed repainting, who was going to take care of securing it after each temple worship, the 20% doing 80% of the work most likely in place at times back then as well. That person insulted another, those children are too noisy, oh there were church squabbles going on! But somehow and some unexplainable way, that small group of believers experienced the risen Christ in their midst! They were at one point filled with sadness, despair, locked away in fear but then their hearts were filled with his words and his presence and all of a sudden what was supposed to be the end was a beginning, what was supposed to be death was new life – they became not the defeated people but the resurrection

people and that power stayed with them and brought them together even more. No, they didn't become the perfect church with no flaws, but they did become a small group of folks who took the good news out into the world, this good news that filled them with glad and generous hearts, and filled others as well.

Today's scripture in Acts about the ministry of the church is an Easter scripture because it comes out of the Easter event; as one author put it, 'the power of the resurrection is the great power behind the ministry and mission of the community – it's what birthed the church and defined it's mission and it's what births the church and defines its mission today.

Defined it's mission and defines its mission today. What IS its mission? May I suggest that it's right there in our scripture; the church's mission is, was and always has been about saving people.

Now, stay with me those of you from a more conservative tradition, don't be walking toward the door just yet. When I say that the church's mission is about saving people, I'm not referring to the church picking and choosing according to their doctrine who is going to heaven and who isn't. I'm not referring to a heavenly saving. I'm referring to a more earthly saving.

I bet you know what I mean. Earthly saving:

He served his time in jail for the crime he committed. When he was released, he couldn't get a job. He was shunned by society. Maybe he should just go back to his old life of crime, wasn't anything else for him. But then he saw this small church down the street and went in. They welcomed him in, they were filled with the Easter message that God can redeem anything and anybody, they called him a child of God and he believed in himself again...they saved him.

The young girl grew up in a church that told her she was an abomination; that to love as she loved was not acceptable in God's eyes. She carried this message with her, did not think highly of herself, was even suicidal at times. But then she heard this message from a church, an Easter message that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ and she began to believe that, yes, God did love her! She was saved!

A successful businessman spent all of his life making money hand over fist, oftentimes walking over competitors, getting rid of anyone who stood in his way. He had everything, or so he thought. Then one day he met a group of people who

were filled with Easter spirit; sharing, taking care of each other and he realized he didn't have what they had; glad and generous hearts. And so he began to try to live more like they did and soon, well, soon he was saved from his ego and greed that had been consuming him.

People who are frustrated and worried and hopeless because the way things are going right now seem anything but compassionate, the richer are getting richer and you know the rest; intolerance and hate and the attitude of just taking care of our own instead of caring about each other seem to be growing. But then the Easter message is spoken, that the worst thing is never the last thing, that Empire nailed Jesus to a cross but love won over Empire...and those people, me being one of them, were saved from their hopelessness and despair.

The Easter message, that nothing, not even death can separate us from the love of God; that the worst thing is never the last thing; that love broke the cross....is a message that saves, that saves us from a life of hopelessness and despair, from our own egos and selfish ways, from addictions, from harmful labels put on by others...the faith we carry that the way of Jesus did not die that day but lives on, oh that message saves.

And it's not just the message, we know that. It's not just words but it's how those words shape our lives; give us glad and generous hearts. And it's about how our experiences in life shape our words and our faith. How can one having experienced God's grace, having experienced new life, how can one NOT have a glad and generous heart?

And those early believers, oh not perfect, but filled with resurrection Spirit, oh those outside could see it. And they wanted to be a part of it.

We are the Easter people celebrating the good news of God's unconditional love. And when we really own that message then we become like those first believers. Not perfect for they weren't perfect, but having glad and generous hearts.

May it be so.