

The New Community: A New Identity

Acts 4: 32-35 1 John 1:1—2:2

Our journey through the next five weeks of the Easter season leading up to Pentecost has the faithful considering what it means to be a follower of Jesus in light of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Our lectionary readings during this period draw from the Book of Acts rather than a selection from the Hebrew scriptures of the Christian Old Testament.

The Book of Acts is a unique written witness to what we know of the earliest days of the Jesus movement post-resurrection. Although written at a time several generations removed from the events described, no other source sheds light on the earliest community and its struggle with its identity.

Our next earliest written witness comes from the letters of Paul, and his insights pertain mostly to his missionary journeys and the faith communities that he is involved with around the Mediterranean. We have no real record about 1st century activities that were certainly occurring in other places, like in Alexandria, Cyprus, Syria, Arabia, Persia, all places where we know that Jesus followers established communities at an early date.

As we engage this earliest time frame, we need to know that there was no road map for what to do next. We hear Jesus's exhortations which essentially boil down to 'follow me where I have gone, and do what I have been doing.' It's hardly a blue print for action, so the disciples have some figuring to do.

Let's also remember that these weren't Christians *per se*. They haven't really been invented yet. These were Jews for the most part – Jews and some God-fearers (Gentiles who hung out with the Jews) – who were part of what seemed to be a Jewish reform movement started by a prophetic and messianic figure named Jesus of Nazareth. His movement was different from the John the Baptist's Jewish reform movement, but there had been a close affiliation by Jesus with the Baptist's community. If that seems a little murky and confusing, don't concern yourself: it **is** murky and confusing.

All of this is to say that very little of what we experience as "the church" today was relevant to these folks trying to figure out the way forward in the first several generations after Jesus. Sweeping away our preconceptions and suppositions is essential. The bottom line is that these were still basically Jews, who saw themselves as Jews, and who had a distinctive path as Jews advanced by the Messiah Jesus. Forming a new identity as a new community would go hand-in-hand.

Today's reading from Acts 4 is like a narrator's note about community life, and the Book of Acts has several such interesting nuggets sprinkled in the first 8 chapters.

It seems that the earliest church in Jerusalem had a community of shared goods, or shared wealth and property. Their moral imagination seemed to have embraced this call of Jesus to minister sacrificially to the poor, weak, and vulnerable. We even have the rather amusing story of Ananias and Sapphira, the couple who lied about a piece of property, and died on the spot for their greed in withholding their wealth from the community.

Interestingly, we have no record of this kind of attention to personal wealth being shared in community anywhere else; only in Jerusalem, only in Acts. Scholars like to call this communal sharing a “failed experiment” since there’s no evidence of it being replicated, at least within the New Testament and early Christian literature. However, to call it a “failed experiment” has history casting its judgment on the effort and finding it to be an error. I think that’s quite hasty and uncalled for.

We hear in Paul’s letters, particularly in Corinthians, about his collection for “the poor in Jerusalem.” Again, many scholars assume that it is a collection like we might have for the poor and needy in our community. But then, it begs the question about the poor in Corinth, or Ephesus, or Thessalonica, doesn’t it? Don’t all of those cities surely have the poor among them? Why not collect for their own neighbors? Why send money to a church in a city they’ve never been to, to people they’ve never met, to meet a need that they have in their own community? Some scholars admit that “the poor in Jerusalem” referred to by Paul in fact refers to this community of shared goods, to the faithful who stepped up their faith commitment to eliminate their wealth so that they could minister to each other, and give witness to their new life in Christ, forming their seemingly unique version of community faithful to the model and mode of Jesus, indeed a representation of the Kingdom of God that Jesus had talked about so often.

Finally, there is that peculiar line in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 which begins: *Blessed are the poor **in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* In Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, there is a very clear contrast between the poor who receive “blessings” and the wealthy who receive “woes.” Not so with Matthew who tends to be interested in the organizational life and tradition of the early faith communities. Could it be that Matthew’s ‘the poor **in spirit**’ reflects an awareness of the special spiritual commitment of the community of shared goods in Jerusalem? *For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

While it’s hardly a comprehensive statement about the nature of the first community of believers, it seems to me that they have taken to heart the teaching of Jesus. That teaching would include the belief that God has provided and God will provide. On the first point, that God has created a good creation with abundance for all, but human sinfulness has managed to corrupt God’s many blessings with greed, covetousness, and indifference to others in God’s human family, indifference to sisters and brothers. On the second point, that God will continue to provide abundance for the mission of faithful servants who follow Jesus’ path of humble service and even sacrifice to bring healing and new life to others. We may get hung up on the communistic aspect of Acts 4 with a reactionary rejection because we don’t have that model in our lives, but the real message comes from the teaching of Jesus that was being advanced by the

disciples-now-apostles. It seems intended as a living example of the Kingdom in the world, the kind of Kingdom that Jesus spoke of.

We have our favorite sins, and we can recite them like a moral code. Here's one that rarely makes the list. Wealth. When was the last time you heard sin *and* wealth mentioned in the same breath? Yet we know how harshly all of scripture regards wealth. Jesus follows his prophetic ancestors on wealth.

Jesus made it clear that the faithful disciple was to esteem and respect and minister to the poor. It was the least of society who were destined for the Kingdom. The wealthy and powerful who ate well, dressed nicely, lived in nice comfy homes, owned property and assets, and had surplus funds were invariably on the negative end of every story. Strangely, wealth is not considered "sinful" in today's world of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and suffering, neither inside the church nor, of course, outside the church. Are people reading the same Bible? Or is the scope of our moral imagination tragically dark on this topic, and the scope of our faith imagination equally shriveled, having been eclipsed and re-defined by custom and culture?

Turning to our other text, the 1st Letter of John to the churches focuses on fellowship and the question of sinfulness for those within the fellowship. Spoiler alert: there is no mention of wealth.

Fellowship is repeated four times in the first chapter. Fellowship is one of those things that we tend to take for granted in the church. We're pretty sure it involves food, like today's Pot Luck, and talking, like we do a lot of before and after the worship service, *and* during a Pot Luck. We know that fellowship is important, but we may not appreciate how important it is. Is it important like communion? Is it important like a sermon? Is it important like coming out on a work day? Is it important like giving regularly to support the church, even when you're not able to attend? What kind of important is it? In fact, fellowship is central to the new body of Christ.

The 1st Letter of John dates from the late 1st century, and bears a number of affinities to the language of the Gospel of John, suggesting that 1st John may also have come from that community. By now, Jesus followers are known as Christians and have mostly moved away from their Jewish roots and become independent of synagogue and Torah-Law. However, that heritage is not that distant in its past. They're still sorting things out.

The writer of 1st John affirms right in the opening paragraph asserts authority, saying: *We declare to you what was **from the beginning**, what **we** have heard, what **we** have seen with our eyes, what **we** have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.* The recipients of 1st John have had no direct contact with anyone who actually knew Jesus, and despite the authoritative tone, that's likely the case for the writer of 1st John, too.

As we move into the arguments, we find a question about sin and how it should be dealt with by the believers' community. A common way of understanding this would be

to take the answer provided and flip it back into some likely semblance of the originating question. For example, verse 8 says, *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* This may be answering the question of whether or not the community of new life has sin or not. It could be that a teacher has told them that they have been made new in Jesus Christ, and they no longer sin. This can easily be problematic. It echoes the libertine tendencies among the Corinthians for Paul. Libertines believe their new identity in Christ means that they can do *anything* they want and it won't be considered sin. Paul corrects this corrupt notion, urging the casting out of such unrepentant sinners from the fellowship. It seems like 1st John is addressing a similar corruption.

The corrective appears in verses 9 and 10 say: *If we **confess** our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*** Again, it seems like the question concerns acknowledgement that, despite the new life in Christ, the believer is **not** made perfect, and does **still** sin. However, Christ is the advocate for the confessing sinner. To say, 'we have not sinned' is a lie, and Christ's word of life is not in us.

In this lesson from 1st John, we see how the community of the faithful, the fellowship of the light, forms the effective witness of the body of Christ. The fellowship of the light is to stand in stark contrast to the darkness, opposite the way that is **not** of Christ, **not** of love, grace, justice, or peace.

As one commentator reminded me, truth and identity for the faithful are not yet established by creeds or councils, by orthodox doctrines, explicit theologies, and defined principles. At this point, truth and identity reside largely in the fellowship, and the experience of that fellowship. This fellowship refers to what is spiritual among God, Son, and Spirit, and then this fellowship is also truly of this world in following the Son of Man in the Spirit among faithful believers.

As we move through this Easter season, we'll continue to look for insights that should awaken us, recognizing the profoundly different path of Jesus and the struggles among the faithful in sorting out their mission and their own identity as followers and as apostles of Jesus good news for all. May we find the journey encouraging and challenging as our eyes are opened to understanding the way of the Lord for us to follow.