

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2011
(RCL, Year B) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common. Acts 2:42-44

In today's first reading, we hear in *The Acts of the Apostles* a verse repeated in question-and-answer form in our Baptismal Covenant. "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship," we're asked, "in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" The question comes each time someone is baptized into Christ's Body, the Church. And each time we answer, as we renew our own Baptismal Vows, "I will, with God's help." It's a central part of the ritual of Baptism – one of the two great sacraments given by Christ to his Church. I wonder, though, if we really think about what we're saying, especially in light of what precedes and follows this particular verse.

We don't hear today what precedes it, but you'll not be surprised that it's a baptism – a BIG one, in fact – where 3,000 people moved by Peter's preaching are baptized "What should we do?" they ask the Apostle after hearing his Spirit-filled sermon on Pentecost; and Peter says, "Repent, and be baptized." They oblige, and so what follows in today reading is their response to baptism as they struggle to become the Church. "Become an Easter community," Peter has urged, striving to turn the one-time event of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection into Christ's *ongoing* life in the world. Be Christ for others, for if Easter is a one-time-only event, then it is no event at all, which can be hard to grasp for people who may have already moved on.

People like us, for instance, who mutter distractedly, "Easter? Wasn't that *week's* ago?" We're on to other things, and yet the truth is that Easter is 50 days long – 10 days longer than Lent – and today is only the Fourth Sunday of Easter. Has our life together revealed the presence of the Risen Christ these past 28 days? Or put another way, what signs and wonders have others seen in us this Easter to inspire awe like that in today's reading from *Acts*. This reading says that the devotion of this community to teach, meet, eat, and pray together led to "awe in everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles."

Apparently, a rich communal life can lead to signs and wonders, which is great! The kicker comes, though, in the verse that follows where the author of *Acts* adds, "All who believed were together and had all things in common." Suddenly I sense the rebel rising up within, crying, "Wait just a minute; hold

everything. Teaching, meeting, eating, and praying together is one thing . . . but **ALL** things in common? That's different! This *Acts*-fella's gone from preaching to meddling," which means that he's hit a spot in me where Scripture – sounding a little like socialism to me – grates against the way I live like nails on a blackboard. It happens, since we're often unaware that what we believe – or **think** we believe – is inconsistent with the way we actually live. I often think, for example, that I'm close to being a socialist, until a reading like this makes me want to slip guiltily out the door.

Such was the case with two old ladies in the church where I grew up, who loved the fiery preaching of the Rev. Dr. Crowe. Dr. Crowe liked to preach about sin, and so when he'd condemn the sin of lust, for example, one old bitty would whisper to the other, "**Those** folks are awful, Gladys. You tell 'em Dr. Crowe." He'd condemn stealing, and the other would murmur primly under her breath, "Oh Mabel, thieves are surely going to hell." He'd condemn lying, and the two of them would point under their hands at people they were **sure** were guilty. But when Dr. Crowe condemned the sin of gossip, they both rose quietly from their pew and slipped uneasily out the back door.

Dr. Crowe had gone from preaching to meddling it seems, and yet the truth is that **none** of us are perfect. We're **all** in this together, and the sooner we know it, the better. It's one reason community is so important, and why it's often found in truest form in some of the oddest places. Places for instance like a party my son Sam and his business partners held last weekend to celebrate the one year anniversary of their Commercial Film Company. Parents, politicians, clients, friends, volunteers – LOTS of people had been invited – most so that the company could just say, "Thanks." Consequently, everything was complimentary – open bar, valet parking, catered buffet, live music – all was seen to with style and graciousness by this amazing group of "kids."

Actually, they're hardly kids any longer. They're young professionals, but that didn't stop me from being a mother. In fact, the later it got and bigger the crowd grew, the more motherly I felt, worrying first and foremost about what it all cost. Finally, unable to contain myself any longer, I said ever-so smoothly to one partner, "I can't believe your generosity. This must be costing a fortune." Carmen, the Executive Director, said, "Actually, people have donated almost everything," and with that Sam saddled up to my side and whispered, "We spent \$1,500, Mom." I was shocked. Michael and I had hosted a wedding before and we knew what things cost, and it was more than that.

Gradually, though, I began to hear one story after another of friends who had volunteered time and talent, lawyers who'd given countless **un**-billable hours, artists donating huge incredible murals, and politicians seeing to parking and police coverage. A small brewery gave numerous kegs of beer, stylish

furnishing had been recovered from dumpsters, a friend did all the catering for the cost of food, and on and on the stories went. I began to think that Sam was an even better schmoozer than I'd realized, but as I began to move around the room I met people who also couldn't say enough about what First Punch Films had done for them – for *their* charitable organization, *their* neighborhood, *their* church. It was a two-way street – and **that** is community.

In fact, although it might not have taken place in church, or on a Sunday, or even purposefully in the name of God, I do not doubt that such community is Spirit-*led*, and even sacrificial in the way that Acts describes and that Jesus invites. “Possessions and goods were distributed as any had need,” says *Acts*. “And they spent much time together . . . with glad and generous hearts, having the goodwill of the people.” In similar fashion Jesus says to Pharisees with sad and *stingy* hearts, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” The “they” here is not the Pharisees, but those whom they've shut out. It's those shut out by “my-way-or-the-highway-religion,” which is hardly what Jesus invites.

That kind of religion is easy, but the truth is that Jesus isn't really interested in religion. The Pharisees were religious, after all, and look at the problems Jesus had with them. Rather, Jesus is interested in a way of life – calling us, as Peter does, to turn in a new direction – and to live as Easter people embodying Christ's *ongoing* life in the world. This is God's vision for us – a vision of people sharing Christ's teaching, breaking bread together, and praying with glad and generous hearts. It's a vision where needs are met and resources shared, but where we also recognize that none of us are perfect. We're all in this together, and herein lies our greatest strength, for together we can be Christ for the world.

We can be an Easter people – living into our Baptismal vows – and we don't have to be socialists to do it. In fact, we don't have to be capitalists either – since the only difference I'm told is that “In capitalism, man exploits man, while in socialism, it's the other way around.” In God's vision, though, no one is exploited (or even asked to leave church) but simply to have the goodwill of all – baptized or not, in church or out – with glad and generous hearts, giving thanks and praise to God. *Amen.*