

## With Glad and Generous Hearts

4 Easter, Year A, 4/30/23

If Christianity has a beginning – and, yes, scholars debate the point – but if Christianity had a single beginning, a Moment Zero, a time and place in which the community became something distinct from those around it and with a clear purpose and a nascent organization forming to achieve it, I suspect that this was it. The gathering of which we heard this morning from the 2nd chapter of the Book of Acts, that is. The church in miniature, the church *in statu nascendi*, Jesus's new community just now a-borning without his needing to be there. His Spirit was enough; indeed, more than enough.

I'm aware that the church names its own birthday as the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples all gather to receive (again? in a new way?) the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire and clarity in all the languages they know. But Pentecost always feels to me like the end of something: the End of the Beginning, if you will, the Last Scene in the First Act of the Jesus Movement, its narrative arc ending in the Ascension – Ascent – of Christ and the Descent of the Spirit, at which point everybody knows that it's all now up to Jesus's followers to make whatever changes he wanted to make in the world. For me, however, the church really begins when it begins to act like one, not merely talking the talk and singing the song, but doing the work, and giving itself what it needs to keep on doing that work, come what may.

And how do they begin this work? Remember, as we learned last week, some three thousand signed up the very day Peter called their attention to the fact that they needed to. The first thing they do is share the teachings the apostles have for them. What did he say? What did he mean? Second, they keep the same fellowship those

apostles shared, spending most of their time together in community. When they break bread – that is, have their meals – they remember what Jesus said, to break their bread in memory of him. There’s no ritual meal yet, no white-board wafers on silver patens and sweet port wine in silver goblets blessed by priests dressed like emperors, just a ritual at meals they still had at home: take this and remember him, remember the things he said, and all he did for us. Third, they came together for the prayers: Shema, Israel; Remember, O Israel your God is one – these Jews, remember, and still thought of themselves as such – but also the prayers that Jesus taught them. One goes, roughly: Lord, may your name be hallowed, be blessed. May your will be done on earth, Lord, as it is in heaven. Keep us from temptation; help us forgive those who owe us or who’ve done us wrong; and give us today the bread we need today to live, and if possible with less toil than it took us when we lived under the curse of Adam and the weight of unrequited sin. Keep evil far away – or, if you can’t do that, at least keep us out of it, and free from it. One of the things we’re having to get used to is that evil never really is all that far away.

Fourth, they watch – and with awe: the apostles now do signs and wonders much like Jesus had done. The results? The blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb talk, the lame walk, the broken-hearted are healed, and those who mourn are comforted. Fifth, they “...had all things in common, and would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). It’s not clear whether they gave those proceeds to the needy within their community, or to anyone indeed, but the word “any” does rather suggest the latter. Furthermore, they did all this “with glad and generous hearts,” and people admired them for it. Many even joined their number, and who would not? They sound like wonderful people to know. The community they’re creating sounds like it would be a blessing to join. What you might give up in worldly goods and time you get back in authentic relationships, the

joy of doing for people or giving to people what they can't do for or give to themselves, and the chance to be part of a community whose members really are blessings to one another. You get the chance to be among people who have found in the teachings and fellowship they share, in the prayers they raise and in and work that they do, something vital about what it means to be alive – to have life, as Jesus says at one point, and have it to the full.

This, friends, is the first church, Christianity at its purest and most idyllic, almost pastoral in its tenor and mood, never mind that it came to be amidst the bustle and hustle and grime of Jerusalem. To those who say such a church, such a community cannot exist: well, there it is, or was. Time and again reformers take, or try to take, the church back to these roots, knowing or at least believing that what once was, could be again. To those who say that such a church, such a community cannot last: well, you have me there. Whether by axe or sword, greed or jealousy, violence without or violence within, these pastoral religious idylls – i-d-y-l-l-s, not i-d-o-l-s, that is – these pastoral religious idylls were a paradise easily lost, and long lamented. There hovers over them the sense that this might be too good to last, too easy for sin and fear and other human ills to overwhelm. It takes but one bad apple, after all, to spoil an entire barrel, and it took one tricky snake but one hot minute to spoil us for paradise the first time round.

It's not paradise that is lost, not to itself, if you think about it. It is we who lost it, we who lose it every time. We hear in the 1st Letter of Peter this morning something about that, in its reminder that suffering in a good cause, and when one has done nothing wrong, is commendable. Why would he say that if those to whom he was writing were not suffering unjustly in a good cause? Moreover, it's what Jesus endured as well – and, indeed, ought not a savior suffer for their people? The letter quotes the Hebrew Scriptures, again finding that an innocent victim suffering unjustly can serve

as an atoning sacrifice – and that nothing else can. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; [for] by his wounds you have been healed,” it says. It doesn’t take too long for suffering with Christ and for Christ becomes a goal in and of itself, and the expected reward awaiting one who lives a righteous life, giving freely and with a glad and generous heart, breaking bread and keeping the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, and helping others do likewise. The blood of the martyrs would soon enough be the seed of the church, as the ancient apologist Tertullian is poetically translated to have said, in the days and indeed centuries when all this was outlawed, but that was not what people signed up for at the start. <sup>1</sup>

What many now have come to call the Jesus Movement, which our presiding bishop and others in the church identify with and as the Way of Love, started the moment Jesus called his first followers to him. The gospels are concerned with it, and how it changed once Jesus left for good, and what those changes foretold for the Way of Love’s future. The Jesus Movement was all about a new way of being in the world, which Jesus both taught and embodied, with love at its center, and a need to purify one’s heart and mind with that love, so that all that one did flowed from God. It wasn’t, while Jesus lived, a new religion, though one might consider it a reformist sect trying perfect the old one(s). It also wasn’t a church; scholars are pretty sure that Jesus didn’t have all this in mind, didn’t want his followers to create a church in any sense that we would recognize, for all that the gospels have him say that Peter is a rock and upon that rock his church he will build. What Jesus wanted his followers to do was to teach everyone to love one another as he’d love them – “teach” and “make

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<sup>1</sup> What he actually wrote was: "*Plures effimur, quotiens metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis Christianorum*" (*Apologeticus*, L.13). Tertullian is arguing for the decriminalization of Christianity, and noting that you can’t make the church disappear simply by killing its members. Wikipedia gives the following translation: "We multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christians is seed," Website source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apologeticus#:~:text=It%20is%20in%20this%20treatise,13>..

disciples” mean the same thing, and I weary of hearing people keep saying that we need to ‘follow’ Jesus when what he meant and empowered us to do is to embody him and be like him – and baptize them in his name. Show him the Vatican, take him round Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s, or even show him this lovely place, and tell them it’s all here in his name and given for his glory, and he’d be gob-smacked, not least by the giant model on the wall of the very thing that killed him, and would want to know pretty quickly, and in no uncertain terms, whether all this helps us love one another better, or helps us teach other people how to do so. If we couldn’t show him that it did, he’d likely curse such places like he did the hated 2nd Temple, tell us to repent and be (re)baptized in his name, and to get back to the work he gave us to do. But if he saw that we treated one another as those people in the first church back in Jerusalem did, he’d no doubt be pleased, if still surprised, and would be glad that buildings exist in which churches can gather to break bread, as he’d said to, share the cup, as he’d said to, feed his sheep, as he’d said to, and tend his lambs, as he’d said to.

If he saw that we with glad and generous hearts had come to share from our abundance what others needed to live on, he’d probably be pleased with that, too.

*Amen.*