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Acts 2:41-47; John 10:1-10

GREAT ABUNDANCE

Forty days after Jesus' resurrection, Peter stands before a large crowd of people and delivers a stunning sermon. And after hearing Peter's sermon, we are told that 3,000 people were baptized and become followers of the way of Jesus. Three thousand people! I've never had that many people clamor to be baptized after one of my sermons!

We might be impressed by the sheer scale of Peter's converts. But perhaps more astonishing might be what follows the people's conversion—how the news of Jesus' resurrection transformed the lives of the converts in significant and tangible ways. Here is what the writer of Acts tells us happened to those first converts to the way of Jesus: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings; they spent time in fellowship with one another, fostering and building relationships; they prayed; they broke bread together—which means they ate meals together, which was a sign of unity and acceptance of one another despite their differences. And they shared their resources—their money and their possessions—so that no one's needs were neglected or ignored. In fact, we are told that they not only *shared* their resources with one another but that all their resources were held in common. In other words, the new converts responded to the resurrection by changing their relationship with money and possessions. The resurrection had an *economic* impact on their lives.

Whenever people willingly change their relationship with money, well, you know something significant has happened to them. And something significant *had* happened to them: the resurrection, the astonishing act of God's love and God's power. The resurrection good news transformed these first Christians.

We want to be careful not to romanticize the early Christian community. If we just keep reading farther in the Book of Acts, we will learn that this utopian community didn't endure forever and did not always work perfectly. Some members of the community held back their resources instead of sharing. There were disagreements and conflicts. We don't want to romanticize the early Church or its people. The Bible is pretty honest about the failings and imperfections of God's people.

However, maybe instead of focusing on whether this utopian community of joyful love endured forever or fell apart, maybe it is enough to reflect for a moment on the immediate impact the resurrection had on them. Let's focus for a moment on the *impulse* these first Christians felt upon hearing the good news of the resurrection. Their first impulse was to live lives that were radically different than they had been living before. They prioritized studying God's way. They prioritized praying and worshipping. They prioritized fostering relationships of meaning. And they prioritized a radical kind of generosity which entailed sharing everything they had, *everything*, even for people who were not their own relatives so that no one was in need.

Let's remember for a moment who these three thousand plus new converts were. They were almost certainly very poor people because the vast majority of the populous was extremely poor. They lived under a cruel and oppressive regime—the Roman Empire. Life was hard and tenuous. Death was a daily reality. Hunger and suffering were daily realities. Part of their world view included rigid social divisions between groups of people and these divisions were not to be crossed.

But this crowd of three thousand hear this news about God's love revealed in the resurrection of Jesus and they are transformed. And they embark upon new ways of living and being. These activities—learning about God's word, praying, seeking fellowship, eating with

one another despite social divisions and differences, and the radical sharing of their meager and precious resources—these activities were done joyfully, we are told, as a response to the good news of God’s love. These activities reflected a new and abundant life in the midst of a hard and harsh world.

Abundant life mattered to Jesus. We hear about that in our reading today from John’s gospel. Jesus states that, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” In other words, Jesus didn’t come to judge or condemn us. Jesus didn’t come to drag us down with a bunch of rules or heavy handed doctrines. Jesus came to give us abundant life.

But what does abundant life look like? Our society thinks it knows. The “good life” according to our culture is found in buying the latest thing that catches our fancy and building a sizeable retirement fund. Abundant life means being able to take nice trips and vacations. Abundant life is found by climbing the ladder of social and professional success. Abundant life is found in marrying a beautiful person, having beautiful children, living in a beautiful home. We see images of the abundant life sold to us in commercials and ads and in movies.

Some Christian communities will promote a similar version of the abundant life through what is referred to as the *prosperity gospel*. You will sometimes hear this kind of teaching offered by TV evangelists but it is found in churches across the globe. The prosperity gospel teaches that the person who lives a faithful life, the person who follows God’s way and God’s teachings will be rewarded by God with financial success, with possessions, with health, and personal happiness. Some Christians confuse the gospel’s promise of abundance with the notion of material prosperity.

But that is *not* what Jesus meant when he talked about offering us abundant life. There is a significant difference between society's version of the "good life" and Jesus' gift of abundant life. A person can live a life filled with hardships and yet live that life with abundance.

That's what I think we see with those early Christians in the Book of Acts. Amid life's hardships, amid life's struggles, amid life's pain, those early Christians discovered God's abundance. The resurrection revealed to them the powerful presence of God's love for them. The resurrection inspired them to love one another in tangible ways. The resurrection transformed their relationships with one another as well as their relationship with money and possessions. The resurrection moved them to acts of generosity and compassion. And in all of this they found an abundance of life and joy.

Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. But he warns us that there are bandits and thieves who try to rob us from knowing the abundant life. Sometimes we don't even recognize the bandits stealing God's abundant life from us because they are hidden behind the veil of what is considered "normal." Our culture has normalized the consumer lifestyle. Our culture has normalized a success driven lifestyle and the over-programming of our children's lives so that they can be successful too. We have normalized the pursuit of personal happiness as our ultimate goal. We have normalized the unrestricted and unquestioned use of technology and social media in every aspect of our lives.

And yet all the while we have been conditioned to thinking that such pursuits will bring us meaningful life, they have really been the bandits which have robbed us of life. We face a mental health crisis in this nation. Many people have few connections to communities of support or meaning. Families are fragmented in different locations across the country. People are exhausted from the stresses of chasing happiness and success and coming up empty. And we are

discovering that social media divides as much or maybe more so than it unites, and that technology is no substitute for the embodied presence of people in community. And the Christian Church becomes one of those bandits to the genuine abundance God offers whenever it promotes the idea that money and material prosperity are signs of God's favor.

Jesus tells us, "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." I think we catch a glimpse of what that abundant life can look like when we gaze upon those early converts to Christianity. They weren't perfect people, they weren't prosperous people, they weren't always happy people, but they were transformed people—people who allowed the resurrection to change them. Which is the resurrection gift God offers all of us.