

Word + Table + Sharing = Encouragement

Acts 4:32-37; 11:19-30

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 5) 2025

Tithe Sunday

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The world does not look the same to someone who is angry and someone who is grateful.

-Jeremy David Engels

Today is Tithe Sunday. For those of you who don't know, this is the one Sunday a year, when we talk about tithing – which means giving 10% of our income – and financially supporting the budget and mission of Austin Heights. It's our version of what other churches have called "Stewardship Sunday," with the emphasis on being good stewards of the financial gifts God has given us and returning a portion of those gifts to God in mission and ministry through the church. Along with Stewardship Sunday, or Stewardship Month, many churches have members of the Finance and Stewardship committee visit every household in the church asking you what you'll commit or pledge to give in the upcoming year, fill out a pledge card, sign your name, and then usually on the Sunday like today, everyone brings their pledge cards to the altar during the service.

Now, over the years, we have been able to take a more low-key approach because you have given. I'm being up front this morning, because for many of you, this is new information.

I'm being up front this morning also because I want to say thank you for your generosity, your giving, your sharing. When Jane and I came here in August

of 1989, Austin Heights was averaging less than 40 people in attendance and the annual budget was about \$70,000 total. Last Sunday, you voted and approved the new 2025-2026 budget of about \$265,000. It will be a challenge but with the Spirit of the Living God working in and through you, you will be able to do it. You've met challenges before, thanks be to God, and you will do it again. At the same time, you are also facing a new chapter in an adventure together. Who knows what God is up to and what God is going to be doing in your life together?

You are a healthy church at a good place right now. You are ready for the next step, the next adventure. You need someone to lead you who can keep up with you and I'm getting to where I can't keep up. The interim or transitional pastor will help equip you and prepare you so when you call a new pastor, you will be ready to be off and running. It is going to be exciting, and it will be challenging.

But it will take all of you together.

Our readings today are from the book of Acts. I love Acts. I love it because it is full of pictures of the young, small church being led, pushed, pulled, cajoled, and coaxed by the Holy Spirit into the new creation of Christ, right smack dab in the middle of the old world of empires, sin, domination, and oppression. It was exciting. It was challenging. It was hard. It was scary. It was stepping into the unknown, but it was stepping together with extraordinary trust in the Spirit of the Living God and trust in each other. And Acts was written to strengthen and encourage the church for the journey ahead.

Just before our reading in Acts 4, Peter and John heal a lame man. The man and his friends were overjoyed but the Powers of Domination did not approve. They like control and this was clearly out of control, Peter and John are healing and talking about Jesus' resurrection, both of which they fear, they can't control,

so they throw Peter and John in jail. The next day they call Peter and John to stand before them, ordering them to keep silent. Peter and John answer with the boldness given them by the Holy Spirit. “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge. For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:19). The authorities threaten them again, but then release them.

That same Holy Spirit which healed the lame man and empowered Peter and John, is the same Holy Spirit which empowers the small church to share with each other and share with others. They share food eating together and they share their money and possessions. The same Holy Spirit prompts a man named Barnabas to take his property and sell it, bring the money to the apostles and share it (4:36-37). Clearly, something is going on. A lame man can walk, Peter and John are bold in front of the authorities, and the church is sharing their earthly goods and money and food with each other.

Barnabas is the nickname the fledgling church has given this man. The nickname means “son of encouragement” because his sharing of the proceeds from selling his property is just the beginning of his encouragement to the church. Throughout the book of Acts, while the main plotline is following Peter and John, the other apostles, and eventually the Apostle Paul in sharing the gospel, every once in a while, Barnabas shows up. He shows up when encouragement is needed. When the church is discouraged, when the church is afraid, when the church is feeling overwhelmed, the Holy Spirit sends Barnabas to encourage.

Encourage means to share or give courage. We get the word courage from the Latin *cor* which means “heart,” and I don’t mean simply the biological organ which pumps the blood in our body, but that which integrates all of who we are, all

of which we feel, all of which we know into that one centering place. When all of self, all of who we are and our understanding of what our world is comes together in its proper place and we act no matter the circumstances. That's called courage. And given the way the Holy Spirit works is that we most often receive courage from one another. When we gather together – perhaps over a cup of coffee or perhaps singing hymns together, or praying together, or listening to the Word of God proclaimed, or sharing food and sharing tithes and offerings – in all these ways and more the Holy Spirit gives and shares courage.

I tell this story with permission: Jane and I remember when we had just moved from Garrison to Nacogdoches and Callie was entering Middle School. It was the first day of class in a new school and she did not know anyone. She was scared and overwhelmed and alone outside of her classroom when Roz Deckard came out from the classroom next door. Roz recognized a disheartened and discouraged child whom she recognized from Austin Heights and talked with her. I can't remember for sure, but I remember that Roz invited Callie into her classroom to wait until it was time. Additionally, Roz promised to pray for Callie that day and every day after, and Roz Deckard is still praying for Callie. Now she is praying for Callie and for Ivory and for little Graham who is on his way.

Now folks I'm convinced Roz Deckard's name means "daughter of encouragement"! She is someone who pays attention to those around her and knows when we are discouraged, disheartened, disillusioned, and maybe even dehumanized, and the Spirit of the Living God works in and through her give encouragement.

Barnabas gave encouragement. He helped the church have courage. And the small church needed all the courage it could get. The apostles are in places they've

never been before, nurturing and teaching and trying to figure out what this church thing looks like and how sharing their lives together is supposed to work. They share meals (breaking bread) with one another, and in Acts there is no distinction between sharing their daily meals with one another and having what we call the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. In Acts, every meal is the Lord's meal, every time they break bread with one another they know that God is present giving nourishment and courage.

Yesterday's Clay House barbecue was about eating good barbecue, and it was about raising money for the Clay House and the African American Heritage Project, but it was also a meal with the Lord, and about encouragement around the tables.

Over in chapter 11 of Acts, way out in Asia Minor, Gentiles are becoming Christian. And the church back in Jerusalem hears about it and is not sure what to think about it. "Gentiles! Man oh man! These people are not part of God's Chosen, the Jews. They are outsiders, they are different, and they don't know Scripture, they don't know the hymns, they've never attended synagogue. What are we to do? And if that's not enough, we're beginning to get some pretty serious pushback from everything from riots and violence and getting thrown in jail, to hostility. What are we going to do?"

Well, the church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to Antioch because those folks way out in Asia Minor could use some encouragement. Acts says that when Barnabas got there and saw how God was at work, he rejoiced, and then he "exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion" (11:23).

Do you know what exhort means? To exhort means to strongly teach and encourage. Barnabas exhorted.

But that's not all. Barnabas knew the situation in Antioch and Asia Minor was such that they needed more help and more exhortation. So Barnabas went to Tarsus, to find Saul (who was not yet known as Paul), and brought him back to Antioch. Then for an entire year they taught the church in Antioch.

The church in Antioch is growing with lots of Gentiles being converted but Barnabas knows that they need careful instruction and long-term nurture.

You and I know that the Christian life and Christian faith is much more than an intellectual exercise and head knowledge. But it is not less than intellect and knowledge.

If you read on in the book of Acts, exhortation and teaching take on an increasing importance in the life of the church as more and more Gentiles, those who have no background in the Scriptures, are being converted and becoming Christian.

Teaching and exhorting the Way of Jesus was essential then and it is so essential now!

Some of my theologian friends emailed me this week a video on X (formerly Twitter) put out by the newly renamed "Department of War" of the Secretary of War" Hesgeth praying the Lord's Prayer over a video of America's military might at work – jets flying, troops repelling from helicopters, tanks crashing through the mud, warships sailing into danger. And when Hesgeth got to the part of the prayer that says, "deliver us from evil" he slows down and the video shows missiles being launched, and more action.

Do you want to know why the church needs careful and thorough teaching? Because now, as much as ever, we need to be taught that we follow Jesus Christ,

not nationalistic heresy. We need to be taught and nurtured in the Sermon on the Mount, and that the Way of the Cross is Jesus dying for us, but it is also the kind of life we are to live. We are to be suffering servants and we are to embody, incarnate, the Way of Jesus. We are not warriors for American nationalism!

May God have mercy on us!

And may we practice, practice, practice hearing, teaching, and hearing the Word plus eating together at the Lord's Table – no matter if it is here around this table or at a table at Dilly Dally's or at home – and may we share. Share our lives with one another and others with empathy and compassion. Share our goods and tithes and offerings. Share our faith in a world that increasingly thinks bombing someone is the Way of Jesus. Share the work of service and ministry.

Sometime ago, I was drinking coffee with an old friend here in town who is black. He asked me, “Do you feel threatened by Black Lives Matter, by the influx of immigrants, and calls for change of White Male Supremacy?” We talked about all that a lot and I have continued to think about his question.

So, here's a short answer to his question. When we learn to practice sharing and giving and we learn to see the world with gratitude, learning to give up White Supremacy is not as threatening as it is to someone who spends their lives clutching and striving and worrying and fearful of others.

When we let go of the lives we cling to so anxiously, then we can share our true selves with others, without fear of loss. And we learn because we are taught that this kind of sharing is not just an imitation of God, but it's a sign of our participation in the very life of the living God, whose life is that eternal Trinity of

self-giving love without loss, a love that spills over to us, becomes visible to us, and available to us in the gift of Jesus, God's Way in a person.

Today around this Table we get to share in that overflowing gift through Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.