

This morning, let's conclude our study of the Early Church. During Lent, we have been studying the Early Church as described in the second chapter of Acts, verses 42 through 47. Each Sunday we have focused on one key characteristic of the Early Church to see what we can learn and apply here at High Desert to better serve the Lord. So far, we have discussed their devotion to reading and studying God's Word, the teachings of Jesus Christ, worshipping, prayers, and fellowship. Let's read this passage one last time to see what the last key characteristic is.

Read Acts 2:42-47

This morning, let's focus on verses 44 and 45: "All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them." Of all the verses that we have studied over the past four weeks, this is the most confusing one because it can be interpreted in so many different ways depending on your personal and political points of view. You could take this passage literally and promote the equal distribution of wealth. Or you could argue that I have worked hard all my life and made sacrifices for what I have acquired; so why should I sell what I have earned and give it to someone who has not worked? Didn't Paul write in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 – "If a man will not work, he shall not eat?"

Well, my mama didn't raise a fool, so I am going to stay out of the politics and go in a different direction this morning. I believe that the Apostle Luke is trying to emphasize what Jesus said when He was asked by the lawyer in Mark 12 what is the greatest commandment. Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, love God and love your neighbor. God is love and the Early Church and churches today demonstrate this love by taking care of each other. It is the church's mission to extend God's love and grace to all.

Another translation of verse 44 states: "All the believers were together and had everything in common." This phrase "everything in common" was a familiar expression back then describing the bond between friends. There was such a readiness to help one another that it might be said: "They had everything in common, according to the law of friendship." They sold their possessions and gave to the church; in other words they established a Help Fund to provide assistance to those in need. Verse 45 can also be translated as followed: "Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." They sold their land and personal property with the money being distributed to whoever had need. The key statement is "to anyone as he had need." They did not sell any property until there was a need. There is no

indication that they sold everything or that everything was held in joint ownership. What is indicated is that they took care of each other as a family of believers.

The Early Church was a sharing church; it was a church that cared. These early Christians took care of the needs of others; they loved their neighbor. They had a sense of responsibility for each other. A real Christian cannot bear to have too much when others have too little; that's why we give. In other words, as Christians, we must not be selfish, but must always be thinking about the well-being of others. This is the agape love that Jesus wants each of us to practice; the love that seeks the best for the other person no matter what they may have done to us or said about us. Jesus Himself said that it was more blessed to give than to receive.

On a television show, a young man asked a financial expert how he could become rich. In reply, the expert told the young man to live within his means; in other words, spend less than you make and save as much as possible. Then he said something that really caught my attention. He told the young man to give as much as he could. He said that if he did this, he would have many more opportunities for riches in life than ever before. This expert must have read the three basic points of John Wesley's famous sermon entitled "The Use of Money," which are: Earn all you can; save all you can; and give all you can!"

This expert no doubt had also read Malachi 3:10 where the Lord says: "Bring the whole tithe (10 percent) into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says, the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." In other words, give me your best and I will bless the socks off you! God is saying that if we choose to be generous, He will keep giving to us so that we can continue our lifestyle of giving. We may never win the lottery or be millionaires, but God will truly bless our lives in many other ways.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to shouts of "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." Now we have all heard many sermons on this story and you will hear another one next Sunday, but have you ever looked at this story from the perspective of the owner of the donkey? Jesus tells the disciples to go and untie a donkey and bring it back to Him. In the Gospels of Matthew and John, there is no mention of anybody questioning the disciples. However, Luke tells us that as the disciples were untying the donkey, they were confronted by the owner. Mark indicates that some of the bystanders also asked the disciples what they were up to.

Think about it, here are two strangers coming up and untying this man's donkey, his prized possession, and walking off with it to who knows where. In the Gospel of Luke, the owner asked the disciples: "Why are you untying my donkey?" That's a logical question considering the circumstances. The disciples replied: "The Lord has need of it," and the owner apparently

understood what they meant, indicating that the owner and Jesus had made previous arrangements for the use of the donkey.

The point of the story is that each of us is called to give our donkey to Jesus; now I don't mean an actual donkey unless you happen to have one in your backyard, but something that we possess. When we accepted Jesus Christ into our hearts and came forward to join the church, we were asked: "Will you faithfully participate in the ministries of this church by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness?" These are our donkeys: our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. Jesus expects our total commitment, not a half-hearted effort. He wants our first fruits, not the leftovers! He wants us to be all in!

One day a little boy was playing with his mother's valuable vase when he got his hand stuck inside it. He panicked and ran to his father for help in getting his hand out. The father tried in vain to dislodge his son's hand, but could not. They were thinking of breaking the vase when the father said: "Now son, let's try one more thing. Open your hand and hold your fingers out straight as you see me doing and then pull your hand out." To his astonishment, the little boy replied: "But, dad, I can't do that, I'll drop my penny." We are all smiling, but in reality we are a lot like that little boy, so busy holding on to the worthless pennies of this world that we fail to open our hands and really see what's truly important in life.

Billy Graham said that God has given us two hands: one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not meant to be basins for hoarding, but to be channels made for sharing. God's kingdom is built one stone at a time; one act of kindness, one act of love, one act of service.

There is a simple formula for the survival of any church; growing churches focus outward and dying churches focus inward. Someone said that the three essential things needed for building a spiritual church are: evangelism, missions and Bible teaching. Missions is and must be one of the fundamental activities of the church. It is so critical that failure to practice it in some form results in the deterioration of the church's vitality and ability to make disciples for Jesus Christ. When churches turn inward using all their resources for their own survival and caring only for their own people, then the spiritual life of the church disappears and it soon dies.

The Church is called to mission. Missions was throbbing in the heart of God when He sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world to die for our sins. As someone said: "Missions didn't start with the Great Commission. It began with "For God so love the world that He sent His only begotten Son." God loves His creation, and He is not willing for anyone to perish.

As I have indicated in my *Ramblings* in this month's newsletter, one of the best books that I have ever read on missions is entitled *The Hole in Our Gospel* by Richard Stearns. The idea behind it is quite simple; it's basically that being a Christian requires more than a personal relationship with God. It also entails a public relationship with the world around us. If your

personal faith in Christ has no positive outward expression, then your faith has a hole in it. Someone once cut out every verse in the Bible that dealt with poverty, sickness, oppression, and injustice, over 2,000 verses. Guess what? That Bible was full of holes.

Sometimes we tend to think that the Great Commission just means saving as many people as we can for the life hereafter; so we tend to minimize our efforts for the well-being of these same people in this life. Proclaiming the whole gospel, then, means much more than evangelism in hopes that people will hear and respond to the good news of salvation. It also encompasses tangible compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical justice and efforts to right the wrongs that are so prevalent in our world today. God is concerned about the physical and social well-being of His children as well as their spiritual well-being. This is what I think Luke meant in verses 44 and 45 of our text for this morning.

James 1:22 tells us to be doers of the Word and not merely listeners. Saint Francis of Assisi understood what James was talking about when he said: "Preach the gospel always; when necessary use words." In the Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25, the criterion for dividing the two groups is not that the sheep confessed faith in Jesus Christ while the goats did not, but rather that the sheep had acted in tangible and loving ways towards the poor, the sick, the imprisoned and the vulnerable, while the goats had not. Jesus taught that care for others was at the heart of God's will for us.

On Sunday morning, safe in the walls of this sanctuary and surrounded by our friends, it can be easy to leave the suffering, poverty, and homelessness of the world out of sight and out of mind. Instead, our prayers should be "let our hearts be broken by the things that break God's heart." Jesus calls us to be active participants in transforming the world one person at a time as we reach out in love to our neighbors. We are called to be the hands and feet of God, His faithful workers.

Stearns urges us to ask the question: "what if?" What if all the followers of Jesus Christ look beyond the walls of our churches and work together to reclaim the world for Jesus? What if we actually demonstrate God's love for the world instead of just talking about it? What if we embrace the whole gospel of loving God and loving our neighbors? Think of the difference we could make in our lives, in our community, and in the world. We are all called to make a difference for Jesus Christ.

Now I know that I'm preaching to the choir, because one of the strengths of High Desert is its mission and outreach program. We are currently involved in several outreach efforts such the Pantry, Feed New Mexico Kids, the Interfaith Bible Center, Operation Christmas Child, Heifer International, Gift Basket Ministry, Women with Purpose and many more. We have just completed a successful mission trip to St. Joseph Mission School. But I'm always asking myself,

are we doing enough, is there a hole somewhere in our gospel? I don't know. So, I'm always looking for new mission opportunities and where God is leading us. If you know of an outreach project that we should be involved in, please let me know.

I hope and pray that it is the desire of each one of us to make a difference in this world, to leave it better than we found it. Let me close with a statement from John Wesley that I have used before that sums up what we are called to do not only as Methodists, but as Christians, those who love and follow Jesus Christ. Wesley said: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can." May we be faithful to this charge and respond as the prophet Isaiah did centuries ago when God asked: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And without hesitation, Isaiah responded "Here I am! Send me." Remember that love done right can change the world. Amen