

Glad and Generous Hearts

**Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Eighth Sunday of Our Pandemic Crisis
May 3, 2020**

**Bethany Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Foxborough, Massachusetts
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Reading: Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[a] to all, as any had need.

⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home^[b] and ate their food with glad and generous^[c] hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I.

Perhaps you know from your Bible study over the years that The Acts of the Apostles (i.e. the Books of Acts) is the second of two books written by Luke, the Evangelist, who was one of the four Gospel writers.¹ Luke's first book, the Gospel, was an account of the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. His second book, The Acts, was an account of the birth and growth of the first century Christian movement, under the leadership of the apostles.²

The passage we just read is what biblical scholars call a summary passage, a passage that brings one part of the story to an end before moving on to the next part of the story. Acts 1 completes the Easter Story with the Risen Christ commissioning his apostles before their return to Jerusalem.³ We read the Story of Pentecost in Acts 2, beginning with the outpouring Holy Spirit on the apostles and then Peter preaching the Good News of Jesus to a large crowd in Jerusalem, converting large numbers of people who "...devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers."⁴

We then we read Luke's summary of all that had happened following Pentecost. Awe came upon them as they shared their resources with each other and met any needs. They worshipped daily and broke bread "with glad and generous hearts," praising God, gaining good will, while adding to their numbers. This is Luke's telling of the story: first, the origins of the Christian movement with Jesus of Nazareth; and second, the origins of the Apostolic movement from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, then to Asia Minor and Greece, and onward to Rome.

The question is this: What can we learn from their collective experience about having glad and generous hearts; in spite of their great challenges, hardships, and threats to their lives?

II.

Today we find ourselves moving from one chapter to another; even more, changing from one volume to another. This pandemic has exposed the world's most urgent and critical needs, calling on us to heal the environment and our global relationships, to build equity and collaboration. Will we use this critical opportunity to start a new world history, or at least a new chapter? Will we turn away from national self-interest to global well-being, from tribal interests to global community? Will we, like the first Christians after Pentecost, share our resources with glad and generous hearts?

Psalm 23 promotes the prototype of a Good Shepherd. Indeed, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."⁵ Not only did he say it, *he lived it*. Not only did he talk the Talk, he walked the Walk. Will we start a new chapter in our nation's history by ensuring that we elect and appoint true shepherds to lead us instead of charlatans and power mongers? Unlike natural disasters over time, which affect some and not others, this one affects all of us. How will we respond? By retreating into ourselves or by looking out for others? By taking only what we need or by sharing our resources with glad and generous hearts?

These are critical questions for such a time as this. If this isn't a time to end one chapter and start another, I don't know what is. If this isn't a time to make deep, fundamental changes to our way of life and relationships with each other, I don't know what is. Don't forget the Greek roots of the word "pandemic": *pan*, meaning 'all' and *demos*, meaning 'people'.⁶ A pandemic involves *all* people. It cuts through our distinct cultures and ethnicities to our deeper humanity; and, it moves us beyond our religious allegiances and national boundaries to a higher global purpose.

The question now is this: What can we learn from our own collective experience about having glad and generous hearts; In spite of the great challenges, hardships, and threats to our lives that we now face?

III.

Writer Anne Lamott⁷ has a lot of good advice for us in her books. From *Traveling Mercies* to *Grace (Eventually)* to *Help, Thanks, Wow*, and other books, Lamott has inspired millions with her humble and humorous reflections on human life. It's perfect pandemic reading! Lamott lives with a glad and generous heart. She writes books "that are honest, concerned with real lives, human hearts, spiritual transformation, families, secrets, wonder, craziness—[books] that...make [us] laugh... [that share truth and light.]" She says: "Books, for me, are medicine."⁸

How much we need that medicine today, a vaccine against the pandemics of anger and blame, anxiety and fear, self-interest and self-dealing. How much we need therapies of healing and hope, compassion and cooperation, as we fight the distressing social symptoms we now see. Listen to what she says. "When faced with a crisis, do three things: breathe, pray and be kind." As we endure the pandemic's effect on our health, economy, institutions, and faith communities, let alone on ourselves, take Lamott's medicine to heart: breathe, pray, and be kind.

*Find a way to live and love and serve with glad and generous hearts,
So that all God's people can enjoy "abundant life," not just a privileged few.⁹*

Dear people of faith and good will, our physical, social, and economic well-being will only be as good as our spiritual health. Unless we are willing to start a new chapter, even a new volume, of human history, we should expect more of the same. Spiritual transformation is essential to our global existence. Nothing less will do: changed minds and hearts, changed hopes and habits.

Whenever crises come our way, and they will, we need to breathe, pray, and be kind; to live, love, and serve with glad and generous hearts. We need to stay connected and in community. We need to share our resources so that all have what they need. With that, we will see good will increase many times over, and God will save us from ourselves in even greater numbers!

Come to the Lord's Table today with glad and generous hearts, giving thanks to God, not only for gifts past and present, but for gifts still to come with breath, prayer, and kindness. May God grant us the wisdom and courage we need for the living of these days! Amen.

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End Notes and References

(Unless noted, all Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.)

1. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luke_the_Evangelist.
2. Note the shift from disciples (i.e. follower or student of a teacher or leader) to apostles (i.e. messengers, envoys, advocates for a movement or cause).
3. See Acts 1:1-11 and Acts 1:12-26. According to Luke, there were about 120 believers at the time. Perhaps there is a symbolic suggestion with that number, which equals 10 times 12; 10 = perfection or completeness, 12 = tribes of Israel. Check it out!
4. Acts 2:42.
5. See John 10:11.
6. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandemic>.
7. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Lamott.
8. Ibid.
9. Jesus said: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:10. Do our highest leaders measure up to that standard?