

Lessons from the Church Pictorial Directory
A Sermon for the Congregations of the
Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota Conferences
of the United Church of Christ
Annual Gathering Sunday
June 16, 2019

The Lesson: Acts 2:43-45: All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 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. (New Revised Standard Version)

Everyone around was in awe - all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met.

They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved. (The Message)

Take a moment to find a memory you have of being photographed. Not a moment when someone snapped a picture of you with their phone, but a moment when you were PHOTOGRAPHED. I'm imagining something like school pictures. Where there was some expectation that you would clean up. And have all the hairs on your head where they were supposed to be. And be dressed in - maybe not your very best clothes - but your pretty good clothes. Maybe you remember some conversations in your house over what exactly pretty good clothes for photographs really are! Maybe you've had photographs taken for a church pictorial directory. God knows we try to shine up a bit for those.

Those photographs are accurate enough, aren't they? The camera captures what's right there in plain sight. But I think it's also fair to say that those "clean up, sit down, and smile" photographs don't capture everything that's right there. They don't capture the distance between who we are when we're posing for pictures and who we are when the cameras are gone. They don't capture the distance between who we are and who we are called to be.

It's tempting just to pass over these verses from Acts, from a gathering of stories of how something we call church got started. I mean, really. Wonderful harmony? Every meal was a celebration? Everyone shared and everyone's needs were met? No one missed worship? Really? Was this ever how it was for any congregation? It seems like there's been some re-touching and photoshopping in this portrait. But this word photograph from the 2nd chapter of Acts, of church in its beginning, is dear to me. It may well be a best-clothes, every hair in place portrait. But it is surely also a photograph of best hopes, a photograph of widest visions of what this thing called church might be.

The best-clothes photograph, the best hope and widest vision photograph, is of believers coming *together*. To follow Jesus is to follow Jesus together. To follow Jesus is to follow Jesus in community. To follow Jesus in a community of saints like us and unlike us, to follow Jesus in a community of saints who both delight us and disappoint us, inspire us and aggravate us, to follow Jesus in a community of saints who love us and challenge us and hold us accountable, to follow Jesus in a community of saints where we ourselves are both delightful and disappointing, inspiring and aggravating, where we love and challenge and hold others accountable. We are better together. We are stronger together. We are more faithful together. We are who God calls us to be when we are together. We live and celebrate a new gift of being together this weekend at our Annual Gathering of the Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota Conferences of the United Church of Christ in Omaha. We hold in prayer this morning those we've sent to Omaha, as all the delegates and visitors gathered this morning on the campus of the Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha hold in prayer those who've sent them.

The best-clothes photograph, the best hope and widest vision photograph in Acts 2, is of believers coming together to worship day by day. Day by day. Oh. Maybe 10:00 on Sunday morning in the sanctuary can't be the one and only time when the community is together for worship. Maybe it's also Tuesday evening in a home. Wednesday morning at a coffee shop. Or at a campground with summer Sunday cookouts. Or in a local tavern. Or at the county jail. Maybe it's wherever people gather day by day.

The best hope and widest vision photograph is of believers coming together day by day to eat. Well, we've made a pretty good start at this, haven't we? And we've got some stretching to do. When we eat together, let's remember to invite folk who don't get invited much. Let's remember to take some food to folk who don't get out much. There's always plenty, right? Except the deviled eggs all disappear! Let's remember to share from our delicious meals with folk who aren't eating well. Are there food insecure folk right in our neighborhood? Yes, there are. What if every fund-raising meal happening in our congregations were a free-will offering meal? We might make more money that way (some folk won't make change in the basket for their \$20), but for sure we will not be a place where someone can't eat with us because they don't have enough money. Let's imagine the fun and the Gospel light in just feeding folk. Grilling out for whoever's in our neighborhood. Bringing ice cream cones for the last day of school. Gathering thank-you dinners for our local community servants like fire fighters or school teachers. We've made a good start at the eating part. Let's imagine how we might add some leaves and chairs to our tables!

The best hope and widest vision photograph from Acts 2 is of believers together who share what they have among those who have needs, who come together in equity rather than simple equality. I don't give all that I have, but I make changes just like you do to keep less of what I have and share more. The truth is that I did give all that I have just once. Temporarily. For about half an hour. With help from a three-year-old. On the morning of the Sunday School Christmas program, our church treasurer stopped by in the wonderful tangle of wings and shepherd staffs and crowns and song sheets to give me my paycheck. When I went back to fetch it after worship, it was gone. I was still searching through the returned wings when a grandfather of the congregation came to find me and held out my check. I asked him where he found it. He said, "Your kid put it in the offering plate." When I asked my son what that was all about, he sighed a long, patient sigh and said, "I have to have offering."

We're living out a wide, second chapter of Acts vision of holding resources in common this weekend in Omaha. Three Conferences have pooled a portion of their resources, holding that portion in common to support one shared one staff - a staff being Installed this morning as representatives of the congregations of our three Conferences gather for worship.

If the church photograph from Acts 2, that photo of best hope and widest vision, could have been taken with a camera, it would have a beautifully blurry picture. Because new folk kept coming, kept being sought, kept being welcomed, kept being fed with the love of Jesus, the bread of heaven, and plenty of good bread right from

Jerusalem ovens. Every day. May the photographs of our congregations gathered be just as beautifully blurry because new folk keep coming into the picture. Day by day. Day by day may we be found gathering. Day by day may we be found seeking and welcoming. Day by day may we not be found biding our time, waiting to welcome folk like us when they manage to find us. Day by day may we stretch our tables to make blessed space for another and another - especially another not like us - and feed them as we are fed - with community, with generosity, with worship, and with feasts for body and soul.

Amen.