

“With Glad and Generous Hearts”

Acts 2:42-47

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Luke is the author of the Acts of the Apostles. In just a few short verses, he captures the mood of the earliest church community. Men and women looked out for each other. Youth and children felt included. They cared for each other's needs. They broke bread together, and basically found great joy by simply being community together. Whenever they gathered, it was with glad and generous hearts!

I have a mental image of this early church community gathering in someone's house. A man takes out a flute and a woman starts to sing. A teenager strums a guitar, and an elder begins to pray. A tray of grapes is passed around and there is enough for everyone. We call this an 'agape' meal (a love feast); a meal that isn't so much about the food as it is about the deep caring for everyone present and for everyone not present.

For Luke, it is this sense of caring community that first draws people in. Neighbors witness the extraordinary caring and want to be part of it. The preaching may be awesome and the music may be sensational, but it is the intentional caring for each other that is magnetic. No one went hungry. No one felt lonely. No one grieved alone. Everyone was valued. Luke is known as the Evangelist, as the one most concerned with spreading the good news of the Gospel. And what he knows in his heart is that the good news begins by establishing communities of people who choose to care about each other's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. In my experience of 37 years as a pastor, I would say that has not changed! And I have thrown myself into inviting families and individuals to generate that very kind of community.

I am remembering my summer at Eden Theological School in St. Louis, a sabbatical to study grief counseling and stewardship. One evening, my roommate and I attended the Municipal Opera at a local park amphitheater. We had heard that some people arrive early; sit in the free seating area toward the back, and share a picnic supper. We liked the idea of free seats, so off we went with our tuna fish sandwiches. Unwittingly, we found ourselves in the midst of an agape feast! One family was passing around caviar; another was pouring sparkling water; another was sharing cloth napkins. Someone called out for Grey Poupon, and someone else had some! We made new friends. Parents looked after each other's children. There was a marvelous caring among all of us early arrivals.

Luke, the Evangelist, would have smiled from ear to ear! Our evening at the Municipal Opera provided a perfect example of what it looks like when people have glad and generous hearts! I have no recollection of the opera we saw later. I just remember the caring. Though the Grey Poupon made our tuna fish sandwiches into a gourmet's delight; it wasn't really about the food. It was about the fellowship. It was about the joy of the community.

In the early days of the church, the Communion celebration was known as the 'joyful feast of the people of God.' Though Communion commemorates the Last Supper, it also honors the full life and passion of Christ. Throughout his short life, he had a way of bringing people together, diverse people: Jews and Gentiles, street vendors and office workers, fishermen and farmers, teachers and students, travelers and stay-at-home moms, tax collectors and real estate agents, priests and laity, widows and orphans. The life of Jesus was all about building community; inviting people to care for each other as they had never imagined previously.

When our children were young, we had a picture-story book depicting Biblical scenes. On one page was the Feeding of the Five Thousand. The illustrator zoomed in on one woman in the crowd. I will never forget her face. It was the picture of a glad and generous heart. She had been fed; but she was also participating in the sharing. She had found herself in a crowd where people were not out for themselves, but were looking out for each other. It struck me at the time as a glorious image of a church community. There was enough for everyone; AND, there were twelve baskets of leftovers! There was evidence of sharing and caring. There was evidence of generosity.

I know we are known in the community as a church-in-mission. I know we are known as an Open and Affirming Church. If Luke the Evangelist were to be a visitor here on any given Sunday, he'd likely say: 'Oh, this is a church with glad and generous hearts!'

And, of course, that is why I remain in the greatest of hope!
Amen.