

Winning at Money

6th Weekend after the Epiphany – February 11/12, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Acts 2:42-47 & 4:32-37(NRSV)

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

We don't like to admit it, but what we do with our money and our possessions says a great deal about who we really are. Today, we'll take a look at some of the choices made by the first Christians.

After his death and resurrection, but before he returns to the Father, Jesus gives his disciples their mission, their vocation. This is not Jesus' vocation; it is their own. They are to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 29:19). They are to be Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Luke 1:8). In the book of Acts, Luke tells the story in just this way – the ever-widening geography of disciple-making and Gospel-proclaiming. And as Luke tells this story, he gives us peeks inside the life of the first Christian communities, beginning with the Jews in Jerusalem who became followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection.

The people of Pentecost

What was it like to live in Jerusalem during those days and weeks and months after the festival of Pentecost? Passover had been even more chaotic than usual that year. Jesus from Nazareth had provoked the Jewish leadership for days leading up to his crucifixion by the Romans. Rumors of an empty tomb and stories of a

Were the first Christians communists?

I invariably get a question something like this whenever I teach today's portions of Acts. We read about their having "all things in common" with no claims of private ownership and we imagine Moscow, not Jerusalem.

There are three directly relevant passages in Acts. The two for today and the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5.

First, the TNIV translation that "No one claimed that any of their possessions were their own" is better than the NRSV, "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions." As Jews, the believers knew that the world and everything in it is God's and we are merely stewards. God is the owner; we are the trustees.

Second, the process of selling possessions to raise money is on-going, not completed: "they would sell their possessions and goods" (2:45). Even 4:35 can be read "for as many as owned lands or houses sold them as *needed* and brought *all* the proceeds of what was sold."

But most important, the ambiguities in Luke's grammar are cleared up by the events. What is the point of noting Barnabas' generosity, if selling the field is something that he is required to do? Even more to the point, when Ananias lies to Peter about having turned over all the proceeds of a sale, Peter's replies, "Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? After it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

In all these passages, Luke wants us to see that the transformed hearts of the believers has resulted in their recognizing that all they own is to be shared as needed, that this is what it means to be good trustees of God's world. There was simply to be no needy persons among them and from what we know of the early church in its first centuries, the Christians did a remarkable job of living this out.

resurrected Jesus had swirled around the city. Then, a couple of months later, at the height of the Pentecost festival, with tensions still running high, followers of Jesus had spoken of God's mighty acts in a dizzying array of languages, none of which they could have possibly known. And Peter, an ill-educated Galilean fisherman, had risen in the temple courtyards to proclaim that this crucified Jesus from no-account Nazareth had not only been resurrected but was God's Messiah. Astonishingly, 3,000 Jews had believed it, that very day!

Surely, the question on many people's minds was whether anything would come of this. There had been others put forward as Israel's savior. When the Romans had ended their brief rebellions, followers had simply melted away, often looking for someone else to adopt as their champion. 3,000 was a lot of people, but would it be enough to sustain these followers of Jesus? Would they fall apart as the initial swell of enthusiasm faded?

The answer came quickly. This community of believers not only survived, it thrived. They lived as devout Jews, devoting themselves to teaching and fellowship, to common meals and to prayer. But what set them apart, what must have surprised many, was the enormous outpouring of generosity. Those who enjoyed abundance, shared it. Land and other possessions were sold as needed to see that the needs of every single one of the thousands of believers were met.

In this, the believers lived out the story of manna in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. There, God had provided the people with their bread every day, for the manna could not be stored. All of them had as much as they needed, whether they gathered a little or a lot (see Exodus 16). The people were to reflect God's character in their own. So, for example, the Jewish Law stipulated that grain was to be left in the fields to be gathered by those who needed it. God had taught them that they were to be generous to the weakest members of their community (e.g., Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 15).

Abundant generosity

It is one thing for Peter to make his many proclamations of the Good News. It is another for the Jews in Jerusalem to see this Good News lived out among this newly created community of believers. Peter's speeches are a witness to Jesus. But just as much so, perhaps more so, are the lives of the believers.

Of course, we all know that abundant generosity is easier said than done. Luke depicts a community where property is still private (see text box) but is held so that it can be shared as needed. We are tempted to see Luke as painting an idealized portrait of this community. Yet, such generosity was a hallmark of the early Christians. They understood that since we are stewards of God's world, "mine" takes on a different meaning, setting them apart from their Greco-Roman neighbors. In the third century, the Roman writer Lucian talked about the Christians' "absurd generosity and their sacrificial concern for others whom they didn't even know by name."¹

Making do with more

I know that there are those in our congregation who struggle to make do with less. But a quick trip around our parking lot, or those of our nearby schools, reveals that for many of us, the problem is making do with more. In a recent article,² Tim Stafford notes that while our abundance creates limitless possibilities for our lives, too many of us lack any signposts pointing us in the right direction. The field is open but we are not sure where to head, so we are frozen in place or drift as the breezes blow. Stafford is also correct that this is a much bigger issue for the children of boomers than for the boomers themselves, who may not have grown up around the abundance we enjoy now.

Yet, wealthy people were among the early Christians. Believers met in the homes of the prosperous, such as Mary, John Mark's mother. They depended on the wealthy like Barnabas to sell property so that everyone's needs could be met. St. Augustine grew up with money as did Francis of Assisi. Like the prosperous in the Jerusalem church, these Christians came to understand that the cross of Christ is the only signpost we need. It points us toward lives of sacrificial love, serving the needs of others before our own. Winning at money begins with knowing whose money it is and hearing God's call for its use.

¹Quoted on p. 24 in Charles Williamson's Bible study on Acts which is part of the *Interpretation Bible Studies* series. These studies are uniformly excellent. They are divided into ten study units and run about 100 pages total. I often recommend them as companion reading for my Bible Academy classes.

²from "Making Do With More" in the Feb 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*. Stafford's question for us is this: In an age of abundance, how do we survive with our souls intact? You can find the article on-line at www.christianitytoday.com. Search for the article name.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

February 12 ~ 18

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Acts 7-9; Proverbs 10:17-32 Stephen is the first Christian martyred; Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus</p>	<p>Day 2 Acts 10-12; Proverbs 11:1-15 The Gospel is taken directly to the gentiles; Peter miraculously escapes from prison</p>
<p>Day 3 Day for Reflection</p>	<p>Day 4 Acts 13-15; Proverbs 11:16-31 Paul's first missionary journey; the big conference in Jerusalem on the issue of circumcision</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 16-18; Proverbs 12:1-14 Paul's second missionary journey; he heads into Greece</p>	<p>Day 6 Acts 19-21; Proverbs 12:15-28 Paul goes to Ephesus before heading back to Greece on his third missionary journey; Paul arrives back in Jerusalem knowing that he is a marked man</p>
<p>Day 7 Acts 22-25; Proverbs 13:1-12 Paul is taken into custody and the Romans must save him from assassination plots by the Jewish leadership; Paul's trials before the Romans begin</p>	

Sermon Notes

Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper?

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to get a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

February Book Recommendation

***How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Stuart and Fee**

Reading Scripture well is an art. This is an excellent lay person's introduction to interpreting the Bible. The Bible includes a variety of different literary forms – hymns, letters, histories, poems, gospels, etc – and each presents unique challenges. The authors examine each type of literature and provide some very helpful practical tips on making better sense of the Bible.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

What was your first reaction to today's Scripture readings? What sort of portrait was painted for you of this first Christian community? What do you think Luke might have been trying to convey to Theophilus, the prosperous Greek-speaking novice Christian for whom Paul wrote Luke and Acts? What would you say is the most important point that Luke is trying to make in these passages?

Do you think that abundance causes problems? If so, what are some examples? If you have lived in times of little and times of plenty, how would you contrast them? Tim Stafford quotes one college drop-out from an affluent family:

"My parents were so driven. Even in high school, they knew what they wanted. For me, having everything handed to me, it's harder to make a decision to do something that's difficult. I feel stagnant. It's hard to feel motivated, with so much coming at you. There are so many options that look really nice. It's harder to make a commitment, harder to really connect to something."

Have you ever struggled with similar feelings? Perhaps you've known someone who has. What would you tell them? How might you help them find the path of discipleship; i.e., loving obedience to God? How can generosity and service to others provide us with purpose and fulfillment? What are some practical ways that we could better use our abundance? How could we begin to reshape our priorities? Many Christians have found that tithing helps them to make this more concrete. Have you?