

## Body of Christ, Birth of the Church

In the weeks after the Resurrection of Jesus, something very new was coming into the world. The disciples were becoming what we might call the church, and what they would have called the Body of Christ.

We read in the Acts of the Apostles, *Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to fellowship, to breaking bread together, and to prayer. They sold their possessions and held all in common, and spent much time together in the temple and in each other's homes.* Isn't that lovely? One gets the impression that though Jesus is no longer there physically, his seat was still warm.

But that was the whole point. The earliest believers had a profound sense of the continued presence of Jesus. They had a deep sense that the risen Lord still stood in their midst<sup>1</sup>, and so they were devoted to study and to prayer, and to treating their money and their time as belonging to God. They came together as the Body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus in the world. I don't mean that in a metaphoric or a symbolic sense. I mean that sacramentally: just as the bread and wine become the holy presence of God, the gathering of the baptized was a sacrament in and of itself.

To be honest, this picture of the first community is probably a little too perfect. We know that. And yet, this story speaks of how the community really practiced their new faith. They knew that Jesus was with them when they gathered together in his name.

I believe that what we see in Acts, despite its newness, was a vision of what a mature baptized community looks like. Curiously, these folks had no sense of legacy: none had a proper theological education. All were there by virtue of conversion and belief: they had experienced baptism as a ritual of dying to sin and of gaining new life, and they lived accordingly. They gathered and broke bread, they gave and they prayed and they ate in a way that reflected that new life.

Then we get to the part about selling their possessions and distributing to all as had need. We tend to speed-read past this part, but it's right there in the text:

*Those who believed had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.<sup>ii</sup>*

Again, they did this because this was how they experienced the presence of the Risen Christ in their midst. We don't know how widespread this communitarian practice was, but it certainly faded. It was recovered in the 4<sup>th</sup> century with the Monastic movement, and continues there to this day: novices to many religious orders must sell all their assets in order to enter that life. That's not for everyone, but the church has preserved this practice through proportional giving, and in growing toward the tithe of 10%. That number is known throughout scripture, and recalls the giving of those earliest Christians. The point is not fundraising: the point is being authentically and sacramentally the Body of Christ.

Now, not everybody can give that much at all times. In fact, the passage in Acts makes clear that many in the community of believers were themselves in need...which is partly why those with means gave so abundantly. The tithe is how we've preserved this tradition. Is a reminder that baptism comes with economic and spiritual commitments to one another and to God.

Now, 10% is a lot less than 100%, but it's still a lot. Fortunately, as American Mainline Protestant Churches we much more *efficient* than that. We've figured out how to be the Body of Christ at a much more comfortable price point. The average pledge in an American church ranges from 2 to 2.6%, depending on how you crunch the numbers. While these are not great economic times, that is down from the high-water mark of percentage giving of 1933 (during the great depression).<sup>iii</sup> And this is after a half-century of the greatest economic growth the planet has ever known.

I'm not worried about the flow of money into the church. I'm concerned that we do so little to question the shaky foundations of the 2% church. A 2% Church doesn't quite sound like the Body of Christ in its fullness. That doesn't sound so much like a gathering of disciples with a deep sense of the Risen Lord in their midst.

Looking at Christianity in America, we know then what a 2% church looks like. So what would a 10% church look like? I don't mean to ask this in a judgmental way, because I know we're all on a journey and a journey takes many steps. Instead, I want to expand our imagination so that we can begin to see what God imagines for us. What could the spirit of the 10% church be? A 10% church would be filled with transformed people who are not beholden to the economic powers of our world. A 10% church could truly speak for justice and peace, speaking in a voice that would transcend conservative, or liberal. Instead of just maintaining our own ministries, we could plant churches, or support other churches elsewhere that reach the people that we don't see on a daily basis.

We could still build grand buildings...but what if we built them with the last 2%, rather than the first and only 2%...what if the first 8 or 9% was all about being the body of Christ, of feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger? The 10% church could look a lot less like an institution, and more like this first gathering: more immediate, more intimate, more awake to the presence of the Risen Lord in our midst.

This would call for a re-birth, but I believe that rebirth is happening. It is a painful process at times...birth comes with pain. (Says the man, I know.) This story from Acts is a part of the birth of an original, new, yet surprisingly mature community of belief, one with a profound sense of their commitments to one another: generous gifts of time and fellowship and money that honored the presence of the Risen Lord, standing there with them. His seat at the table was still warm, and so their hearts were both glad and generous.

His seat at the table wasn't warm simply because he had only recently been among them; rather, the warmth was there because the people gave, and prayed, and broke bread together so wholeheartedly. And we, as a church, are recovering this.

The first gathering of the believers as this new thing, what we would call the church, was all about intimacy and immediacy. Their identity was rooted in their baptism, and baptism came with things that in our world seem to have become anathema: obligation, sacrifice and fidelity. Yet as followers of Jesus, we know that these are not burdens but treasures, keys

to the greater gift of the church itself. When we devote ourselves to prayer and fellowship, the risen Lord stands in our midst. In worship, in giving, in breaking bread together, we are not just members of the nicest church in town. We are the Body of Christ, God's gift to the world.

*Homily for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Year A, May 7 2017, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.*

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<sup>i</sup> The Living Church May 7 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Acts of the Apostles 2:44-45

<sup>iii</sup> <https://biblicalstewardship.net/statistical-research-on-stewardship/>. I have read previous articles that offered statistics of 2-2.3% that typically focused on Mainline churches (This article includes evangelical churches as well).