

“Communal Living”

Acts 2:36-47

June 3rd, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

It was an exciting time in history. Jesus had risen from the dead and by doing so, He continued in consistency with all that He had lived. The Holy Spirit had come upon the apostles in the Pentecost experience and when Peter finished telling the story of the life and purpose of Christ’s life, there were about three thousand converts to the new faith. A new community of Christ-followers had begun and Luke, alone, goes on from his gospel to describe the new faith community in his work Acts.

In Acts, we see at least seven characteristics of the first Christian church.

- ① They were a **learning** community, committing a portion of their time together to the teaching of the apostles.
- ② They were a community of **fellowship**, experiencing a quality of being together that made life easier to bear and celebrate.
- ③ The first church was **sacramentally oriented** in that they regularly used the symbols Jesus had given them of the bread and wine.
- ④ They were a **praying** church, knowing that God is a personal God Who hears even our innermost spoken and unspoken thoughts and feelings.
- ⑤ Since they were devout Jews, they regularly went to the temple to worship – **they revered God**.
- ⑥ They were **an active church** as there were frequent changes – wonders, signs and miracles.
- ⑦ It was a **sharing** church as they immediately engaged in communal living as best they could.

These seven characteristics were somewhat related because Christianity become a way of life. Their minds, hearts, time, abilities and their money were tied directly into their trust in God.

Is your mind, heart, time, abilities and money tied directly into your trust in God?

This morning I want to focus on the last aspect of early church life, communal living, and how that concept evolved. I’ll suggest how we can share more of ourselves with one another, achieving a sense of community, even though we are not a commune.

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Palestine had about four or five thousand Jewish Christians at this time. Obviously not all Christians gathered at the same place and it is equally clear that not everyone was involved in this Jerusalem commune.

What is described here is probably about the core group of Christians which included the apostles, their families and their closest friends (which may have been around two hundred or less). As they began to sell their belongings, eat some meals in common and, in some cases, share dwellings, a commune was formed.

Peter was the strongest personality and he became the leader of the community. One incident, with which you are familiar, involves the couple Ananias and Sapphira.

Like the others, they had sold their property but handed in some of the money, lying by saying that they had handed in all of their money. As it was described, they didn’t have to hand in all of their money but they apparently wanted to look good so they lied.

When confronted in their lie, they fell over dead, each with a heart attack, or something, and that impressed everyone.

Luke’s description of the first Christian commune was about their excitement and total commitment. They did this, in part, because they expected Jesus to return soon. Even Paul, when

writing his first letter to the Corinthians years later in the 50's, fully expected Jesus to return any day.

For a number of months, their commune worked. They were happy but in the passing of time, the group eventually dispersed – probably because of the persecution launched by Saul the Pharisee. This early commune's commitment to sharing and a voluntary simplicity of life-style was mirrored in the Medieval monastic movement of the priests and nuns.

Pure economic communism was abandoned by the early church – probably because it is too demanding. We are not disciplined enough nor are we willing to make the many personal sacrifices needed to make communal living work. History also shows it is difficult for people to live closely and intimately together with several others. We seem to have a hard enough time living together with one family under one roof.

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Toward the end of our college days, I thought communal living was a pretty good idea and so we joined with two other couples who decided to rent a large house in New England while two of us attended the same seminary. It worked fairly well for a nine month period. Each couple had their own sleeping quarters and we shared a common living room, dining room and kitchen.

Common meals broke down within two weeks because one couple suddenly became vegetarians with one of them measuring out every ounce on her Weight Watcher's food scale. We also experienced some different values and at times, it was draining.

One day I saw one of the other men sitting in the living room and his infant son began crawling toward the actively burning fireplace about five feet in front of where he was sitting and reading. To remedy the situation, he called over his shoulder into the kitchen, demanding that his wife, who was up to her elbows in cooking, drop what she was doing and come into that room and

get the baby before he burned. I'll never forget that scene.

All of us did get along amiably but to come home from a demanding day at work or school and find that there were other people in your living room, to whom you had to be sensitive – it all came to become challenging. It wasn't long before I got in touch with my own need for time alone. But I suspect this was true for all of us. We can even see this in Jesus as He often went away into the hills to pray and get away from it all.

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From that commune experience, which was a fantastic learning experience for all of us, I modified my ideal of communal living. One idea I've thought of is for a number of Christians to purchase a large mansion or condominium and section it off into separate living spaces.

On the first floor, there would be a large dining room and a lounge, perhaps even a game room and common room for computers and children's play. Whenever the occupants chose, they could have a common meal, at least on holidays and possibly once a month.

Every household would have their privacy but would find that living in proximity with others would increase their time with others. This would be a condo-community.

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A variation on that idea could involve people building houses near one another and somehow erecting a community house in the center of the tract of land for occasional common meals and even worship services. As you see, this idea moves the commune into a larger community.

In today's culture, there is a need for greater intimacy with others. Henri Nouwen, the writer and priest, suggested that there are two trends in the way we are living.¹

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer, Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image, 1979) He suggested three trends but the third is omitted because I

The first is that people are becoming more inner-world oriented. With all of the technological communication advancements, people, he suggested, are feeling more and more insignificant. People are increasingly engaged in self-reflection and individuality. That people are considerably less interested in social norms or traditions – almost to the point of denying any social responsibility for others.²

Nouwen suggested that our movement inward has led to more privatism that is not only anti-authoritarianism and anti-institutional but also self-centered – a preoccupation with material comfort and personal gratification. Just look at the consumer price increases, the scarcity of long-term relationships and the aching loneliness.

Another author suggested that young adults are becoming captive to their own peer group. “As adult authority disintegrates, they are more and more captives of each other. . . . When adult influence [completely] disappears, the peer control intensifies.”³ You see this when the peer view point becomes more important than all other influences in society. You already know that this has always tended to be the trend in young people’s quests for self-identity but this pattern continues in us as we mature.

Even as adults, we can be surprised to see how much we end up conforming ourselves to our own little in-groups in order to gain their approval. On the inside, we know this isn’t the way we should manage our lives but we still don’t want to risk exposing ourselves to others who may voice a criticism and deem us as less worthy. We don’t want to do the work of owning who we are so we keep making the mistake of taking the thoughts and actions of others personally.⁴ It’s as if we have this compass within us that keeps pointing to the magnetic pull of

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² Nouwen, p29.

³ Nouwen quoting David Riesman, p32.

⁴ See Don Miguel Ruiz *The Four Agreements* ISBN: 1-878424-31-9.

others’ opinions. Instead, we shouldn’t take what others do or say personally with regard to our own self-worth.

Because we keep taking what others do and say personally, we live in fear. We’re so needy and dependent on the approval of others that we fearfully restrict our lives to conform to people whom we believe to be almost exactly like us. We are fearful of moving into an intentional community. But community is not mere conformity. Instead, community is an intentional gathering of caring, support and love of a diverse people.

So we are afraid that our neighbor might not take care of the communal lawnmower as well as we might. Suppose the other person doesn’t pay their fair share of the landscaping bill? Isn’t it amazing that two or three of us can’t get together and co-purchase a snow-blower or lawnmower (and share the maintenance costs)? How about cutting each other’s lawns?

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You and I are called to several things to help one another deal with the raging loneliness that is not only affecting the old but the young as well.⁵

① First, our church should be **a community which articulates or expresses our inner events.** Our personal experiences with one another should help us come to terms with our inner struggles. Through our time together, we should come to know that it’s not that God is “out there” or “up there” but within us – even in times when we acutely sense that each of us walk alone.

If we are Christians who never deal with our individual feelings and perceptions about what happens in our lives, we are missing the most basic of life’s questions. If we go through our lives, always avoiding the difficult and complex issues, we are doomed to living a superficial and boring existence. We are dooming ourselves to live only a shallow un-thought out existence

⁵ Nouwen’s thoughts are used extensively in this section.

tantamount to the level of television game shows and soap operas. So the first and most basic task of our Christian community is to **do the work of dealing with the deep and significant movements of our spirit.**

We can't go about this work together until we build **trust** and **sensitivity** for one another. We need trust in order to explore our internal struggles together. We've got to be offering channels through which people can join us in discovering themselves, safely clarifying their own experiences and finding new ways of seeing the reality of God in their lives.

② A second personal and community level characteristic we must do is **cultivate compassion**. This gathering of Christians, on this street, should serve as a model for the use of authority with compassion. Compassionate sensibilities may have already started to leak into the business world.

Hewlett Packard, one of the larger high-tech corporations, has interesting management techniques. Their executives and managers don't have their offices in a separate building from those whom they manage. They don't separate themselves with glass and steel and a sea of support personnel but do it differently.

Instead, managers work right in the midst of everyone at work. Supervisors and workers work in casual clothing, often jeans, with lots of shrubs and plants and works of art surrounding them and their coworkers. They work along side of the rest of the staff with their sleeves rolled up, considering themselves and everyone around them to be part of the team. Because of the corporate training, the attitudes are that if a manager doesn't care about all members on the team, they're not doing their job properly. But I wonder how they teach compassion.

How can we teach compassion here, except by modeling it? In our time spent in this community, we should be experiencing compassion. We should be experiencing forgiveness.

When we find ourselves alienated or broken, in some way, we should be experiencing, in the midst of these people here, a sense of shared support and consideration. We should find renewal of our hope from just being together.

Is that true in your experiences while you are here? Are you making it happen in the experiences of others when they are here? Are other people gaining hope just from being in your presence? Are you acting in such a way as to bring out the best in them by looking for it and celebrating it with them?

Today, have you taken the time to remind someone here that they did a nice job at something they have done? From being here, have you revised and changed your outlook on the world?

Think again through the seven characteristics of the first Christian church. Learning, fellowship, sacramental celebration, prayer, a sense of reverence, change and sharing.

Your presence here, what you are doing with yourself in this community here, may be the only sense of God's kingdom that someone will experience this week. What we are, as a community, is what you are making if it.

So we symbolize our connectedness together, in Christ, through the sacrament of communion.

You are the church.

I am the church.

We are the church together.

All God's people all around the world.

Yes, we're the church together. ☪

