

Good Morning Friends: it is hard to believe that this is the 8th Sunday of remote/virtual worship services, and with many more in our future together. I miss being with you in person, however I am blessed with those of you I have been with using our new best application ZOOM. I am encouraged and fulfilled with the many deep conversations and reflections on scripture, prayers, and lament we have shared in new ways. Thank you for watching and listening to this week's homily. To be honest, these are awkward and uncomfortable; nevertheless we move on doing our best to share the word, explore its relevance to us in our time, co-create with God the beloved community, and as Paul writes in Thessalonians 'pray without ceasing'. Join us for our homily reflection and virtual coffee hour.

A reading from Acts of the Apostles

Community of believers

⁴²The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. ⁴³A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were united and shared everything. ⁴⁵They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. ⁴⁶Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. ⁴⁷They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

⁴³⁻⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷ 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.

³² The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions but held everything in common. ³³ The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them all. ³⁴ There were no needy persons among them. Those who owned properties or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds from the sales, ³⁵ and place them in the care and under the authority of the apostles. Then it was distributed to anyone who was in need.

I am a huge fan of Monty Python and have made it a personal ritual to watch their 3 major films (Life of Bryan, Search for the Holy Grail and The Meaning of Life) at least once a year. They fill me with comic relief, they are good for my soul. I have imagined that a great script for a fourth film would be The Acts of the Apostles.

Each Easter season we revisit in Acts of the Apostles this growing community of men and women that were so close to Jesus led by Peter, and of course the know it all outsider Paul, as they attempt to make sense of Jesus life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Jesus and his followers ... were hippies in a world of Augustan yuppies. The historical Jesus was a peasant Jewish Cynic... . His strategy, implicitly for himself and explicitly for his followers, was the combination of free healing and common eating, a religious and economic egalitarianism that negated alike and at once the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religion and Roman power.

—JOHN DOMINIC CROSSAN

Their lives and their world have been turned upside down. They have a chaotic leadership team, and one might suggest they are clueless. They left their families and trades and spent the better part of 3 years chasing around the country with Jesus. Now that he has moved on, they are left with overwhelming grief, confusing directions, his transforming relationship with them, and their fear of the Empire and the Jewish leadership.

They learn that they have powerful spiritual powers, they work to organize their community to grow and to survive, they banter on just when and how to tell the Jesus story, they argue over the menu, who's in and who's out, how important is it to be Kosher, or not, and of course the big circumcision debate, and whether or

not to stay close to home and wait for the pending return of God's kingdom or head out into the wilderness and run around, run around, run around.

Luke, the storyteller is not very helpful for our understanding either, he literally writes two volumes with the two lead characters, Peter and Paul, who I would imagine in my Monty Python film are still debating the table setting, menu and invitation list for their heavenly banquet.

In today's reading from Acts we learn about the community of believers; This passage follows the narrative of Peter's emerging leadership and the baptism of 3000. We know that they were successful.

For three centuries they grew and prospered as an underground community, practicing communitarian principles, caring for one another, sharing their resources, creating an alternative world hiding from the power of the Roman Empire. The early church has been compared to the underground railroad movement prior to the civil war.

Robin Meyers writes in *The Underground Church*:

They were not sustained by the assurance of personal salvation in the form of a ticket to heaven. It was not conformity of belief that united them, not hierarchy, not creeds. Rather it was a powerful confidence that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God had changed everything. Hence the only way to be a true disciple was to live as a truly changed human being. The first Jesus Followers were not, as so many churches are today, communities of conformity. Rather, they were communities animated by a common spirit—

I think it is helpful for us today, in this time of pandemic isolation and fear that we look to these early followers of the Way for guidance. We share many of the same emotions: fear, loss, confusion, lack of leadership, radical changes within families, neighborhoods, centers of worship.

There is a saying in Central American Liberation Theology that ‘the poor evangelize us’ that they challenge us by their overwhelming numbers, their poverty and their increasing misery. They evangelize us as we turn to them in mission. Theologian John Sabrino writes when the church takes the poor seriously, it is then that it has become truly apostolic. The poor initiate the process of evangelization. When the

church reaches out to them in mission the paradoxical result is they, the poor, evangelize the church. Think of the many manifestations this pandemic is evangelizing our community?

We are called to reach out in new and different ways to those who have been affected by the virus. We are called to pray for and support our health care workers in all ways that are possible. We are challenged to pray and provide pastoral care for those that are grieving from a distance. We are called to reimagine how a community of faith stays connected during a time of separation. We are challenged to grow our capacity to be disturbed as we live into the pain of separation, and of disease, and to reach out in prayer and to reach inward to listen carefully to what God is intending for us. We are called to fully experience the risen Christ in the context of the beloved community by turning, learning, praying, worshiping, blessing, sending and resting. None of these expectations are simple or ordinary.

Our anxiety, our fear, the disruption to our lives in so many ways can be seen through the lens of the followers of Jesus described to us in the Acts of the Apostles.

Archbishop Ndungane known for his outspoken opposition to injustice and economic oppression in southern Africa speaking a few years ago at the EDS graduation preached that "Lament is about paying attention to the human

predicament...about being honest with the realities of the world in which we live...about being prepared to listen to the stories of others,"

"Lament is to stand in solidarity with others of God's children...to open ourselves to the pain of others.... When we lament with others for the pains they suffer, we will find we can also lament for ourselves, and the failings and injustices of the societies of which we are a part and in which we are complicit."

We live in a time of lamentation. We live in a time that calls us to reflection and action; in some ways we are standing still like a hummingbird.

This past week we read in the daily office from the letters of James challenging the church for renewal only when right practice replaces right belief, when our commitment to do the real work of compassion in the world is stronger than our impulses to convert others to our own ways of thinking, when we become doers of the word and not just hearers only. As Bonhoeffer wrote of this passage, 'grace is a byproduct not of good intentions but of good deeds performed by imperfect people for the right reasons'.

As Christians we are sent to advocate for abundant life in the midst of pandemics, and to not forget the ever-present challenges of poverty, for to bring justice in the midst of empire and oppression, and peace in the midst of civil disruption and distrust. We are not called to run away as Monty Python characters. We are called by Jesus and sent like the first disciples to respond with wisdom, courage, advocacy, mercy, and humility. We are sent into a broken and frightened world with the promise of the Beloved Community demonstrated to us in the risen Christ.

And so, as we open ourselves to new expressions of our relationship with God and our communities, we should look at what made us different and challenging to begin with, we are called as suggested by MLK and others to move away from the edge of irrelevancy. We have the opportunity to respond to God's call to unclutter our minds, release our addictions, and to find a new pulse in the Body of the Risen Christ.

We have been warned by the prophets over and over to stop substituting empty rituals for justice and peace and to be engaged in creating the beloved community. We have certainly been eager in voice to love God and our neighbor, now is the acceptable time for us to ask what effect we have really had on disease, poverty, addiction, greed, violence and the destruction of the environment.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry writes in his homily this week: What would love do? Love finds a path in this new normal to build church communities around being in relationship with God. Love calls us to care for our neighbors, for our enemies. Love calls us to be gentle with ourselves, and to be in love with God, to be still and to know that God is God.

Surely the most dangerous verse in the Bible is Romans 12:2. There Paul endorses Christian nonconformity: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. This is an invitation to submit to the process of personal transformation that is unavoidable if one takes the gospel seriously. All change is risky and difficult, but we are called to nothing less in a broken world. We must become radicals.

And the people say, Amen.

Meyers, Robin. *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the subversive way of Jesus* (p. 212).

Questions for discussion

1. In what ways are you being spiritually transformed by the pandemic?
2. In what ways might the experience of the pandemic evangelize our faith community?
3. In what ways might the experience of the pandemic lead us as a community of faith to more relevancy in healing a broken world and being cocreators of God's Beloved Community?