

I sometimes get asked how I choose what I'm going to preach about on Sundays. Sometimes folks think I pick a topic first and then select the appropriate Scripture. But that's not what actually happens. Instead, I let the Scripture pick my topic. I preach using the lectionary, the calendar of readings I've told you about before which most mainline churches follow. Each week I'm given an Old Testament, Psalter, Gospel and Epistle reading.

On most Sunday mornings I preach to you from the Gospels. The parables of and stories about Jesus are usually a little more interesting, and more fun to preach about. But today I'm preaching from Acts. The book of Acts is the story of the earliest church and the way they lived together in the first years. This is a sort of "next chapter" of the Gospel stories. This is how this band of believers began to become something greater than just themselves

This morning's reading from Acts talks about how they sustained themselves in the earliest days: All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day 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, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I really resisted preaching about this passage this morning. I hate preaching about money and about how you should be using the things you have. I make it a point not to know who gives what to this congregation. I don't want to. And I make it a point not to harangue you to put more in the collection plate. Some weeks you just can't, and there is absolutely no shame in that. I don't tell you to give. It makes me feel like a televangelist. And so I say, in the end, don't listen to any preacher who tells you what you should do with your money.

But as much as that is true, I remember something one of my seminary professors used to say. If you are scared to preach on a particular text, if it makes you uncomfortable, it means you probably need to preach on it.

The Bible says more about the correct treatment of money than it says about a lot of other things. More than it says about heaven. Far more than it says about sex. More than a vast majority of topics. In the end, the stewardship of money, which is how you use it, seemed to matter a lot to the people who wrote the Bible.

The interesting thing is not that they are saying "turn over all your money" to the church. If I said that, I hope you all would walk out the sanctuary doors and find a new pastor. Instead, we are told in this passage about what the earliest believers did. We are told about how they as a community survived in the hardest of times.

They took what they had, and they shared it with one another, and they shared it with those who needed it outside of the church, and they gave thanks for all that they had been given. In a very radical way, they cast their lots in with one another so that they could do ministry to those who needed it most.

There is a church in Washington, DC that takes up an unusual offering on Sunday mornings. They still have a collection plate, but people don't just put something in. They tell the people that come to worship that if they are in real need, they are free to take something out.

You might think that would make the church an easy target. You could come and just sit on the back row and take everything out when it gets to you. But that's not what happens. Rarely does anyone take more than they need. And usually, those who you might think have nothing to give, give something instead of taking.

I'm not suggesting we start that here. But I do think there's something to be learned there. The people give fearlessly. They give because others need. They give because they receive. They give because they believe something good is happening at that church and they know that they have to be the ones who ensure that it's there for the people who need it the most. And they give without fear.

It's hard to give without fear. Especially in this economy. I know how hard it is out there right now. I know there is a lot of anxiety. I know that the impulse is not to give now more than ever, but to try to keep as much as possible for oneself in case of emergency. My friends at non-profits tell me that they are having a particularly hard time making ends meet. People aren't giving the way they used to even as more people are losing services that they depended upon. They are struggling to do more with less and often turning people away. In the end, the need is becoming greater and greater.

And I think about how the way we give is sometimes so different that was in this earliest church. I think about how when things were so bad for them, far worse than they are for those of us nowadays, they reached in a little deeper and gave to one another and the ones they didn't even know.

And you know what happened? They didn't go into the red. They didn't lose everything. They didn't die.

Instead they lived. Scripture tells us: the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

They grew.

Yesterday I was helping a friend move. We were nearing the end and she cleaned out her refrigerator. She threw out the products that were opened or about to expire, or already expired. I went and took them out to the dumpster and came back from more trash. When I went back there was a woman, probably in her 80's, digging through the dumpster and pulling out the expired food. She spoke only Russian, but I could tell what was happening. This was the only way she would eat. I gave her some money, something I rarely do, and I went upstairs to try to

get her some more food. When I came back she was gone. But soon another elderly couple appeared in her place doing the same thing.

I remember how that morning I had been looking at my bank account and getting frustrated that I wasn't able to afford a minor want. It made me feel pretty ashamed that I was so worried about that, than about the woman downstairs who would dig through bags of trash to eat.

And I thought about how that was my work, because I was a Christian. And about how it was the work of the churches. And I thought about that neighborhood. So many churches. Churches I knew. Churches that held on to everything they had out of fear. Churches that thought they couldn't help her because their membership was dwindling and so were the reserves. Churches that, unless something drastic happens, will be dead in twenty years.

And I read this passage. And I read those lines about what happened. About how they gave, not until it hurt, but until it felt good. And how they grew. The church as we have known it for centuries would never have existed without that first church making the decision to be fearless with what they had, and with the love that Christ gave them.

And so, that is my challenge to you today. How will we cast aside our fears and be fearless in Christ? How will we be owned not by the demons of "do we have enough" but by the love of Christ? How will we show the world outside these doors that grace is real, and that we can be God's agents of it?

This morning the Psalm was Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." If we really believe that, if we really believe it when we recite it, then we have to believe that it's true when it comes to stewardship. And we have to believe that in the end we are all here because someone in the church showed us grace of one kind or another. And in the end, it is not our fear, but our joy and our hope and our generosity that help us grow. Amen.