

To Each According to their Need

Hespeler, April 30, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Fourth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 2:42-47](#), Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

We seem to live in an age when anytime anyone wants to take a measure that will address some of the social and economic inequalities in our world, they will face a torrent of criticism and abuse. Any program that seeks to address the systemic issues in society that tend to keep racial minorities from advancing socially or economically will be attacked as being too woke – as if being awake and aware of systemic problems were a bad thing.

Any measures that seek to create a safe space for young people to discover their own identity is routinely labelled as grooming these days, often by people who have no understanding of how ironic they are being. Any tax or economic measure that, in any way, seeks to lessen the gap between the extremely wealthy and the abjectly poor is attacked as socialism.

This is just the world we find ourselves in these days. And what it often means is that we are now living in times when we cannot even discuss such measures rationally. It all just descends, almost immediately, to name-calling that has no real substance behind it. In various places, this has also led to the banning of books that raise such issues or even just make people think about them.

Radical Community

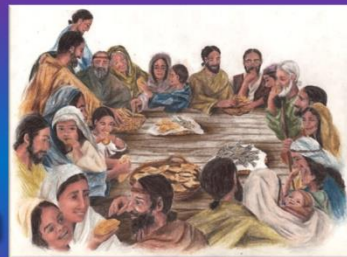
And so, can you imagine what might happen today in certain jurisdictions if somebody published a book that described a community where nobody had private property. Instead, everybody in this community sold everything they had and used the proceeds to support the people of the community according to only one criterion. People would not receive based on their status or their wealth, but only based on their need.

Can you imagine the outcry? Can you imagine the parents complaining about how they don't want their children being exposed to a book that is based on such a radical woke ideology? Can you hear the people complaining about elites who want to impose on us their socialistic and perhaps even communist point of view? I don't need to imagine it. I hear it all the time these days, don't you? Of course, once you explain to those people that the book they are complaining about is the Bible, you might get a somewhat different reaction.

Political Hot Potato

The passage we read this morning from the Book of Acts is one of those political, economic and theological hot potatoes of the Bible. Down through the years there have been many socialists, Communists and anti-capitalists who have pointed to this passage and said, "Look, here is the proof that our approach is divinely ordained." Meanwhile, I've certainly heard conservatives of various kinds dismiss what is described in this passage as little more than a failed experiment that only demonstrates that their approach is the only one that can possibly work in the real world.

So, I do think it is time for us to really dig into this passage and understand what is actually going on in it.



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The passage describes a community that actually existed – quite possibly for a long period of time – in the city of Jerusalem. This was genuinely one way in which the early church did seek to live out what they had learned from Jesus.

A Response to Jesus' Teaching

And it does make a lot of sense, doesn't it? I mean, how else do you set up your community after listening for so long to a man who said, **"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God"**? (Luke 6:20) How else do you respond to the teacher who told the rich man, **"There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."** (Luke 18:22)

So, it shouldn't surprise anybody that the early church did this. And the evidence for it is more than just what is found here in the Book of Acts. In Paul's letters, he writes often about a collection that he was making among the churches that he had founded. This collection was explicitly for the poor (see [Galatians 2:10](#)), but it is also clear that this money was not for the poor people in the communities where these churches were located, although, of course, there must have been many poor people there. No, Paul insisted that all of the money needed to be taken to Jerusalem. (see [1 Corinthians 16:3](#)) It is not hard to figure out that what this money was needed for was to support this ongoing community in Jerusalem and to provide for the people in it according to their need.

A Long-Lived Community

But the community lasted even longer than the time of Paul. Various leaders of the church right up until the fifth century made references to a group of people called the Ebionites. These were Christians who followed a very strict Jewish interpretation of the faith. They started out in and around Jerusalem, though with various wars and the destruction of Jerusalem, they eventually moved onto other places. The most important defining feature of this group, however, was their poverty. They owned nothing. That is what the name Ebionite means, the poor ones. So, it does seem very likely that this community that is described in the Book of Acts continued to exist on pretty much those same terms for something close to five hundred years.

So I would say that those who look at this passage and see in it a mandate to set up society on very different grounds from what we have in our modern capitalistic societies do have a point. This was not merely some experiment that was doomed to failure. There were Christians who lived out this economic vision of the faith and did so for a very long time.

And Yet Rarely Copied

And yet, at the same time, there doesn't seem to be any evidence that, as Christianity spread to other places, and particularly as it spread in Gentile territories, other churches sought to live in the same way. At least, certainly not to the same extreme as it did in Jerusalem. So, while it seems very clear that the way the church lived in Jerusalem was important, it really didn't seem as if there were any expectations that all Christians everywhere were meant to live in the same way. So, I am not sure that we could use this to say that this is the only and divinely inspired way to run an economy. I would caution socialists or Communists against making that argument.

An Alternate Vision

So, we are still left with the difficult question of how we are supposed to understand the significance of this description of the Church community in Jerusalem. I have come to see it like this. There is no question that Jesus presented a very different way of organizing society. This alternate vision was something that he called the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God definitely had economic dimensions to it. It was a kingdom where the first would be last and the last first. (Matthew 20:16) It was a kingdom where, to borrow from the Song of Mary, God had **“filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”** (Luke 1:53)

But, even if the church had this alternate vision for ordering society, it certainly had no ability to make it happen. The Roman Empire had all the power and had absolutely no interest in setting up a system where the resources of the Empire went to people according to their need. So, if a society organized according to the principles of the kingdom of God were to be established, the church would have to wait for God to do it. And the church absolutely expected that God would do that, though when exactly that would happen continued to be a problematic question. But they would never stop trusting that God would do it.

While They Waited

But in this, as in all things, the early church was never content with simply waiting for God to bring about the kingdom. They believed that they needed to start living in the reality of that kingdom in anticipation of what God was about to do. And I believe that that is what the establishment of this special economy in the Jerusalem Church is all about. They knew that they would have to wait in order to see it all come to pass, but they were determined that at least some would live in its reality right now.

That is why this community was established and that’s why it endured for so long. It is also why the Apostle Paul and all the churches that he established thought it to be a joy and privilege to give from out of their limited resources to support the poor in Jerusalem. Just knowing that there were some Christians out there who were living according to the economy of the kingdom of God was something that made the kingdom of God more real and closer to them. They believed that it was important that they be part of it in this way.

A Witness

They also believed that the very existence of such a community that was founded on a different economy stood as a witness to and as a condemnation of the system that flourished all around them. It was a way of declaring to the world that there was an alternative to a system that was entirely geared towards the prosperity and power of those who were already powerful and prosperous. They knew, because of the powerful earthly forces arrayed against them, that they could not set up such a witness in every church and every place, but they understood that, if they pooled their resources and gave generously, they could make that community exist somewhere and that it would stand as a rebuke to the ways in which their world was ordered.

So, that is how I have come to understand the existence of this extraordinary community of believers in Jerusalem. It seems to me that they believed that this was how society ought to be ordered and that it was how society ultimately *would* be ordered. All that stood in the way were the powers that were presently dominating in the world. It was not a matter of practicality that all Christians didn’t live this way; it was a matter of principality.

How we Respond Today

But, of course, all of that still leaves us to struggle with a question of how any of this applies to the challenges of living as the church in the modern world. In many ways, I'm not sure that the situation has changed all that much. It seems to me that many of the same powers are still at work in this world, the powers that seem to conspire so effectively to make sure that the great majority of the wealth of this earth remains in the hands of the relative few.

I am not blind, of course, to the many blessings that have been brought to us by our capitalistic system. I enjoy them daily. But I'm also aware that it is a system that has its flaws. For me, however, the problem is not the system itself. The problem is the powers in this world that conspire to use the system to their own end and thus also conspire to shut many out of its blessings.

But wherever the problem may lie, the reality is that we, in the church today, have no more power to change how things work than did that small group of Christians in Jerusalem at the very beginning. But just because we can't overhaul the system, doesn't mean that we should just throw up our hands and say that there's nothing we can do.

Showing the World Things Can be Different

Wouldn't it be something if we were able to set up communities, even small examples, that could demonstrate to the whole world how things could be different? That would be interesting. That would be a witness. And I know that various churches have attempted things like that at various times. I think it can be a powerful way to challenge the system of our world.

But just like it was not possible for all Christian communities in the first century to live that way, I do recognize that that is not going to be an option for the vast majority of Christians living in the world today. Most of us – myself included – really do not have the ability to just opt out of living according to the rules of the capitalistic world. There is nothing wrong with that.

Bearing Witness

But just because we have to live in it, doesn't mean that we don't see the flaws that are within the system. Just because we have to live within it and sometimes even see the benefits of it, doesn't mean that we can't be critical. We are people who are called to live according to the vision of the kingdom of God, which is a kingdom where the blessings that are given are shared according to need.

And anytime we can make that happen, that is a witness. I often see it happening, for example, when we host the food bank or when we are open for Hope Clothing here at St Andrews. I see it when we offer people food to eat, not because they've earned it but simply because they could use it.

We need to recognize this for what it is. If it is only charity, if it is only being kind, that is wonderful, but it is not enough. We should recognize this as a subversion of the system under which we live and, as much as possible, it should be something that we do in the full hope and expectation of the kingdom that God will establish. It is not enough to simply wait for God to do it. We must find creative ways, even if it's for only moments at a time, to live within the reality of God's kingdom.