

“That Would Never Work!”

Hespeler, April 7, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Second Sunday of Easter

[Acts 4:32-35](#), Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

Is it bad that, when I read our passage this morning from the Book of Acts, my first response is to say, “That will never work”? I read about how **“no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common,”** and all I can think is that someone was bound to abuse a system like that.

And how about the idea that **“there was not a needy person among them”**? What are the implications of that? If no one is ever afraid of poverty – of not being able to pay off their debts or put food on the table – then who is going to do the jobs that nobody wants to do? Everybody knows that it is only the threat of starvation that makes people apply for those really lousy jobs.

Red Flags

And if there was ever a big red flag, is it not this? **“As many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”** Do you realize the enormous amount of wealth and power being given to a small group of people there? Can you not see how they would inevitably use that to create their own tyrannical rule?

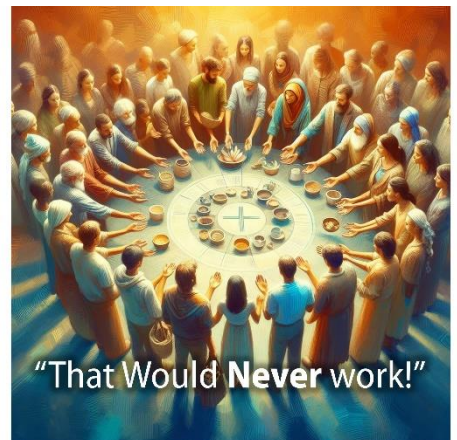
These, I must confess, are the kinds of questions and objections that come to my mind when I read that passage in the Book of Acts. I’ll bet they probably came to yours as well. And that is really kind of extraordinary when you think about it. I am quite sure that when the author of the Book of Acts wrote that little paragraph, it never occurred to him that any Christian might have a problem with what he was describing. He may have thought he was describing a goal, a utopia and something to work towards, but he didn’t expect anyone to have all these problems with it.

Did it Really Not Work?

Now, I do know that there are some people who would argue that the reason why we react like that is because this whole idea of how to treat property simply did not work out for the early church. We generally assume that all of these problems that I described did manifest themselves in this early church in Jerusalem and the whole system simply collapsed.

But there is actually no evidence for that at all. There is nothing in the scriptures that indicates that the people in that church didn’t work or contribute because they weren’t poor enough. There are no accounts of people mistreating the common property because they did not own it.

And far from all of this power going to the apostles’ heads, we are told that, as soon as some issues around fair distribution began to be raised, they were only too happy to give up this power and pass it on to a group of deacons who were empowered to make sure that any distribution was fair.



Who Actually Caused Trouble

In fact, there is only one story of anything going wrong with this way of organizing things. The only people who caused trouble in the system were a wealthy couple named Ananias and Sapphira. They sold some of their property and decided to hold back some of their wealth for themselves. And then they lied about it. Their greed made them lie and try to cheat the system. The problem, when there was one, wasn't the poor people. It was the rich ones.

What Influences Us Most?

Now we are supposed to be people who take the Bible seriously – who allow the Bible to influence how we relate to the world. And that makes me think that there is something wrong when we read a passage like this and our first instinct is not to say, “Wow, we should find ways to take this story and apply it to the way that we try to do things today.” No, our first reaction is to think, “That would never work because poor folks would abuse any such system!”

And do you know what that means? That means that we have allowed the assumptions of our modern society and of our economic system to have more influence over us than the Bible.

Today's Crises

Just look at how we talk about and try to respond to some of the huge crises that are affecting our society these days. We have a housing crisis. It seems that every year more and more people cannot afford suitable housing. We have an affordability crisis as people find that they cannot afford the basics of life.

Alongside of that, and certainly connected to that, there is a debt crisis with more and more people carrying a weight of debt that they will never be able to get off their backs before they die. That is, I realize, only a part of what we are dealing with as a society, but everyone agrees that these are deep problems that are affecting all of us to a certain extent. And they are certainly affecting the poorest among us most of all.

How We Respond

But it is very revealing how we talk about these problems and how we attempt to address them. Rather than talk about the availability and affordability of housing, we tend to focus on the proliferation of encampments and the dangers that they pose to property. When we talk about building more housing, the only way we can consider doing this is by getting private developers to build that housing. And, of course, any private company is necessarily going to be more concerned with its own profits than making sure that everyone can afford the housing they need.

Dealing With Inflation

And what about inflation. The causes of the inflation we are dealing with are complex, but there is no denying that a lot of it has to do with ongoing supply-chain issues, the continuing effects of the pandemic and a lack of competition in major corporations. It is not caused by rising wages for workers; they have largely remained flat for decades now in many cases. Companies and corporations have seen their profits go way up, but employees and workers have not seen their wages rise at anywhere

near the same rates. In the past wages may have been a major driver of inflation, but today that is not the case.

Nevertheless, guess what economists are doing to address the problem of inflation. They basically only have one strategy and that strategy is raising interest rates. And if you ask economists how high interest rates fight inflation, they will let you know. High interest rates cause higher unemployment which tends to drive wages down. The only solution they are offering to fight inflation is to bring wages down. Apparently, there's nothing they can do about competition or excess profit taking or even supply chain issues.

Our Ideology

All of that is simply an illustration that, when it comes to economic issues, we have an ideology. And it is the same ideology that says that the story in the Book of Acts would never work. The ideology of our society is that all economic problems are caused by poor people and by working class people.

We tend to think of poverty as a moral issue, that is to say that we assume that people are poor because they are somehow morally deficient. That's why we blame them for economic ills and why the only solutions we can come up with are solutions that discipline the poor in some way. And we have heard this ideology so much that we cannot even imagine thinking about such economic matters in any other terms.

Thinking Differently

But then we open up the Book of Acts and we are forced to think in other terms. I think that is a very good thing. We all need to have our basic assumptions challenged from time to time. And I believe that our society is in great need of that challenge right now.

I am not suggesting that we could cure all of the economic problems in our society by abolishing private property and making it so that everything is held in common. I am actually quite sure that we could not make that work. But the reason why it wouldn't work is not because of the laziness of the poor. It would be because of the greed of the wealthy that would not permit it to work.

What We Lack

But the other reason why it wouldn't work for us is because we lack what the people of that early church had. **“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”** What we are missing is the power of the resurrection and especially that “great grace.”

The Meaning of the Resurrection

I know that, when we talk about what the resurrection of Jesus means, we tend to think about it in terms of the impact it makes on another life in another world. We think of the promise that, because Jesus has been raised from the Dead, we also may be raised and so we can live to all eternity in the presence of God.

That is true; the truth that Jesus has been raised is a promise to us that God will raise us as well. But we do not need to wait until we come to the end of life in this world in order to have the resurrection of Jesus transform us. We can experience its power to transform our minds and fill us with grace now.

Transformation

That is what happened for those early Christians that allowed them to live in such a radical way. They learned to look at their possessions and property in new ways and to realize that these things had no value if they could not be used to better the lives of their siblings in Christ.

And, because they were filled with a grace that came from God, they could see that, if some were poor, it was not because there was any deficiency in them. Yes, perhaps they had faced some adverse circumstances, or they had lacked the advantages that others enjoyed, but there was nothing wrong with them. They did not hesitate to share what they could.

That is what I feel we are often lacking – the transformative power of the resurrection and the ability to see one another with grace. Is that why it seems so impossible today to offer people a way out of poverty? Is that why we only seem to be able to set up the system so that the rich only get richer while the poor only get poorer?

Beyond Economic Systems

Economic systems, as far as I am concerned, are kind of morally neutral. Capitalism, socialism, communism, anarchism, they all have their pitfalls and their shortcomings to be sure, but they are not, in themselves, good or evil. I believe that any of them could work given two things: the transforming power of the resurrection that allows people to see possessions in a new light and the power of grace that allows you to see people without judgement.

Where I think we need to put our energy, therefore, is not into promoting this system or that system as a solution to all of our economic woes. The systems are broken and will remain broken until our humanity can be made new.

Why Jesus Came

But that is why Jesus came – not just to offer us a way to heaven or to teach us to worship God in some particular way. Jesus came to transform our humanity. And yes, I know, as his followers we are still caught up in a world where the greed of some will continue to trap people in perpetual poverty and try to blame them for it while doing it. But we don't have to buy into that. We can choose to buy into the transformative power of the resurrection and we can choose to view people with nothing but grace.

By doing that, the church in Jerusalem offered a testimony to the world that things could be different. Just think what we could accomplish if we were half as courageous as them.