

“Better Together”

April 19, 2015

3rd Sunday of Easter – Pathway to Discipleship

Dan Price, CEO of Gravity Payments, became the favorite person of a few people this week. He announced that he would take a pay cut himself and set a minimum salary of \$70,000 for all of the employees in his company. His decision came after he read an article about happiness related to people’s earnings, and for many employees, this is a big deal. Some of their salaries will double.

In the US where the pay gap between CEOs and employees is so wide, Dan Price’s decision was big news. I thought about Dan Price as I read in Acts 2. There’s something about his personal conviction that mirrors the early church - his lifting up of his employees as important and vital.

Trust and love were abundant in the early church. Some scholars debate whether Luke wrote what was going on in the early church or if this was an ideal to strive for. Honestly, it’s difficult to read this and think that it actually worked this way. We know that problems arose - that life in the church wasn’t always like this - but how do we respond? How do we live more like this picture today?

If this is the church of Jesus Christ, this is a challenge for us as we seek to follow Jesus Christ. In a culture where we pride ourselves on independence, how do we receive this news? Yes, we may love and trust each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, but think about the sharing and caring that were so central and foundational.

Regardless of political leanings or opinions, this Scripture is incredibly challenging because we simply don’t live this way. This Scripture takes us beyond an economic system and into the realm of how God wants us to be. This isn’t just about what we do or how we act, but about who we are called to be. Does our church - does the church in the world - reflect this now?

I think there are moments when we do, but many more when we don’t. We live in a “me” and “my” world, and the church in Acts is clearly an “our” world. To ask me to share what I have - to put it all in - is a big request! To ask me to be vulnerable enough with you is a big request. Trust is a tough exchange these days. It takes a lot of time. And my sense is that these early Christians had a different sense of time. Life was more immediate. Christ was coming back soon. There wasn’t time to decide. They had to trust each other - and quickly!

Am I saying that we should simply trust each other? That it’s easy? No, but there’s a challenge for us to consider how we reflect this image of the early church. Are we engaged in service to one another? Do we care about being with each other? Not

just for social reasons, but even more to share our spiritual lives? Do we share our witness? Do we pray with one another and for one another? And do we risk enough for the sake of Jesus Christ? Do we expect that following Jesus - being a disciple - demands something from us and costs something to us? Do our priorities look different because of our faith in Jesus Christ?

We know that this picture comes after Peter preaches on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit moved, and 3,000 were baptized and became part of the Christian community that day – 3,000 people! What would we do with that kind of response? It would probably frighten and amaze us all at the same time! But these are our ancestors in the faith. They are the first generation of Christians, and we can learn from them.

Scripture tells us what to do when we claim faith in Jesus Christ – how to be an active, vital, and faithful Christian. First, we’re called to be in community together. In Acts, faith in Jesus Christ pushes folks into life together, and being together deepens their faith in Jesus Christ.

This still happens in the Body of Christ – even here and now. Our faith in Jesus gathers us together – as diverse as we are – in this congregation. And living our faith together deepens our faith in Christ.

It’s a serious and sacred thing to build trust and share faith and ask questions about what it means to be a Christian in this world. The church is at its best when we do that – engage one another in critical faith. It is a gift we give to each other. And we’re better because of it. We engage one another in those deep questions of life and faith - the hard questions.

Acts lays out how to be the church: teaching and learning, fellowship and worship, eating together, sacrificing for others, serving the needy, sharing our faith, and inviting others to choose Christ! These folks nurtured one another in faith while always reaching out to include all people. They had an impact on the people around them. They had charisma – others were drawn to them. I imagine that people said, “Look at these followers of Jesus – what’s up with them? Why are they living like this? What’s it all about?”

And still, the church is the best there is when people are asking questions about why we do what we do. Are all of us in the church perfect? No, we need God’s help as much as anyone! But, we need each other even more! Chris Andrews says, “No one can make the case that the Christian faith is theoretical. It is not a system of thought, a bank of words, or a collection of ideas. Ultimately the Christian faith is about living in relationship and community. The Easter legacy is the church of Jesus Christ.”

Jimmy asked that crucial question, “Now What?” when he shared God’s Word last week. He encouraged us to live as Easter people - sharing the Good News - not a

half-off faith. Our loyalty is to Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, the One whom death could not stop from showing God's love to the world. That is why we're here. We are servants in the church, and we are connected through Jesus. That doesn't ever change.

Friends, life in Jesus Christ isn't something we're forced into. Just like our ancestors in Acts, we're created to be for relationship, for fellowship, for community. We're bound together not just on human terms, but spiritual terms – by our commitment to Jesus Christ.

Connecting with others and hearing how God is moving in their lives helps us to look at our lives and see what God is up to. Whether you're someone who finds joy in talking about faith matters or someone who finds joy in serving others at Supper House, nurturing our own spiritual lives is vital. We have to be committed to growing in grace and holiness.

Hospitality is a key part of building community, and we're seeing signs already of people taking that call to radical hospitality even more seriously. We trust one another enough to want to share our spiritual lives together, and we know that it's important to be together so that all of us grow in faith.

But it's not easy. I believe that it takes more to be in community - to be in the church - than it does not to be a part. We need to meet with others who are seeking to follow Jesus. We need support, and we need to be accountable - not only to God, but also to each other.

This is about intentional faith development. Bishop Robert Schnase describes the term this way: "all the ministries that help us grow in faith outside of weekly worship, such as bible studies, Sunday School classes, support groups, and prayer teams.

Congregations who practice Intentional Faith Development offer opportunities for people to learn in community for people at all stages of faith. They offer ministries that help people grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God. Intentional refers to deliberate effort, purposeful action, and high priority."

What does it mean that our faith develops? We don't simply learn by osmosis. We can repeat things, but our faith can only develop if we're intentional. Relationships take work. In a marriage, hard work and dedication are vital. In a friendship, you can't be disconnected. Phone calls and get-togethers help to nurture that bond. You can't call someone a friend if you never connect with them. If we claim to have a relationship with God in Jesus Christ, then we take time - we're intentional - about connecting with him. Yes, it's personal, but Acts makes it clear that it's also communal. Being together means is important. We're better together. We grow together. We're challenged together. We struggle together. We learn together. And that helps our personal

relationship with God go deeper. How can we be faithful witnesses if we're not learning and growing? Do we figure that there's no more to learn about God and faith and life?

I can only imagine how difficult it was for those who first followed Jesus as Lord and Savior. I know its work for me every day - some days better than others - but there's so much power when we're together. We know that the Holy Spirit is here leading and guiding. We feel the Holy Spirit when we worship. We sense the Spirit's presence when we're willing to share with each other...share what we have and share who we are.

As I said, some scholars wonder if this is an ideal view of the church from Luke. Even if it is, consider the power and potential for what can be! There is no more powerful description of the church than in Acts 2 - challenging and powerful. The church was vibrant and growing because people were devoted, dedicated, and committed. They were together. They were accountable to one another and depended on each other for support of every kind. They couldn't be Easter people without being in study, worship, fellowship, and prayer. They shared their resources for the good of others who were in need. They lived in the power of God and were grateful.

Even though Peter preaches, it is God, the Holy Spirit, who moves the people to live faithfully. God challenges us to be faithful as the church in Muskegon. Open to the Holy Spirit, devoted to reading God's Word and learning, intentional about being together whenever we can, sharing meals together praying for one another, sharing the gifts we have, worshipping together and living in God's grace, ready to follow God's leading wherever God leads us.

We celebrate a risen Christ who walks with us through it all and calls us to learn and grow in faith. Friends, Christ is risen! Thanks be to God. AMEN.