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Eric Dupee

Acts 4:32-35

“A Carried Away Church”

The 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts provides a glimpse of life among the followers of Jesus just weeks after the defining events of the Christian faith. Jesus had been crucified and resurrected. The resurrected Christ ascended into heaven. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

All these huge, defining events happened within weeks of each other and what affect did they have on the community of believers? There was an outburst in sharing. They encountered the risen Christ. The community received the Holy Spirit in dramatic fashion. All of that led the people to be generous with their possessions and not just generous.

We talked about this at Bible study this week. We talked about how they might have gotten a little carried away. No one claimed private ownership of any possessions. They held all things in common. We can't even imagine. There were people selling their land, selling homes, and laying the money at the Apostles' feet.

I was going to say that whoever ran that first pledge campaign was a genius. Those are incredible results. The appeal for generosity must have been amazing. The reality is they didn't need a pledge campaign. The Spirit was so demonstrably present, they were so moved by God's activity in their lives, they became so bold, so confident, so assured that they would be okay, that they got carried away and began to share everything.

If you are a member of First Parish Church, you probably received a letter from the Stewardship Committee last week. If you haven't read it yet, it's a nicely worded letter. It's an invitation to continue your financial support of First Parish even though the church did not hold a pledge campaign this past fall on account of the pandemic.

In the letter, the Stewardship Committee makes mention that it appears the church will have a budget shortfall in 2021. On paper, it looks like the church will spend more than it will receive. But with a 10% increase in gifts and pledges, we could go a long way toward closing that gap.

When the Stewardship Committee decided to send their letter right after Easter, the suggestion was made that perhaps the sermon for the Sunday after Easter should be a stewardship sermon. I don't think I've ever done this before, to go right from Easter to everyone's favorite topic.

Think for a moment. How do you feel about the church's annual pledge campaign? Be honest. It's often considered a necessary evil. If you're like most of us you've probably thought to yourself, "Here we go again. They're always asking for money."

There's this little story I like to tell to add some levity to this subject. In the middle of the sermon, the preacher says, "Let the church walk." The head deacon, Deacon Smith, sitting in the front row replies, "Amen. Let it walk." The preacher says, "Now, let the church run." Deacon Smith shouts, "Amen. Let it run." The preacher says, "Now, let the church fly!" Deacon Smith says, "Amen! Let it fly." The preacher says, "Now, it's going to take money to let the church fly." Deacon Smith responds, "Let it walk, Reverend. Let it walk."

I was unsure about a stewardship message immediately after Easter, but I looked at the scripture passages the lectionary provided for the Sunday after Easter and there it was. Acts chapter 4 reads, "There was not a needy person among them, for 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."

I would submit that the desire to share is the barometer or the measure of the spirituality of a community. If the Spirit is present in a given place, it will reflect in the generosity of the people.

My partner, Jessica, shared with me that in the town where she lives, they have a Facebook page set up so people can share free items. If you have something you want to give away for free, you post it on the Facebook page. If you're looking for something that you can't afford to buy or you only need it temporarily, you can go on this page if see if someone has one. The community that develops through this is fantastic. People interact and become friendly. They lend tools to one another. They help one another solve problems.

The spirituality of a community can be gaged by the desire and the willingness of its people to share what they have. Since I've been at First Parish Church, I've been astounded

by the way each one of you supports this church with you time, talent, and treasure. Sometimes people do get carried away.

We received a check from someone in a far away state who we don't know. It was a sizable amount of money. The last I knew we haven't figured any connection the person has to our church. He may have seen one of Pastor Dan's sermons and heard the appeal to support our church and the Spirit moved him. I assume sharing brings him joy.

We received a sizable check from some members of the church I previously served. They're wonderful people who just wanted to be supportive. I believe they view sharing resources as a way to express love of God and neighbor.

I don't know how many of you are aware of this, but years ago, the leadership of this church decided to take a loan from the endowment in order to refurbish the parsonage. We had roughly \$80,000 to pay off on the loan. Recently, one of our beloved church members decided to make a special gift to the church. The bottom line is that the \$80,000 is now paid in full. We would have spent years paying off that loan. Surely, the Spirit's presence is in this place.

In 2021, we're asking you to continue your financial support to the church at least at the level you gave in 2020. If you can increase it, that would be helpful. If, as a whole, we can increase our giving by 10%, that would put us on a solid financial footing. Having said that, we know that contributions to the church come in all forms, financial and otherwise. We know everyone has something to share.

But what I really hope you will do is reflect on how good God is...on how present the Spirit is in your life. Ultimately, we give out of gratitude for what we received.

In the 1940's, after he received his Ph.D in New Testament Studies, a man named Clarence Jordan established a farm in southwest Georgia called Koinonia Farm. It was unusual because it was desegregated. Black folk and white folk worked side by side.

Clarence Jordan once said, "The proof of Easter is not a rolled away stone but a carried away church." We see it in those first followers of Jesus and their willingness to share everything they had.

In my work and in life in general, I usually find myself saying things like: Let's not go too far. Let's not overdo. Let's not get carried away. I have to rethink that. This past

week, we had our monthly Mission Committee sponsored food drive for the York food pantry. The collection was being received just outside the church offices.

As we were finishing up our Zoom Bible study, someone jumped in and said, "I have to get going. I have to leave now so I can get my food to the food drive." Someone else chimed-in and said, "I do too."

What a perfect way to end our Bible study on this passage from Acts 4! We had to break up the conversation, because people had food they wanted to share. That's the sign of the Spirit's presence. It's generosity. It's sharing. It's even allowing oneself to get carried away.

When we realize how good, how generous, how forgiving, and how loving God is, we just can't help ourselves.