

“MAKING SPACE FOR COMMUNITY”

Philippians 1:27-2:4; Acts 2:41-47

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The Reformation of the sixteenth century began with some great ideas. Many historians point to the doctrine of “justification by faith” as taught by Martin Luther as one of those key ideas. We are made right with God not by any good act, but by faith in Christ. Salvation is a free gift made known to us by the teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At stake for the church at the time were the sacraments of confession and absolution, the practice of selling indulgences for the forgiveness of sin, and the role of the priesthood in mediating between God and the laity. Luther’s doctrine undermined these structures and led to a new way of thinking about the community of faith. Instead of a sharp distinction between priests and people, the reformed church insisted that every believer had access to God apart from the intercessions of the clergy.

Luther’s ideas were not original. Jan Hus, a century earlier wrote about such things and objected to numerous abuses by the priesthood. And there were others before him. But the church didn’t change until some community of believers gathered around the ideas and insisted on living into the implications. Change happened when groups of Christians stopped going to the priests for confession, started sharing the bread and the cup in communion, and spoke out against the sale of indulgences. Change happened as faith communities lived into the new understanding.

This is what happened in the aftermath of Jesus’ resurrection. The Judaism of Jesus’ day had become highly structured with well-defined roles for the priests. Salvation was mediated by the priesthood through the sacrificial system in the temple. Jesus redefined religion from a system of rules and rituals to a practice of love in community. As Luther rediscovered later, Jesus insisted that every person had access to God because God lives among us and loves us. Or to use the language of the gospels, “The kingdom of God is at hand.”

This idea really begins to take hold of the faith community on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit descends upon each believer. All the followers of Jesus experience the presence of God individually. We see in today’s reading what the idea of “God among us” looks like in the lived-out reality: spending time together in worship, breaking bread with “glad and generous hearts,” holding all things in common, and distributing to each according to their need.

The radical change piece is “the selling off of possessions and the distributing as each had need.” Judaism did have a system which provided for the needs of widows, orphans, and the poor. Some of this care took place through offerings made to the temple and some of it happened as individuals responded to the law of Moses. But here the task of provision is taken on as the responsibility of the whole community. The rights of property are subordinated to the welfare of the needy.

Such a practice is not unknown in our society. The Kibbutz in Israel, the communes of the 1960's, monasteries and convents have all attempted economic structures that share the wealth on an equitable basis. Someone in Bible Study last week pointed out that immigrant families adopted a similar economic structure as they entered this country. As often happens though, these systems learn to bend or they break when the welfare of each gives way to desire for wealth among the few. Even in Acts we see the strain on the system in chapter five when Ananias and Sapphira withhold a portion for themselves from the sale of their property.

It would be easy for us see this radical change as either impractical or irrelevant, since the practice did not endure. Indeed over the course of the church's history we have seen great cathedrals arise at the expense of the poor. Luther complained about the extravagant living of priests in his day. More than one televangelist drives or very nice car or flies in their private jet. To hold to the standard in the early church would seem quite hypocritical.

And yet, I think this early effort by the faith community is so relevant in the face of the income disparities that we see today. That the church responded to the needs of those who had little as one of its first responses to the gospel should give us pause. James writes to believers that they have failed in the call to love their neighbor when they have wished him or her well without supplying their physical needs. I John tells us that we cannot claim to love God if we do not love our brother or sister. Jesus goes so far as to instruct his disciples to love even their enemies. That we are loved by God, blessed with the Spirit of God, must be lived out in the realities of the world. Great ideas bring real change only as they are lived out in the real world.

Theologians and church experts have been arguing for real change in the church today. We have adopted and held on to ideas that have made a bad impression on the world. Quite frankly, the world does not know us "by our love." We have been too busy being separatists, telling others that they are not good enough. We have built churches that barred the differently abled from even entering them. We have told black and brown people that they are inferior to white people, excluded women from leadership roles, labeled the GLBTQ community as sinners.

Some of these things happened a long time ago. Many of them do not apply to all churches. This church is certainly working to eliminate these barriers, but there are so many ways in which we close the door against people. Community is hard, especially an open community where all are regarded as children of God and loved by God.

The faith community in Acts took on this challenge of creating community, of making space for community. They sensed that addressing the needs of the "have-nots" would be critical for the new life they envisioned. Making space for community meant providing the poor with the same opportunity to give shape to the faith that the better-off religious leaders had always had.

We can't let our attachment to a certain way of doing things or to a certain set of beliefs get in the way of the gospel, the good news of God's love for each person. According to Brian McLaren, the Christianity that will flourish in the future will let go of the necessity of holding to a certain set of doctrines, will lose its judgmental attitude toward those who don't fit the norm, and will thrive on the diversity that lies within the very nature of the world. At the core of this movement lies love and compassion. He says of the future church in his book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*:

"What I believe can and should happen is that tens of thousands of congregations will become what I call 'schools' or 'studios' of love. That's the desired future to which I am passionately committed. I'm not concerned about a congregation's denomination, musical style, or liturgical tastes; I don't care if they meet weekly in a cathedral, monthly in a bar, annually at a retreat center, or daily on-line. I don't care whether they are big or small, formal or casual, hip or unhip, or whether their style of worship is traditional or contemporary or whatever. What I care about is whether they are teaching people to live a life of love, from the heart, for God, for all people (no exceptions), and for all creation" (pp. 53-54).

Making space for community centers in the practice of love. Such a commitment gave courage to the early church to challenge an economic structure that separated the rich from the poor. It moved Luther to challenge the hierarchical structure of the church that made priests superior to people. It encouraged congregations to participate in the Civil Rights movement that struggled against the racism of the day. The commitment to the idea that we are all children of God, loved by God led believers to challenge the denominational structures that denied full participation in the life of the church to slaves, women, gays and lesbians. Making space for community can only proceed from a foundation of love with an open welcome to others.

It was this commitment that led to the growth of the early church and around which Paul advised the congregations to which he wrote. Making space for community needs to be part of a reformation agenda to day. One could not go far wrong by looking to Philippians elements of this love. "Encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, sharing in the Spirit, compassion, letting go of selfish ambition and conceit, and looking to the interests of others. The church would do well to heed these words as it lives out its faith in the realities of today's world. Amen.

Resources:

Brian D. McLaren. *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian*. Convergent Books: New York NY, 2016.