

Taking God for Granted
Acts 2:42-47
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Can you really read this passage and not get a smile on your face? This is one of the most pleasing passages in all of Scripture, isn't it? It's a shining moment in our history as a people, and a beacon for us still today, because isn't that just how every church wishes it was right here and now, all the time? A unity, a purpose, a goodwill. Grace, generosity, and growth. That season may well have been the church's greatest era. Until today or tomorrow or a week from Tuesday.

Yes, it was a golden age of life in the spirit, but if we are not careful, it becomes a relic of that golden age, a fossil good for nothing more than a museum of church history. I spent some time in Minnesota this week and saw a lot of that kind of fossil; churches trapped in the good old days, unchanging in the midst of rapid change all around them. At a Presbytery meeting, we voted to sell a church building that once upon a time held a thriving congregation. At the congregational meeting when they decided to close the church, eight people attended the meeting to vote. It was a sad end to a glorious beginning. We have closed several churches in the same way over the last few years. At that same meeting, the president of the Presbytery Women got up to make an announcement during which she lamented the fact that all their leaders were old and tired and that they needed new blood. You know, I heard that same lament at my first Presbytery meeting fourteen years

ago, maybe even by the same woman who offered it again yesterday, and now they are smaller than ever. What you should know about these two situations is that the church that closed was launched by a family who gave, in the 1930s, the enormously generous sum of two hundred thousand dollars to get it started, and that the Presbyterian Women was once a thriving group that kept the whole church alive for a time with its generosity. And now they are fossils, trapped in their golden ages, unable to change, and overwhelmed by the events around them.

As I thought about these fossils, at first it seemed to me that for a very long time, the Crosby-Ironton Presbyterian Church, and the Presbyterian Women, took God for granted, that they were waiting for the Holy Spirit to swoop in and fix everything, that God would restore their golden ages and all would be right with the world. But the more I thought about that, the more I began to see that it wasn't God they had taken for granted. It was that they had taken each other for granted. They lost their lives moment by moment, hour by hour, day by dragging day in a thousand, small uncaring ways, and then they looked up and the end was staring them right in the face. Taking God for granted is OK. God is going to be there, always. God is going to provide, generously. But we have to take care of what was entrusted to us by that generous God, and that is what we see happening in that community of the early church, the one that puts a smile on our faces rather than a lament in our hearts.

I'm not interested in idealizing the early church. I wouldn't want to go back to those good old days. They were hard days. Last night, I attended a concert by a local chorus and the theme of the concert was a celebration of the 70th anniversary of the landing at Normandy France, a turning point in World War Two. And so they sang songs from that "greatest generation" and interspersed with the songs were stories about real people from Minnesota who lived through those times. The narrator of the story reminded us just how hard were the times right before the war, and they make Biblical times look like a walk in the park! He told us that in 1920, in the whole of the United States, although 60% of the country was involved in agriculture, there were a grand total of 270 tractors in operation. In the whole country. That means that everyone else was using an animal and a plow, or a hoe, or some other really exhausting means of bringing food to their tables. I would have been a terrible pioneer. I would have been a bad cowboy. I would have been a useless farmer in the 1920s. I need a hot shower. I need a soft pillow. I'm a weakling. I don't want to go back to the good old days.

There is a lot we can take for granted almost a hundred years later. It is easy to take our food supplies for granted. We go to the supermarket and see a glorious display of products, and not only do we not need to work to make sure they are there, we don't even need to think about it. We just fill up our baskets and pull out our credit cards and off we go. But we take our food supply for granted when we get that disconnected, when we forget that other people still do work really, really

hard, in really horrible conditions, poisoned by really toxic chemicals, exploited by really greedy corporations, so that we don't have to think about it. And as their bodies suffer, our spirits begin to harden, and pretty soon we'll be the ones people are calling fossils. Taking God for granted is OK. God is going to be there, always. God is going to provide, generously. But we have to take care of what was entrusted to us by that generous God if we want to experience what we see happening in that community of the early church, the one that puts a smile on our faces rather than a lament in our hearts.

As we look at what was going on there back in the book of Acts, we see a community taking care of itself and sharing. It is as simple as that. They had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as they had need. They broke bread together, they prayed together, they had glad and generous hearts together. They praised God and had the good will of all the people. It's not a formula though. It is not a list we can make and if we do all those things we'll be OK. But it is a guide to living without taking each other for granted. And you know what? It really makes a difference. What was the result of their taking care of one another? That "day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved," those who became part of that community. You see, that kind of life is attractive. People are drawn to it. It is authentic. That kind of generosity is the opposite of the tight fisted way a lot of our world works. It is the opposite of sales and giveaways and gimmicks used to entice us to buy. It is

the opposite of the accumulative spirit of our age that always leaves people feeling empty in the end no matter how much they have.

I talked about you a lot this week, mostly to make all my Minnesota colleagues jealous. I reminded them of how we suffered greatly for the gospel here this winter when it got down to that frigid temperature of 68 degrees. But mostly I told them how generous you are, how your spirit lifts my spirit, how blessed we are here at ECF. We are that way I think because we take God for granted, but don't take each other for granted. We know how fragile this thing really is. We can't fight amongst ourselves or there won't be anyone to fight with! We are reminded of our fragility as we look around the room and realize that some who are here this month won't be here next month, and even fewer in July. Yes, we are saying goodbye to some good friends and faithful companions on the journey. And times will be a little tougher around here. We'll have to tighten our belts and roll up our sleeves and stop using so many clichés about working hard. But most of all, we need to continue to take care of one another, and break bread together, and have all things in common, and pray together and praise God together. Because that is not only a good survival strategy. It's a good strategy for growth. You see, "day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Just like in the good old days, we are a reflection of God to the world. And when we reflect the generosity of God, it's like turning a light on in a room full of moths. We do have to be careful that our generosity of spirit and dollar doesn't

become an idol, that it is not practiced simply for ourselves and our own comfort. But just like in the good old days, it begins with us. We are the ones who are here. Our generosity is like our spiritual currency. You know, when a government wants to bolster its stagnant economy, it pumps more money into it. It provides a stimulus with its own currency. Well, if our spiritual currency is generosity, in all of its forms, and we are worried about stagnation, the wise thing to do is pump a little more of our currency into it, to invest in one another in the way the early church did that proved so attractive.

At first glance that might seem a little self-serving, that we practice our generosity amongst ourselves? Aren't we supposed to be feeding a starving world? Binding up the broken hearted and visiting the sick and those in prison? Well, of course we are. But let me suggest that the church in Minnesota I mentioned earlier might still be around to serve its community in all those ways if it had practiced the generosity we see in our story tonight. Instead, they took that original \$200,000 for granted, and never cultivated an authentic spirit of generosity that would sustain them through the tough times. And so they had no currency to pump in as stimulus, and the death spiral began. But generosity breeds trust, and trust builds relationships, and relationships provide the basis for our work together sharing with those outside our church, that 20% of our budget that goes to show the world what God is doing in our midst.

In a couple of weeks, we'll have the opportunity to reflect on one aspect of our generosity, the part that involves sharing our cold, hard cash with the church. In the time before then, I want to invite you to have that conversation with God, with your spouse, with your family, about how much money God is calling you to give, but also about how else God is calling you to be generous. With your time. With your tenderness. With your trust. And if that conversation doesn't start easily in your home, perhaps you could begin by talking about how God has been generous with us, how Christ gave so that we might give, how Christ lived so that we might live. Generosity is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ and it is the church's gift to the world. And when we recognize just how free-flowing is God's generosity, as it was in the good old days, and as we can take for granted that it always will be, ours will follow naturally. And day by day, the Lord will add to our number those who are being saved. Amen.