
My Sermon from Sunday April 11, 2021 'Easter 2' ~ "The 3 Hallmarks of The Christian Community"

I speak to you in the name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

Years ago while visiting friends in Ottawa, I experienced my first and my last minor earthquake. I remember how frightening it was to be sitting in their family room and feeling the earth shake underneath my feet. Fortunately, it didn't last very long and we were all OK.

The biblical book of Acts is in the New Testament and follows the 4 Gospels. This book is a narrative of the growth and development of the early Christian Church.

Our passage selected for this 2nd Sunday of Easter is about the early Christian community in Jerusalem. The believers would gather together and we are told that the Holy Spirit shook the place where they are gathered. That must have been awesome and we read in the 4th chapter of the Book of Acts that this action made the believers speak **with boldness**. Talk about being shaken up for the Easter gospel!

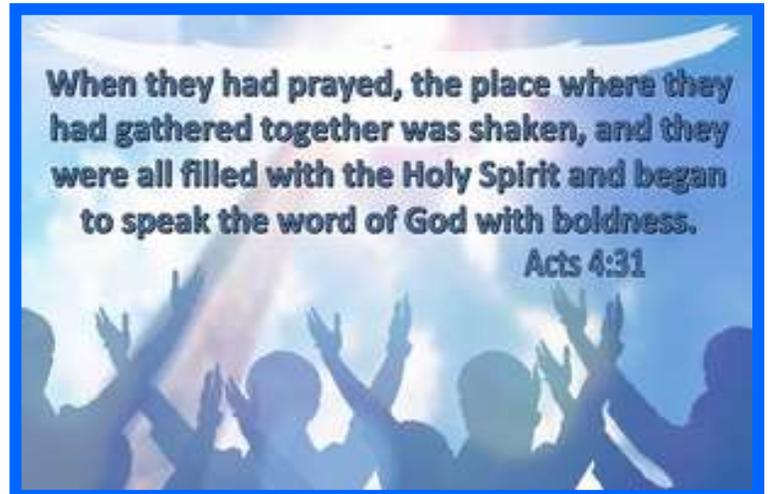
This is the first and most important hallmark of any Christian community ~ then and now ~ **the Hallmark of the HOLY SPIRIT**. The

boldness comes from experiencing the power of the risen Christ. The disciples were able to touch him and eat with him, as the risen Christ had a physical body. After his Ascension the Holy Spirit was sent to the believers to empower them in boldness for ministry.

This earliest pocket of Christianity developed in Jerusalem under the leadership of the apostles, including Peter and John, and it began with a 'utopian' experiment. The believers (they weren't called "Christians" yet but "Followers of the Way") shared their money and their possessions ~ **"everything they owned was held in common."** (Acts 4:32). The apostles would witness the realities of the resurrection and grace was upon all. No one had any needs, as people sold their properties ~ their homes and their lands ~ and gave the money to the apostles who distributed the funds to those in need. One man, (named Joseph, given the nickname 'Barnabus' which means "encourager") sold a field that he owned on the Island of Cyprus and gave the money to the apostles. Later on, Barnabus would play a significant role in Paul's ministry and Barnabus is credited with planting Christian communities in Cyprus.

One disturbing episode about this community sharing is recorded in the 5th chapter of the Book of Acts and follows our reading for this morning. A married couple, Ananias (pronounced "An-nan-eye-as") and Sapphira ("Saff-eye-ra") sold a piece of their property and gave a portion of it to the apostles. They lied about the amount given and both Ananias and Sapphira said they gave all the proceeds for ministry: **"Yes, that was the price."**

Peter becomes very upset and tells them that they were under no compulsion to either sell all the property or give all the proceeds to do the work of God. However, they must always tell the truth. Peter calls their actions, their lies, a sin against the Spirit of the Lord. The result of their deceit was



heavy upon Ananias and Sapphira, and the stress sent each of them into heart failure. Both Ananias and Sapphira died.

This story stresses the importance of the 2nd hallmark of any Christian community then and now, **the Hallmark of TRUTH**. The community is built upon trust and truth-telling, and not lying to make oneself look good. That is sadly what Ananias and Sapphira did.

What about communal living? To this day, 2,000 years later, certain types of communities work and flourish under communal living and sharing. For Christians, this works best with celibate men and women in monasteries and in convents. It seems easier to share everything when one isn't raising children or maintaining an intimate and personal relationship. The sisters at the Anglican convent in Toronto, the *Sisterhood of St. John the Divine*, live by the vows of poverty, celibacy, and chastity. The sisters share their pensions and a joint community budget is developed every year and includes projected expenses, for example, prescription glasses. Donated clothing is pooled in a clothing room and that is where the sisters go 'shopping.'

For the past one hundred years, Israel has experimented with community living through the "kibbutz." Originally, all meals were shared together and children were raised together and did not even eat meals with their parents. Today, it is different. Most children on a kibbutz share their evening and morning meal with their parents and sleep at home. On one of our pilgrimages to Israel, we went and visited a Finnish kibbutz and found the atmosphere and the food comfortable, life-giving and wonderful.

In *Canada's History* magazine for May 2021, there is an interesting article about a utopian Finnish co-operative on BC's



Malcolm Island. Malcolm Island is off the north-east coast of *Vancouver Island*. The communal community was called **Sointula**, which means "Place of Harmony," and was established in 1901 by immigrants from Finland. The community was founded on



socialist principles. Here are some actual photos of Sointula.

The vision was beautiful. It was to be a place of true harmony, free from the evils of religion, self-centredness and capitalism. Churches, alcohol and tobacco would not be allowed.



Courtesy of Royal BC Museum
BC Archives



The community failed just a few years later by 1905. Why? Women wished to raise their own children and the community went into huge debt and people were not able to be housed, clothed, and fed properly. The magazine article concludes: *“it was a romantic idea doomed to failure by human nature, a noble experiment in solidarity among working people... The utopian dreamers who came to the wilderness of Malcolm Island could not truthfully realize their ideals. The original colony was made up of people who were innovative, progressive, and willing to work.”*

Communal Christian communities did not last outside of monastic orders. I think this is a good thing. I like my own kitchen and my own bathroom. I am happy to share with guests but to never have anything that is just mine would be really difficult.

However, the 3rd hallmark of the Christian community then and now has remained the same ~ **the Hallmark of GENEROSITY.**

Everything we have comes from God. Our ability to earn money comes from God so we share it to bring heaven here on earth and to make the world a better place. That is why we are committed to tithing at St. Paul's. Did you know that more people are giving 10% of their monthly take-home income to the parish to do the Lord's work? I must tell you that, from my experience, as the money is given from the top of my household income and not the bottom, I do not miss it. We have learned to live without it. I like the 10% because it is not a set amount but is based on a person's financial resources. I am committed to **after-tax tithing** and not before tax tithing.

Now to be clear, **to be a member of St. Paul's, tithing is not required.** We will never, ever ask to look at your income tax return! Your giving amount and the reason why and how much you give is between you and God. I don't like 'pledge campaigns' and you will not receive a phone call from a Warden asking you how much you plan to give the church this year.

St. Paul writes that *“God loves a cheerful giver.”* (2 Corinthians 9:7) We are called to be abundant givers because of the *“incredible gift”* of our salvation that God has so freely given to us.

Now, Christian communities have made plenty of mistakes over the years in encouraging people to try tithing. I don't even like 'stewardship campaigns'! I am a proponent of discipleship growth and formation.

Here are 5 statements that I think should never be said when encouraging people to give more money to their church:

1. **“You can't take it with you.” True but it sure is nice to leave an inheritance** to your children, a close friend or a favourite charity.
2. **“Jesus gave 100% but you won't give 10%?” Guilt does not motivate anyone** to give.
3. **“Look at all the money you spend on your monthly wifi bill.” I am sorry but I don't want God to be unhappy when I enjoy my favourite Netflix series.** These comparisons just don't work. You will not receive a letter from St Paul's that says this, *“For the daily price of your latte from Starbucks, you can match this donation for the church.”*

4. **“You will receive blessings and prosperity if you give.”** There is no guarantee about this. It is not a cause and effect relationship. **I don't give to buy grace.** Giving won't take away the challenges of our lives. Tithing won't protect us from illness or suffering or dying.
5. **“God will love you more if you give more.”** **Nonsense!** God loves us unconditionally whether we are generous or not.
6. **“Give until it hurts.”** **Are you kidding?!** This is not my pilates class where I know that the discomfort will make me stronger.

So why tithe then? I asked some people this week why they give and here is what they said:

- ✓ *“It just feels right.”*
- ✓ *“It feels good.”*
- ✓ *“I don't know any other way to live.”*
- ✓ *“I want to support God's work.”*
- ✓ *“Everything I have comes from God anyways so why not give something back?”*
- ✓ *“I love the big income tax refund I get back every spring.”*
- ✓ *“I believe in the people and the ministry.”*
- ✓ *“It is one of my forms of spiritual discipline.”*
- ✓ *“It is my thank-offering back to God.”*

Ultimately this is up to you. My prayer this day? That the **3 Hallmarks of The Christian Community** resonate in your heart and in your mind.

Hallmark 1 ~ The Hallmark of The HOLY SPIRIT: We must be powered by God, by the Holy Spirit. We must be shaken up and speak with boldness. We need spiritual earthquakes.

Hallmark 2 ~The Hallmark of TRUTH: We don't lie. We tell the truth and are authentic and vulnerable with each other.

Hallmark 3 ~ The Hallmark of GENEROSITY: Even though we don't share all things in common, we are a loving and a blessed community of generous Christians.

There is no other way I wish to live. Powered by the Holy Spirit. Speaking the truth and reaching out with the hands of the risen Christ.

Amen.

Archdeacon Deborah+
