

Our first reading from Acts today shows us a picture of what life in the early church was like. And it's a picture of people living pretty communally with a clear de-emphasis on private property or maybe even personal space. Its funny, but you don't see passages like these on banners or church signs very often: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts..." To be fair, it does sound like a hippie commune. I mean, does anybody work??? It is a very different model from our very nuclear, very independent, very structured and compartmentalized way of being. And it is tempting to look at these early followers of the Way and write them off as impractical. But we need to understand that these were also folks who were living into the gospel, this good news, in ways that they understood to good news to mean—literally breaking bread with one another as Jesus did, caring for others as Jesus did, and all while thinking that Jesus was going to be returning soon. But that was not to be the case, and as time progressed, we see the church moving away from this wildly counter-cultural community into something perhaps more practical: Well, if we are going to be here a while, I probably need that land to farm on, maybe I should keep an extra tunic, perhaps we need to have some rules about worship... as the Church begins to settle in for this long in between—the time between Jesus' ascension and his return, it becomes more structured, and perhaps a little more sober as the euphoria of the newly converted cools. Eventually these new believers realize that they are going to have to live in this world, with everyone else, and they were going to have to figure out what that looked like. And so the Church is very different these days for many reasons.

But let's not write off this early community. Let's not call them a bunch of socialist—that wasn't even a thing then, and let's not assume they were a simple bunch of starry eyed naive new believers. They were definitely new believers, but their way of life is very much like the one we promise to live into in our own baptismal vows: To break bread with one another, to pray together, being the Good News to those who had need, serving Christ by serving others. So, we aspire to this kind of community in its best form. There is a Greek word that describes this kind of community: Koinonia. It is a community that shares a spiritual and material life. Koinonia comes from the word Koinos which means common.¹ When we talk about the Greek language used by everyday people in the Hellenistic period we call it Koine Greek: common or shared Greek. The word Koinonia means a community just as we see in the Acts community: a community of people sharing a common life: their whole life bringing the fullness of their spiritual and material selves to the community and sharing those within the community. We are a people called to live a shared life. In this sense, our faith is really meant to bring us back to our

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/koinonia>

roots when we first walked together in the garden in the persons of Adam and Eve, people who were given to each other, creatures who were made to be together. That is us.

And that is what makes the church different. This is how we are different from something like the Rotary club. They do great work, and it is a great place to meet people and make friends but it is not Koinonia. Rotary is an organization who gets its identity from the work they do, like many other philanthropic organizations. But we receive ours from Christ himself, and it isn't just about what we do but who we are in the world. We are to be authentically the Body of Christ, and as such live out the Good News that we believe is embodied in Christ life, death, and resurrection. Nearly twenty years ago a friend of mine who was super plugged into very libertarian, jaded Millennials and I did a survey of said jaded Millennials to see what they wanted in a Church should they ever attend (few did). She was one of them too, but also really loved Jesus. We had a good sample size because Sarah was gifted at meeting people--all kinds of people, and so she basically asked her Facebook friends all of whom she swears she met to answer our survey questions. We got a lot of different answers. Some were dismissive, but many were not. And what we heard from these people was they wanted a church that was real, with real believers, and real love.

And there have been many times you and I have seen when the Church is really being church, really being koinonia. I've shared this story with some of you already, about the 94-year-old widow in my former parish who had no children, no real extended family. She had niece in Philly and her church community. And that was all. And so when she was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer, her church community stepped in where family would have been. One person took on the responsibility to make health care decisions for her in the event she could not, another was her financial power of attorney. People sat with her as her disease progressed. They helped her plan her funeral, helped her pick out the clothes she would wear in her coffin and it was all pink. They prayed with and for her. They threw her a birthday party and invited her all of her friends. They worked with the staff at the nursing home to make sure all her needs were being met. They stayed with her as she was dying. They celebrated her life and gave her things away as she wanted when she was gone. It hadn't always been easy being in community with her for me and for others...we had all at one point been on her I'm-not-talking-to-you-list. But together we'd gotten past difficulties and ended up in a space where there was only love and care and hope.

As the Church we are meant to be the best example of community. We are a people who have the language to say welcome, to say I'm sorry, forgive me, I forgive you, or join us at the table. We are a community that can tell the truth, that can listen, that can say I love you who can offer their lives to others. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, remember that we talk about ourselves as being part of the flock or as sheep only because Jesus is the shepherd. We live as our shepherd leads us as we strive to become more and more like him. And that life can look like a lot of different things. But at the heart of it are the values we see in that early Church: The value of sharing, of being together in worship, of caring for the needs of one another, of selfless living in a

community that exists to welcome more into it. Koinonia is not a club. For the Christian, it is everything. It is meant to be love embodied. It is the Kingdom of heaven. Perhaps it is time for the Church to let go of some of our being settled and take on again, more of the life of the early church with all its wonder and joy. Amen.