

With Glad and Generous Hearts

Acts 2:43-47; (Colossians 1:11-15, 17-19)

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, November 24th, 2019.

Many years ago, Rev. Fred Craddock was assigned to serve a Baptist church near Knoxville, Tennessee. People became members when they were baptized. On a chosen day, individuals seeking baptism let themselves be immersed in a nearby lake. In baptism, they ritually experienced dying to an older and more restricted and then arising from the waters to a new birth into a more interconnected and freer life. While the baptisms were happening, members of the congregation had a fire going and were cooking supper by the shore. People were singing hymns around that fire and waited. The newly baptized were allowed to change behind some sheets hung up in the tree branches. They put on new clothes to signify their new life in Christ. Then they'd join the rest of the church around the fire. A church member would introduce the newly baptized to the community, say where they lived and what they did.

With everyone gathered in a circle around the fire, each person would then take their turn, say their name and something like this, "My name is ..., and if you ever need someone to do washing and ironing..." "My name isIf you ever need anyone to chop wood..." "My name is ...If you ever need anyone to baby-sit..." "My name is...If you ever need anybody to repair something in your house..." "My name is....If you ever need anybody to visit with the sick..." "My name is ...If you ever need anybody to give you a ride to town..." and around the circle it went, just like that. Everybody was offering a gift based on their passions and abilities without first demanding a particular return. Then everybody ate and they had a square dance. After a while, it was Percy Miller's job to stand up and say "Time to go now" and people would slowly clean up together and then head for home. Before he left, Percy said: "Craddock, folks don't get closer than this. That's what we call church."

This church community in many ways mirrored the life of the early church as expressed in our text from the *Book of Acts*. The Holy Spirit has just descended on those who are following Christ on the Day of Pentecost. The Apostle Peter has been preaching to the crowd, saying that Jesus

who was crucified is present to us and in us as the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹ Scores of people have chosen to be baptized. As our passage says, people experience “awe” because they see life changing within and among them. People experience love and healing. Here is what else begins to happen: “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, they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47).”

They gathered as the resurrected body of the crucified Christ, each member was part of the whole body at the table of grace. They were also moved to give of their resources for the good of the whole because they no longer thought of themselves as solitary entities. Notice how they were not tying their giving to a quid pro quo with expecting a particular return as one would in a market economy. Instead, they practiced what Richard Rohr and others have called a “gift economy.”² They simply gave with glad and generous hearts. Their Spirit driven manifested love for each other flowed out to service of the larger community. Thus, they had “the goodwill of all the people.” By daring to live as fully invested interconnected people, naming and responding to need, others were drawn to join. Together, they sought and experienced healing which is the true meaning of what it means to be saved right in the here and now. Folks don’t get closer than this. This is what we call church.

This is what we call church, too, here at First Congregational Church, UCC. We call it church when we can be honest about our own need to have someone care for us through the gift of a

¹ The text gives evidence of how this early community of Christians of Jewish descent was still participating in their traditional faith setting of the Jewish temple while incorporating new rituals that celebrated and deepened a new identity as the body of the living Christ. They were also living the table fellowship of grace that Christ modeled for them and had to first do that gathered in homes.

² [1] “A gift economy, gift culture, or gift exchange is a mode of exchange where valuables are not traded or sold, but rather given without an explicit agreement for immediate or future rewards. This contrasts with a barter economy or a market economy, where goods and services are primarily exchanged for value received. Social norms and customs govern gift exchange.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gift_economy)

meal, a visit, a prayer, a ride to the doctor, a shawl, a kind word of hope and belonging when life seems to be falling apart. We call it church when we are the ones doing the caring while we can. We call it church when we serve soup lunch and fellowship and now even the gift of healing touch after lunch thanks to our volunteer Reiki and Shiatsu practitioners. We call it church when we give of our time to teach and model life-giving values and relationships with our children and youth. We call it church when we support in time and with money organizations that seek to alleviate suffering and when we empower people in need (I will let Deb Endl speak to this during her stewardship time).

We live church when we learn from faithful practitioners of other paths like the monks who shared the World Peace mandala. We call it church when we serve through the gift of music and art. We are God's church when we recognize that all of creation is God's temple and act to preserve it. We live church when we go the extra mile to develop compassion for ourselves, for each other, even if it is uncomfortable. Elizabeth and three of her sons just experienced this when they spent a night in the freezing cold and listened to formerly homeless people to learn about what it is like to be homeless in Maine.

As an Open and Affirming church, we also practice being church when we welcome each other with dignity and respect, no matter our age, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, income or educational level, or our cognitive or physical ability. We are church when we affirm that we all carry a love that seeks to flow through our lives to spill out and be there for each other. We are church when we desire to grow spiritually and be challenged in serving and trusting God's love. Daily dying and rising to a more wholesome life is no spectator sport. If we want to experience and share transforming love, we need to have skin in the game and practice what we say we believe by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are church when we say "yes" to this beautiful and demanding life.

Today, we have the great joy of welcoming new members into our community as fellow sojourners on the way. On this *Reign of Christ* Sunday, we are saying "yes" together to living his

vision of a life of shared belonging. We are Christ's living body together – beautiful and glorious even with our foibles, always called to the edges of our longing to grow further and deeper. Here, we give ourselves to a mission that is bigger than our own lives that can only be accomplished when many come together. So let us say *yes* together. Let us put our skin in the game in all the ways that we can from giving of our time to sharing our possessions with glad and generous hearts.

Pledging financially is part of making sure that we can count on each other to forge ahead with our shared mission. Please remember that what may seem like a small monetary gift due to a fixed income is still mighty in the Spirit of love. If you are in the position to give larger amounts, I urge you to stretch beyond your comfort level simply with glad and generous hearts. I am thrilled to say that most of those who have pledged early have chosen to increase their giving. Mark and I will be increasing our pledge significantly as a sign of our commitment and confidence in the Spirit's work among us.

We do not fully know what lies ahead but we know that the Holy Spirit is alive in our midst. Let us trust this pull, this energy, as we walk into the future in faith. As the living Body of Christ, let us say *yes* with all our being to the God who is the ground of all being, to Christ in whom the fullness of God is still pleased to dwell. Thanks be to God.