

Hold On!

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November 8, 2020

Acts 2:41-47

Part One

They say hard times clarify, clarify what really matters. A hard time can be a refiner's fire, getting rid of the dross and leaving only what really matters. It seems true. This pandemic is refining us in so many ways. Like our relationship to money.

Some of us are in really hard times financially and needing to accept, with grace, help. We're all givers and receivers of charity at some time in our life...

Many of us are doing fine and in fact spending less so we have more to give.

If you've been despairing this week about the nature of humankind, from the political news, listen to me. There's other news that will renew your trust in the basic goodness of humanity; news I've been collecting since the beginning of the pandemic. Listen!

Donors Generously Heed the Calls for Help: Giving has surged during the pandemic, eclipsing donations during the 2008 recession and after 9/11.

When you have enough, help others: "no longer focused on trying to increase my net worth: there is nothing more I want."

Spend more on Society and Get More for yourself. Individualism has made Americans unhappy. There's another way.

Turns out givers are smarter than takers in negotiations

Waste not, shop not

Maybe your starter home should be your forever home. "The people who are generally the happiest are the ones who avoid the more, more, more and understand what is enough for them."

20 % planned on donating more and 54% would leave their donations unchanged in 2020: A recent Fidelity Charitable report found

Could it be that some things have changed forever? That even when this pandemic is over, we will not go back to our old spending patterns. Remember how they used to say about our ancestors who had been through the Depression, that they were changed forever? Could it be the same for us? That we are spending less on stuff that doesn't really matter; that our

consumer patterns have changed dramatically... hello farmer's market and local book store and neighborhood restaurant, (carry out for now) and goodbye Amazon and cheap clothing and tech fads forever. And hello giving, more and more, until we die. So that when we look back from our death bed, we know we've left a good legacy.

It will be easy to lose track of this hard-won wisdom, given the seductive power of money, but our religious way, and our religious communities, will help keep us on the path. Religions have a lot to say about money. In Islam, it is one of the five pillars, zakat to give 2.5 % of all earnings and assets away to charity every year. And Judaism has the practice of the tithe, 10%, of the fruits of the harvest every year... Many at Mayflower, my family included, practice what is called the modern tithe, 5% to church and 5% to other wonderful causes-- charity, justice, the arts... Some of us who are younger are intentionally moving towards this by increasing half a percent each year. And some of us, who have more, give far more than 10% away: It's called proportional giving. And a few of us, hearing Jesus clear call to give **all** that we can, give even more...

Someone once said: "No one who believes in the rapture should ever be elected to political office". That same person says: "If your financial advisor is not religious or does not come from a religious background, leave them. Or more accurately this: If your financial advisor, in person or online or in the newspaper, talks or writes about "goals for saving, planning, budgeting, and investing" but leaves off the word "giving", leave them, delete or throw the paper away. There is no such thing as values free financial advice.

Not surprisingly, because of the huge power of money, perhaps second only to the power of love in the human psyche, there is a ton of scripture about it. In the New Testament it is a very consistent message. 1. Be careful about your wealth: Greed distorts. 2. Give money, food, help to those who need it, ... AND --the message of the prophets and the social gospel of the Lord's prayer... thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth...- 3. structure society in such a way that there are no extremes of wealth and that everyone has their basic needs met.

Today's Bible passage is about the early church. Jesus, this teacher and prophet who gave the people such a sense of possibility and of the goodness of life, he had just been lynched, crucified by the empire and the people were shattered and at great risk of despair, bitterness, hopelessness. But something stirs them up... call it what you will, language is inadequate... the spirit, Christ, God, ... something stirs the people back to life. It's not all over... Not at all... And the people come together, in community, they break bread, share the stories together about Jesus and the prophets, and give their possessions for the common cause...

Basil, a 4th century Christian bishop from Cappadocia, said: “While we try to amass wealth, make piles of money, get hold of the land as our real property, overtop one another in riches, we have palpably cast off justice, and lost the common good. I should like to know how any man can be just, who is deliberately aiming to get out of someone else what he wants for himself.” To be sure the church got more silent about money, after the church became the official religion of the empire, but the message of the early church has never been lost. Christians have wrestled with the power and place of money through the centuries. And we will continue to do so in centuries to come. “We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind... yet more light and truth will break forth from God’s word” ... We speak of “charity” and of “justice”, and now this word “reparations” What will *it* mean for people of faith?

So finally, let’s listen to our scripture passage this morning. From the Book of Acts, the story of the birth of the church, listen to our story:

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[a] to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home^[b] and ate their food with glad and generous^[c] hearts, ⁴⁷ 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.

Sources

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Part Two

Some say churches will die in the clarifying, refining fire of this pandemic, or at least shrink.

Some say churches will be forever and fundamentally changed by this pandemic, never looking at all the same again.

Some things no doubt have changed dramatically. We will never stop livestreaming even when we return to worshipping together in the sanctuary. For those who are homebound or at a distance, this is a welcome change. And some groups might meet in hybrid, zoom and in person, even beyond the pandemic.

And now, in this pandemic year, we are not taking a vacation from church, but rather doing Church differently. And doing it differently rather well, thanks to the talent and resilience and commitment of so many of you. And working harder than ever. Children and youth, pay attention! if religion is best known by the lives which express it, well!, I wish we had a giant book that shows what the people of this church are up to in these between times! It's astonishing and heartening!

But is it enough? ... This state of being... is it enough? There is this building, and this side sits empty most of the time and we may well wonder: Why bother? We may wonder why we bother to keep maintaining this entire enterprise... Well! That's what this pandemic is helping us clarify, the things in life worth bothering about.... *"Perhaps we are finding that we have bothered too much about trivialities, or bothered too much about appearances, or bucket lists.... perhaps we have wasted too much time or energy or money or used them in a futile way... Let us pray for guidance, and as we pray let us remember that when all the extraneous*

*stuff of life is pushed to one side, there are many things which we **shall** choose to bother about, which concern us immensely because they concern the well-being of the community as a whole... In spite of our absurd inadequacy, as a church, in spite of all our weaknesses, we can affect, by our lives together, the life of humanity in its progress towards God's dream." (Lily Montague)*

Will Mayflower survive this pandemic and maybe even thrive? We'll know a lot more in a week, at the culmination of this stewardship drive.

Do you ever wonder how in God's name the church survived wars and pandemics in the past?

In November 1918 as the epidemic was spreading in waves across the country, The Christian Century Magazine criticized an Illinois church that had decided to conduct a public worship service against the orders of local health authorities. "When religion is inevitably tied up with a meeting house, the closing of public worship means a separation from God", the editors wrote, "but when religion concerns itself chiefly with human welfare interpreted from the divine standpoint, we are unwilling that one single person should die of an epidemic for the sake of a theology." The second wave of the 1918 pandemic hit just before Christmas. On Dec 10, 1918, the Century noted one church's plans to leave Sunday school materials and instructions for home worship on front doorsteps and "Machinery has been set in motion for the use of the telephone to carry church news concerning the sick and the needy ". The telephone was to them in 1918 what the computer is to us 100 years later. "It remains the church's work to nurture human connections with God and with others—even in times of physical separation." AS the editors write in 1918, "It will be a mistake to accept this as a vacation time for religion." (Christian Century)

We're making do. Remarkably well, we are. We're holding on to one another.

And we're holding fast to the dream that we will be together again in person. Livestream and zoom are not enough for ever. Christianity is at heart an incarnational faith, an embodied faith, ... God's grace comes through physical contact and proximity.... Water trickling down a baby's forehead. Bread baked, blessed, given and received. The laying on of hands at ordination. Prayers shawls wrapped around the shoulders of graduating seniors. Becoming one voice as we sing together. Breathing as one as we pray together. The meal of mercy after the funeral. And then there's that inimitable, familiar, quirky, Sunday morning dance... the flow, the greeting, the laughter and tears, the coming and going, in this building... starting at 8:30 and going until well past noon... the dance of community... energizing for extroverts, challenging but still gratifying for introverts and newcomers... bodies moving here and

there....doing that crazy church dance... Nothing beats it. I miss it so! Don't you? The Sunday morning church dance....

We're holding fast to the dream that we will one day be together again in person. And we're holding fast to the dream of the next Mayflower adventure...Without the call to high adventure, the faith has never flourished. We're starting to get excited... There is so much we want to do and be and curious...as this pandemic is creating a values revolution, a clarifying of what matters most in life, will religion become more intriguing to more people? who will join us on the Jesus path of progressive Christianity?

We're holding fast to the dream of the next justice journey together we will take, what will it look like? Land acknowledgement, reparations, the next chapter towards carbon neutrality, giving our children and grandchildren hope....

Yes, Mayflower, we are holding fast to the dream of being together again and our grand adventure together into the future?

The ancient Jewish philosopher Maimonides defines eight levels in giving charity (tzedakah), each one higher than the preceding one. On an ascending level, they are as follows:

When donations are given grudgingly.

When one gives less than one should but does so cheerfully.

When one gives what one should, but only after being asked.

When one gives before being asked.

And so on...

We might wonder about *this* level of giving then: When one gives generously during a pandemic, when you don't know when you'll be together again, as a way of holding fast to the dream....

Let us pray:

Source of all being, we turn to you as did our people in ancient days. They beheld you in the heavens, they felt you in their hearts, they sought you in their lives. Their quest is ours. Amen.

Sources

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