The Koinonía of the Spirit (2/5)

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(2 out of 5)

Catherine:

Acts 2:42-47

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 4:32-35

> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Justo:

As we look at these texts (and at others like it in the book of Acts), the first thing to be noted is that interpreters have often sought ways to diminish their importance.

One way of interpreting these texts so as to avoid their radical implications is to say that the early community did indeed practice a commonality of goods, but soon abandoned this practice. According to this commonly held notion, the failure of this practice soon convinced

Christians that their original zeal was unjustified, and that having things in common was a mistake. As a result, it is claimed, the entire idea was forgotten a few years –perhaps months– after Pentecost.

This interpretation, however, goes against the most common principles of historical scholarship. When looking at ancient historical texts, scholars usually expect that the practices and ideals of the time at which the document was written have been projected back to the time to which the document refers. In dealing, for instance, with the various gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, scholars are quick to point out those elements in such accounts which reflect conditions, not at the time of Jesus, but at the time of the actual writing of the gospel.

But when it comes to the several texts in Acts that speak of an original commonality of goods among Christian, it is customary to take the opposite tack, declaring that such commonality was probably a fleeting experiment that failed. Were we to apply to these texts the same principles applied elsewhere, we would come to the conclusion that, no matter whether or not the very early church practiced such commonality, at the time when Acts was written this was either the practice or the ideal of the church.

In consequence, it seems logical to conclude that, at least at the time when Acts was written, the church was practicing, or trying to practice, a commonality of goods such as the one described in our texts. That this was true, not only in Luke's time, but even much later, will be

shown in a moment.

Catherine:

A second way in which the implications of this text are avoided is by taking the opposite direction, and claiming that the commonality of good described in Acts never happened. According to this interpretation, Luke is simply projecting back into the early days of the church an ideal that he actually took from Hellenism. There was a long tradition in Greek philosophy, dating back to Pythagoras and even earlier, and including Plato, which saw the common possession of goods as a characteristic of the ideal society, Therefore, so the argument goes, what Luke is actually doing here is simply projecting that ideal back onto the early Christian community.

The main difficulty with such an interpretation is that, as we read the books of Acts, it is difficult to come to the conclusion that Luke is trying to picture an ideal community. This is the community of Ananias and Saphira, and the community where the widows of the Hellenists find it necessary to complain that they are not getting a fair share.

Justo:

There is, however, another reason to reject the claim that this never happened, or that it happened only in the very early days of the church. In a nutshell: there is ample textual proof that, even after the time of Luke, Christians were speaking of the commonality of goods as

something that was still practiced among them.

In 1875, a long lost document was discovered in Istanbul. The date of this document, called the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is difficult to determine, but most scholars agree that it was written sometime between the year 60 and the first decades of the next century, In other words, it is roughly contemporary with the book of Acts. There we find words that remind us of the text we are studying: “You shall not turn the needy away, but rather will share everything with you brother [or sister], and call nothing your own. Since you already share in immortal goods, should you not do so even more in those that are mortal?” (4:8).

Almost exactly the same words are found in the so-called *Epistle of Barnabas* (19:8), probably written around the year 130.

Likewise, Tertullian, writing around the year 200, declares: “all of us who are joined in one heart and soul do not hesitate in sharing material goods. All things are common among us, except women.”

Thus, the notion that the text we are studying is pure Lukan fiction, or that it refers only to a fleeting moment in the life of the early church, is clearly shown to be wrong.

There is, however, another way in which this text has been interpreted so as to diminish its

challenge to us. That is by overradicalizing it. According to this interpretation, what this text means is that, as a result of their overwhelming experience, the early Christians “went on a happy.” They sold all they had—or as we would say today, used up their principal—and soon they were all left in poverty. There are even commentators who then tell us that this failed experiment was the reason why Paul had to spend so much of his time collecting an offering for the church in Jerusalem.

This is simply not what the text says. In Greek, as many of you know, there are two forms of the past tense. (I may add that the same is true in Spanish, that other vehicle of divine revelation!). One of these forms of the past tense, the imperfect, refers to an ongoing action in the past (as in “When I was in college I went to the movies on Saturdays”). The other refers to a single action in the past (as in “I went to the movies last Saturday”). In both cases, the verb is “went”; but in the first case I mean that I used to go, while in the other I mean that I went once and for all.

In the text in Acts, the past tenses are in the imperfect. Thus, what this text, and the two other similar passages in Acts, say is not that the early believers went out and sold everything, but rather that they would sell their possessions and goods, and would distribute them, “as any had need” (Acts 2:44).

It was not a modern commune, guided by some ideological dream of common property. It was simply a community of love, guided by the need of the less fortunate.

Since I have just used the word “community,” it may be well to clarify another point, closely related to this subject, at which we have weakened the language of the New Testament. We all know, or think we know, that “koinonía” means “fellowship.” What we are not usually told is that it means much more than what we today mean by “fellowship.” In some ways, it comes closer to “partnership,” as in a business venture. Thus in Luke 5:10 the NRSV tells us that James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were “partners” with Simon. What the Greek says is that they were “koinonoi” with him. In the common secular language of the time, if a group of us were to join in a common business venture, being common owners of it, what we would have would be a “koinonía.” Thus, “koinonía” does not mean simply “fellowship” or “communion.” It also means partnership in the sense of sharing in material or any other kind of wealth. Therefore, when the New Testament speaks of the “koinonía of Jesus Christ, or of the “koinonía of the Spirit,” it does not mean simply, as we often think, the good feeling of fellowship engendered in us by Jesus Christ or by the Spirit. It means also our common participation, in a way our common ownership, in Jesus Christ or in the Spirit. And it also means our partnership in all things because of Jesus Christ or because of the Spirit.

If on that basis we look at the entire New Testament, we find that this kind of sharing, not only in the spiritual sense, but also in the material, appears throughout. Whenever the church is spoken of as a koinía, what is meant is, among other things, a company in which we are all equal stockholders, so that all we have is at the disposal of the rest, and what they have is at our disposal.

Catherine:

The clearest example of this is the collection for the church in Jerusalem, which plays a fairly prominent role in the letters of Paul. As was mentioned, some interpreters have claimed that the church in Jerusalem became poor because they had sold all they had, eaten the proceeds, and been left with nothing to live on. There is nothing in the New Testament to support such an interpretation. On the contrary, there is every indication, supported by both pagan and Jewish historians, that there was a general famine in Palestine at this time. If such was the case, what most likely happened was that the church in that region, composed mostly of people of meager means, was sorely trying to meet the most urgent needs of the poorest among them.

In Romans 15:25-27, Paul explains to the Romans that his hope for visiting them has to wait until he finishes his work on the offering for the Jerusalem church: "for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to establish a koinonía (a partnership) with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." Paul then goes on to say that these Gentiles "were pleased to do it, and indeed they are in debt to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings."

Paul also needs to remind the Achainans—particulary the church in Corinth—to fulfil what they had promised to the suffering church in Jerusalem. In II Corinthians 8 and 9, he does so:

> It is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire…. I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written (in

> Exodus 16), “He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.”

In this passage, as a theological prod, Paul reminds the Corinthians of what happened in the Exodus, as recorded in Exodus 16. We generally remember the miracle of the manna—that God gave the “bread from heaven” for the Israelites in the wilderness—but we often overlook the miracle that Paul reminds his Christians readers of in this passage: the miracle of the distribution. When the manna fell, the head of each “tent” went out to collect enough for the family, to be measured at about a quart apiece. Some gathered much more than they should have, and others did not get enough (a typical human situation!). However, when they came to measure it, a miracle occurred, and those who had gathered too much found that the excess had disappeared, and those who had too little, found their supply had increased to the right amount. God had performed a miracle to make the sharing in the resources provided come out right. (Perhaps one of the reasons we tend to remember the miracle of production, and not the miracles of distribution, is that we can boast of imitating God in being productive, but not in the manner our resources are distributed.)

In both Romans and Corinthians, Paul points out a sharing that is both in material and in spiritual goods. The Gentiles had received and were still receiving a share in the spiritual resources of the Jerusalem church, and therefore ought to share with them the material resources that they possessed. It is the same expectation we saw in the Didache: if we share in immortal goods, ought we not also share in mortal ones?

One could raise from these passages the question whether churches that are materially poor often have spiritual gifts to share with those churches that are richer materially. Although clearly this cannot be universally assumed, it is often the case.

Justo:

Three is an interesting passage in Proverbs that points to the dangers of too little material wealth as well as too much: both conditions pose spiritual dangers:

Proverbs 30:7-9:

> Two things I ask of you
> do not deny them to me before I die:
> Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
> give me neither poverty nor riches;
> feed me with the good that I need
> or I shall be full, and deny you,
> and say, "Who is the Lord"?
> or I shall be poor, and steal,
> and profane the name of my God.

In the NRSV, the phrase "the bread that is my portion" is translated: "the food that I need." What it refers to is the daily ration of a solider–the proper share, neither too much nor too little. It is that phrase that lies behind the Exodus story. It also occurs in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread." What is meant is the right portion for us, with a clear understanding that too much can be as dangerous as too little.

In the case of the collection for the Jerusalem church, Paul is pointing out that sharing the material resource can help both Jerusalem and Corinth. The collection would help balance things out so both churches had the right amount. Churches that pray the Lord's Prayer have a

constant reminder of the need for the right amount. The Acts community, in their readiness to share to meet the material needs of all of the members, is living out the meaning of the Lord's Prayer. No wonder there is not a needy person among them.

Paul has gone beyond the local congregation. The koinonía we have in the Spirit is worldwide. Therefore, the sharing of resources seeking to prevent there being any needy among us, is also global. Nor can we assume that the churches that have the material wealth to share have no poverty that the poorer churches cannot help to fill.

There is, however, an element in our United Methodist tradition that hearkens back to the theme of sharing of goods, as it appears in Acts and in the Corinthian correspondence. That is the principle of connectionalism. Connectionalism means much more than the fact that we gather in Annual Conferences every year, and in General Conference every four years. It means much more than that we have a common Discipline. It means that we literally, truly, are one church. That whatever resources one of our congregations has are the resources, not of that congregation, but of the church as a whole, to be used jointly in ministry and mission.

I am often appalled at how easily we forget the very meaning of connectionalism. Some years ago, in another part of the country, one of our Hispanic congregations had its church building torn down in order to make way for a highway. They took the money for their building, went to another congregation of the dominant culture, and invested all their money in repairs to the

building, which was sorely in need of it. The agreement was that the two congregations would now share the same building. Years later, as so often happens, there were “murmurings” between the two groups, and eventually the bishop came to a meeting where he began by telling the Hispanic congregation that they should remember that they were guests of the other congregation.

When I first heard that story, I was bothered by the bishop’s response not taking the time to learn the historical facts of the situation. But then I was even more bothered by the realization of the appalling understanding of the nature of the church that lay behind that statement. In church, we are either all guests of the One Host, or we are all hosts to the world outside. But we are never some hosts, and some guests. And much less ought we to think in such terms in a church that claims to be connectional.

And it is at this point that I have my greatest fears for the National Plan for Hispanic Ministries. This is not a Hispanic Plan. It is not even a plan in which we are simply asking churches to make a contribution to Hispanic ministries. This is a plan of the entire church: Hispanic, White, African-American, Native-American, Asian-American, young and old, rich and poor, urban and rural. It is a plan for a church in which, as on that day of Pentecost, all can hear the Gospel in their own tongue and their own culture. It is a plan for a church which, as in that Corinthian correspondence, all can be mutually enriched. It is a plan for a truly connectional church.

Catherine:

The ideal of commonality of goods in the church did not disappear even after centuries. In the West, it became institutionalized in the monastic movement, a process that continued it for the few while eliminating it as a goal for the vast majority of Christians. Within the monastic movement, it has continued even to this day in the Catholic tradition. In Protestant churches, however, it has had no currency, except for occasional experiments in community living or in small churches stemming from the Radical Reformation.

Scholars have pointed out that the term "poor" in the sense of the absolutely destitute –ptoches– which is quite common in Luke, does not appear in Acts. Could it be that the author's mind has somehow changed between the two treatises? Or is it rather that what Acts is saying is that in the community of the Spirit the promise of Deuteronomy is fulfilled, that "there will be no poor among you…if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God"? (Dt. 15:4). From all that the book of Acts says about the sharing of resources and its connection with the outpouring of the Spirit, the latter would seem to be the most adequate explanation.

Monasticism has also included another concept that needs to be distinguished from the commonality of goods. That is the idea of voluntary poverty. Obviously there is a relationship between the two. Both imply a certain loose attachment to material goods, a lack of the possessiveness and acquisitiveness that generally characterize our culture. The Acts passages do not seek poverty. In fact, they take a certain pride in the fact that "there was not a need person

among them."

There is a place in the church for voluntary poverty. It makes possible an identification with the poor that might otherwise not exist. It makes possible readiness for certain forms of ministry that might not take place without it. It has an individual quality about it, a decision to give away everything and be poor. There are obviously solid Biblical bases for such a response to the Gospel. In some ways, it is clear that the early Protestant missionary movement, which thought of itself as quite different from Roman Catholic monasticism, did have a dimension of voluntary poverty. And it is also clear that much of its success was directly related to that poverty.

But commonality of goods is a somewhat different matter. It implies constant readiness to share, to give away piece by piece as necessary. It implies an ongoing awareness and sensitivity to the needs of others and meeting those needs joyfully, without even being asked. That is what the account in Acts anticipates. It is out of love rather than out of a search for personal holiness that such actions occur. There is a place for both in the church, but they cannot be equated.

There is, however, a relationship between the two. The commonality of goods described in Acts requires sensitivity to the needy. Such sensitivity is much more likely within the context of a lifestyle which promotes it. It is a clear fact, for instance, that during the time of the Spanish conquest and colonization of Latin America, it was generally the friars, rather than the diocesan priests, who understood the enormity of the injustices that were taking place. One reason was

that the friars, with their vows of poverty, lived closer to the Indians. Thus while the colonizers, and many priests and bishops, saw cities being founded, churches being built, and people being Christianized, the friars, precisely because of their voluntary poverty, could see the oppression and genocide that was hidden from the eyes of the rest.

In much more recent times, it was nurses who were members of a Catholic religious order who worked and lived with the poor in Africa, who first realized the terrible toll that the marketing of infant formula was taking on the newborn children there. Their ability to do this had much to do with their voluntary poverty. And it was the connectionalism of the order itself with other religious orders that helped spread the word, and discover that it was not an isolated event in one hospital, but a global issue. It was the connectionalism of those women in orders with Protestant church women in this country through Church Women United that brought the situation to the attention of our churches. Voluntary poverty was the basis for the nurses to be in such a situation in the first place. The fact that the churches were interconnected, even informally, allowed their discoveries to have some effect on other Christians.

As we read the texts in Acts, the most obvious question is, What would happen if in today's church we took the concepts of voluntary poverty and commonality of goods seriously? There is, however, a previous question, both easier and more difficult to answer: What must we, as individuals and as churches, do in order to gain more of the sensitivity and solidarity with the needy without which such sharing of resources is not possible?

As mainline Protestants we have few structures that really give us constant contact with the poor. We do not have monastic orders, and there are good reasons why. But we have not replaced them with anything that gives us the ability to live among the poor or in any way be brought into undeniable awareness of what the needs are and how we could share our resources. Even the soup kitchens or shelters that churches set up to respond to the immediate crisis of homelessness often keep the poor at arms length from the majority of the congregation.

Justo:

This means that the National Plan for Hispanic Ministries requires more than our money and our planning. It requires our presence, our direct personal experience. The National Plan will succeed in the measure in which the United Methodist Church as a whole, and each of its congregations, and each of its members, gains a fuller understanding and appreciation for Hispanic culture and traditions, for the pain of poverty which so many Hispanics and others suffer, and for the vital religiosity of the Hispanic people.

And again we must insist, as Paul did to the Corinthians, this is not so that you may be made poorer, but so that each may be made richer by the other's contribution.

Question for discussion:

For those of us who serve in non-Hispanic churches: How can we bring the Hispanic experience

closer to our congregations? How can we do this in a way that is both challenging and edifying? And, for those of us who serve in Hispanic congregations, or who are Hispanics, how can we help the rest of the church understand and appreciate who we are in a way that goes beyond the folkloric?