

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Acts 4:32-35

I had a remarkable privilege while in seminary. A privilege few experience, and fewer seek out. I worshipped with Atlanta's homeless. They were drug addicts and alcoholics, military vets and the mentally ill; they were those looking for work, those unable to work, and those who had simply given up. This wasn't a worship service in a public park or a witness to the issue of homelessness in Atlanta. This wasn't a worship service especially set up at a soup kitchen, night shelter, or even outreach center, although the location houses all three forms of aid. I worshipped week after week in a regular downtown church. A community of faith that not only claimed to welcome all, but lived it.

Worshipping with the homeless changes the way you worship. It calls the community to examine the way they talk about stewardship and call for the offering; it calls the pastors to think about the way they invite the people of God to the Table that they might be fed. And after worship in this particular congregation, when we gather to share a meal, week after week, worshipping with homeless calls us to think about the way we care for those in our midst and their needs.

Despite the suggested price of our weekly meal being \$5 not one person, not the homeless, not those who didn't have any cash that week, not even the seminary students, were turned away. All was distributed to each as any had need because the whole group, the whole assembly, the whole congregation were of one heart and soul. And so we sat at table, we sat upstairs, in the sanctuary, at the Table of the Risen Lord and we sat downstairs, at the lunch Table, enjoying Stan's famous fried chicken.

That's the message of our texts this morning, both the Psalm and Acts are calling us to care for one another, to look after one another, to ensure all each others needs are taken care of, to simply be the church. We've heard the Easter proclamation, we heard tell of the empty tomb, we've met on the road to Emmaus and now we must live like the church, act like the church, be the church. Our Acts lesson tells of a community of faith that looks after one another and acts in the best interests of the whole community. This early church model are congregations founded on the preaching of the resurrection, grace, generosity, and unity. And they have been usurped by churches that look far more like multibillion dollar, multinational corporations than churches that preach radical change, hope, and inclusion. We are called to simply be the church.

Now, don't get me wrong, I don't believe we've totally failed at living into the first century Christian's model of what being the church ought to look like, I simply see fewer examples of a church that sees to the needs of all the community, fewer examples of a whole group of believers who are of one heart and one soul than I do of churches that are glossy, prepackaged, business model, for profit, heat and serve, just add water buildings. I'd like to tell you about two particular examples that get to the heart of the lives today's texts are calling us to:

Both are restaurants, of sorts, both have taken a creative approach to the meals they offer and the communities they serve. One is in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood of Atlanta. Historic Sweet Auburn is home to Ebenezer Baptist Church, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic District, and the Sweet Auburn Curb Market. Sweet Auburn is also a major thoroughfare for public transportation and, almost synonymously, therefore, Atlanta's poorest. Cafe 458 on the weekends is the hottest brunch reservation in town. From pulled pork eggs benedict to chicken and waffles to the best shrimp and grits west of Savannah, Cafe 458 offers Southern classics in a stunning, historic setting. During the weekday, Cafe 458 continues to offer spectacular meals to those who stop by, except during the week the cafe is open to Atlanta's homeless. Cafe 458 is not a soup kitchen; there

is no 50 gallon soup pot in the back, no stale bread, no day or two old cookie. During week days Cafe 458 offers its clients meals: real meals, real menus, real service, real bathrooms, real respect. Every single penny of the proceeds at Cafe 458 support the Samaritan House, a local nonprofit helping Atlanta's homeless men and women get back on their feet. In addition to serving meals with dignity and respect, Cafe 458 offers on site job training in the food service industry, including job placement in restaurants and catering companies across the city. Day after day they are providing for the needs of those in their community. Day after day the folks at Cafe 458, the folks of the Historic Sweet Auburn Neighborhood, cradle of civil rights and resting place of Dr. and Mrs. King are of one heart and of one soul.

In downtown Denver, on a street famous for its urban-ness, in the best and worst ways, is a restaurant called SAME Cafe. They take their name from the mission of the restaurant, "so all may eat". The offerings at SAME are different each day and consist of a collection of soups, salads, and pizzas, all homemade, all fresh, all organic. Like Cafe 458, the food is superb, the location charming -- just a mile from the Colorado capitol and Denver City Hall, and the clientele-a mixed bag. You see, the only thing that's the "same" about the SAME Cafe, is the name. There are no prices attached to artichoke and feta pizza or the apple, bacon, and tomato soup. There is, however, a small wooden box where customers who can are invited to pay what they can and for those who can't, there is work to be done. At SAME Cafe, there really is no such thing as a free lunch, because there are always bathrooms to be cleaned, tables to be bussed, and dishes to be washed. This past summer I ate twice at SAME Cafe; once offering what I could to their collection box and once rolling up my sleeves and doing some dishes.

Cafe 458 and SAME Cafe are not churches, per say, but their missions, their goals, their hopes, are certainly first century church. Day after day each of these organizations struggles to ensure there is not a needy person among them. Both of these remarkable places are not only making sure the needs of empty bellies are filled or hearts rejoice when they are offered simple respect; but they are also examples of people who quietly go about the work of being the church.

This of course is not something new and radical that comes with the first century church, it is the Jewish notion of Jubilee. The ancient idea that in order to prevent the rich from getting richer and the poor from getting poorer, Old Testament law mandates every seven years for all debts to be released and every 50 years land and property would be returned to the original owner, no matter why the ownership had changed hands. Jubilee is God's way of assuring "basic equality of economic opportunity to continue... [assuring] the means of producing wealth was to be equalized--up to the point of every family having the resources to earn a decent living"¹ The presupposition behind Jubilee and the first century church's practice of selling what they had, what they could, to support one another comes from the ever-present knowledge that, in the words of the Psalmist, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1).

And so we say now, "so what". We can argue our way out of Jubilee by saying there's no real evidence it has ever been practiced, at least in the strictest sense. We can justify our not forgiving debts or returning property by saying we no longer live in an agricultural society where land is capital and the basic means of producing wealth. We can throw around words like socialism and communism, we can whittle the first century church's actions to ones of mere metaphor, or we can look after one another. We can **be** the church.

We can be a community of faith that sees to one another's needs: a community that heals one another in sickness, feeds one another in hunger, comforts one another in mourning. A community that cares for one another's needs, in whatever form they may take. We can be a community that doesn't hold private ownership over this aspect of ministry or that one, a community that doesn't territorialize the work of God, a community that doesn't call throwing money at a problem a solution. But rather, a community, who with compassion

¹ Sider, Ronald J. Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity. World Publishing: Dallas. 1997

looks to the needs that exist here in this sanctuary, the needs in this neighborhood, the needs in this community and seeks solutions with energy, imagination, and creativity. Over the last few months I have been meeting with a group of people; we started as a group of community organizers and hunger activists but our ranks have grown to include local real estate barons and politicians and now, most recently, include representatives from the most powerful agri-business families in South West Florida. We are meeting to find a way to incorporate a gleaning program right here in the heart of agricultural south Florida. Gleaning, the ancient and simple process of going into the fields after the harvest and picking what is left that it might feed the least of those in our community. The program is not yet off the ground, but we are hopeful because with persistence and faith we are seeing people engage in dialogues and problem-solving that has never happened in this area. We are struggling to find solutions to a systemic hunger problem not with huge amounts of money, but with huge amounts of love.

We are called to simply be the church. The church of the empty tomb that wipes away tears, comforts on a walk, and breaks bread at the Table. If we lose sight of that mission, than nothing else matters. If we lose sight of our call to care for one another than we lose sight of our faith, and lose sight of the risen Christ. How will we offer what we have, offer what we can? How will we live together in unity, be of one heart and one soul, see to it that all our needs are taken care of? How will we be the church? It is just that easy, and it is just that hard. Thanks be to God for this remarkable call to new life, an empty tomb life, a church life.