

GATHERED WITH ONE ACCORD

Illinois Yearly Meeting 7/26/01

"I've been thinking." Rufus Jones began a piece of vocal ministry with this statement one First Day morning many years ago. At the rise of meeting, one of the elders of meeting approached him as they made their way out of the meetinghouse. Looking him in the eye, she said, "Rufus, thee shouldn't think!"

The Conservative Quaker tradition in which I have put down my roots shares this skepticism about too much thinking. Nevertheless, I must admit to doing a good bit of it over the past several months. I've been thinking about the nature of the Christian life what does it mean for me to be Christ's man in Pharaoh's world. We who have had the experience of the Living Christ are a small minority in a much larger world and a much more powerful culture. How do we survive, and thrive, and even carry out some of the tasks that God may be giving us? Somewhere in the midst of all this thinking came your invitation to speak, which seemed to be an opportunity to share some of the fruits of this inner work. If at the conclusion you say to me "Lloyd Lee, thee shouldn't think," at least I'll know I'm in good company.

We are called to grow in our faith, and also called to transform the world. The hard truth is that we are caught up in a powerful culture that is as intent on transforming Christians as we are intent on transforming it. One way of looking at this struggle is to say that our calling as Christians is to put God at the center of our story. The dominant culture wants to put me there. Put you there. Put the individual person at the center of that person's story.

The pervasiveness of that effort is reflected even in our religious thought. Let me give you four examples of the way the dominant culture's individualism has gotten a foothold amongst us.

... "The Great Christian Question is, 'How can I be saved?'" In fact, the Christian life isn't really about personal righteousness. It is certainly not about getting into Heaven. Our vocation as Christians is to heal the world, not to get saved.

... "The path to holiness is to separate myself from the world." In fact, the Bodhisattva principle is true: you can't be holy until all the world is transformed anyway. You can't get away from it. So even if personal righteousness is your thing, the path to righteousness is to heal the world.

... "One person standing alone can change the world." In fact, the faith community, not the individual, is the means by which the world is to be transformed. No single individual is strong enough to overcome *The Powers That Be*, and the changes that are needed are systemic and institutional, not just individual.

... "I grow in grace most by personal spiritual disciplines and practices." In fact, individual growth in grace comes from life in community, which is the mechanism for that growth. We receive what we most need when we focus our attention outside ourselves and our needs, immersing ourselves in our chosen community.

So the Kingdom is not about personal righteousness or piety. We won't bring about the Kingdom of God by living a lot of disconnected holy lives, but by helping one another become whole people, in holy community. My own personality makes me wish the path favored becoming recluses, hermit scholars with relatively little contact with other people; but it doesn't. The Gospel of the Kingdom is about a way of life in relationship; a life of loving servanthood to all of creation. Not only servanthood, but suffering servanthood. Only in servant relationship to others (and to all of creation) can we fulfill our role as a people "in the world but loyalists of Christ".

How do we do this community thing? I can't say. I can't say for several reasons. First, community is messy and unpredictable. It is a living thing, not a crystalline structure like a gemstone that is beautiful only when it is "right" in components and crystal bonds. Community is not the same from place to place, or even from time to time in the same place.

Second, describing community in advance is the Law all over again do this and this, but not that, and everything will be all right. Life isn't like that and the life of the Spirit is certainly not like that. Community can't be described or regulated *a priori* because it doesn't exist *a priori* only after the fact can we identify that yes, that was community that happened then.

We don't have a set of *a priori* rules to determine how we should behave in order to nurture and sustain community, or what the community should do in order to be faithful. We do have another way to direct our actions. Community comes out of our common *praxis* our practice. Community is nurtured when we try something together, and reflect together on what happened and why, and then try again but this time something a little different, based on the fruits of our common reflection.

As a beginning point for our praxis, we do have the example of those first Christians of 2,000 years ago, as recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts. This description is especially valuable because this community was so close chronologically to Jesus' life and teachings that we can assume with some confidence that they had an accurate understanding of what that life and those teachings meant. These folks were even weaker than we are, and the surrounding culture was more overtly hostile, so we may be able to learn some valuable lessons from them.

Let's take some time to examine the example of the early Church in Acts 2:41-47.

41. Those who believed were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

42. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

43. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

44. All the believers were together and had everything in common.

45. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

46. 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,

47. praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Paraphrase of NIV)

- They believed
- They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship
- They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread
- They devoted themselves to prayer
- They all believe
- They spent time together
- They treated their belongings as held in common
- They shared their material wealth according to need
- They spent much time together in daily worship
- They broke bread together daily
- They ate with glad and generous hearts
- They praised God
- They had the goodwill of all the people
- The Lord added to their number

This is a wonderful description of community I want to sign up now! How did this come about, and how can we have that same experience? The first couple of verses of this chapter give us two important principles:

... Verse 2 Community is a gift.

"Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" (KJV)

The Holy Ghost came upon them as an unexpected gift. After we've done everything right, after we've dotted every i and crossed every t, community is a gift. We are not in charge we can't build community or achieve community on our own; community is a gift. Hard to learn, in this culture, but once we're in community we're glad we're not in charge!

... Verse 1 You have to prepare to receive the gift!

"They were all with one accord in one place." (KJV)

The dominant culture works to persuade us not to believe in community. To the extent that we are persuaded, we act in ways that make community more difficult, if not impossible. Individualism is king in the dominant culture look out for Number One! Our western paradigm of dualism either this or that has convinced us that we are each independent entities, working out the progress of our lives in isolation.

Individualism is a myth. It doesn't work, and the more effort we put into it the more absurd it becomes. Think of the millions of dollars spent in advertising to convince thousands of people that if they just buy this particular mass-produced car they will be more unique than if they buy that other car mass-produced by another corporation.

Community is a gift a miracle. So we have to prepare to receive the gift. Expect a miracle! Order your life to make room for the gift. "They were all with one accord gathered in one place."

How do we prepare? The body of the passage I read earlier lays out the principles early Christians found to be central to their life. I believe that a large part of our preparation lies in orienting our lives to be in harmony with these principles.

... Verse 41 They believed.

Those that gladly received Peter's message were added to the community.

This was a covenant community. The basis on which they were drawn together was not compatibility, or special interests, or similar backgrounds they were together because they had received the gospel message of Jesus Christ, and accepted it gladly. Another way of putting it is that this was a "Believers' Church". The new Christians were not forming a national church in political or geographic terms, nor one based on a creed or liturgy. The new community consisted of those who voluntarily confessed their belief in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Conflicts and differences of opinion abounded (c.f. the controversy about circumcision in Chapter 15), but they shared a single orientation, like sunflowers. They were all oriented toward Jesus.

What you don't read in Scripture is sometimes as important as what you do. This passage says next to nothing about an expected belief "system." This is a confessional community, not a creedal one. They shared an experience of the power of the risen Jesus, but Luke is much more concerned with describing their right practice orthopraxy than right belief orthodoxy. They had not accepted any specific creed, dogma, or vocabulary. They had accepted Jesus Christ into their lives. To use my wife's expression, they were all looking in the same direction: toward God as revealed by Christ. God was now at the center of their story.

... Verse 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship

These were not folks intent on changing the group to meet their own pre-dispositions. They were eager to learn more about Jesus and about the gospel, and were ready to hear more from those who knew more. In traditional Friends terminology, they were humble learners in the school of Christ. They valued what these more seasoned Christians could tell them about Jesus' life and message.

On the other hand, the apostles' teaching at this time would have been almost entirely stories and reminiscences about Jesus' teaching. What we share with one another should be mostly what our experience with Jesus has been, not our intellectual ideas about what God must be like.

These folks had been through a transforming experience, and now they wanted to put down new roots, to dig down into this newly discovered truth. In modern times we often act as if the way to honor other religions is to take an eclectic approach to them all, taking a little from this one and a little from that one to suit ourselves. This is like trying to find deep water by digging dozens of shallow wells all over the landscape. When drought brings tough times, the shallow wells will go

dry. The same effort spent digging one deep well will bring us to the aquifer, to the living water that will never go dry. When we've done that, we'll realize that the same living water feeds all the great religions.

The newly convinced Christians devoted themselves to digging deeper wells. To do that, they listened to the stories of those who were more experienced. They undoubtedly also asked some hard questions, and talked long into the night about what had happened to them and was still happening to them.

... Verse 42 They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread

It is unlikely that this phrase refers to a practice of Eucharist as such, but rather to Jesus' practice of table fellowship. In both his gospel and in Acts, Luke reports on a great number of meals. Jewish identity was defined in large measure by the people with whom one ate. Dietary laws, cleanliness regulations and the like defined who was a real Jew. Remember how the Pharisees were constantly offended by the people with whom Jesus ate. Luke in particular tells us Jesus was constantly sharing table fellowship with folks who were excluded from Jewish society by purity and debt laws.

Now this community was devoted to the apostle's fellowship. What do you think the apostles told them about meals in the kingdom of heaven? Remember Luke's story of the messianic banquet and think whom this community must have been inviting to eat with them. Were these invitations themselves not gospel good news to those who received them? "Blessed is anyone who will share the meal in the kingdom of God!"

They were devoted to breaking bread together. If you eat with someone often enough, you get to know their likes and dislikes, their table manners, the pressures and commitments that sometimes make them late to dinner or call them away early. These folks were getting to know each other in a very intimate way. You can be on your best behavior for a while, but sooner or later at mealtime the real you comes out. Good for that!

The new community was inclusive, not exclusive. Everyone who believed the Good News was welcome, whether they were "moral" people or not. We Quakers keep forgetting that we're all sinners, not one worthy of the table. Personal righteousness is not the issue our love of God is all that matters. Love God, and love one another.

... Verse 42 They devoted themselves to prayer

What prayer had Jesus taught his disciples?

Now once he was in a certain place praying, and when he had finished one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "Say this when you pray:

Father, may your name be held holy

Your kingdom come.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our sins,

For we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us.
And do not put us to the test." Luke 11:1-4

Now there are lots of commentaries about that prayer; I encourage you to spend some time with it, in study and/or contemplation. A couple of points are particularly relevant to our topic.

"Your kingdom come" if we are praying for that occurrence, our behavior should be consonant with our prayer. Act boldly for the kingdom lean on God! You have not yet suffered to the shedding of blood, as Paul reminds us. Don't pray for the kingdom and at the same time live a life that keeps that day distant from us.

"Give us this day our daily bread" Money is one of the great destroyers of community. Dependence on God rather than our individual piles of money is important to all of gospel life, including community. Let us each consider the lilies of the field, and look at our own lives, and repent.

"And forgive us Ö for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us." It is well to be reminded of just how central the matter of forgiveness is to Jesus' message. This is not forgiveness in exchange for repentance or apology or sacrifice, but forgiveness as the first step. Two thirds of the gospels can be read as encouragement of the practice of forgiveness. Community is in large part the practice of forgiveness. God's love is not conditional, and our being righteous (or repentant) is not going to make God love us more. Our love for one another is also to be unconditional, and we are to forgive those we love. The prophet Ezekiel in the Hebrew Scriptures realizes that God forgives us in advance, and that our repentance comes as a reaction to the realization of God's forgiveness. Two millennia later, after all that Jesus has tried to tell us, we still get it wrong. We think that God doesn't love us until we repent, and we withhold our love from other humans until they repent to us. This moral one-upmanship is contrary to the Gospel.

So these new Christians prayed. What do you think they prayed about? What did they ask for? Something like "Gee God, this is great! Keep it going and if possible make it better! Help me share this with Aunt Bessie back home and Joe and the gang at the office!"

... Verse 44 They all believed

Now this is a repetition of what has been said before, which is always important in Scripture. Remember, writing materials were expensive, and not to be wasted on unnecessary words. Acts is just about long enough to fill up one scroll completely. Luke used up all the available space, and had no room to repeat ideas that didn't merit repeating.

The basis of church community is belief. Not political stands or peace testimonies, but belief. And the belief on which community stands is not affirmation of a creed or assent to dogma it is our "yes" to the experience of God's centrality in our lives. To believe is, among other things, to make ourselves vulnerable to that in which we believe: to take a risk. Using our intellect to keep a safe distance from the presence of God is not belief. Falling into the hands of the living God is belief. Until we can let go that much, our belief is incomplete.

... Verse 44 They spent time together

See also 5:12 One in heart, they all used to meet in the Portico of Solomon.

How important this is to strong community. We want community, but we don't invest our time in being community. These folks wanted to be together, so they spent their days together.

Fact you can't be community with an investment of one hour per week. We create space for community to happen by spending time with people, and we naturally want to spend time with the people in our community.

It is surprising to me how many Friends want to have community, and how few show up to participate in meeting for business. There are a hundred reasons why meeting for business is frustrating, or irrelevant, or the stronghold of stick-in-the-muds: I know every reason, and have expressed most of them myself at one time or another. All that aside, nevertheless, meeting for business is when community is made manifest: when the body of Christ discerns how it is called to be kingdom in this world, and how to carry out that call. Think it is irrelevant? Come add thy relevancy to the mix. Is it held at an inconvenient time? Be sure and tell God when it is convenient for thee to receive leadings and carry them out. Does it seem fractious and argumentative? This is where community is forged absent thyself at thy own risk. Does it not seem to do anything relevant or important? How can thee tell without being present to participate in the corporate discernment? Maybe thee would learn that some things are more relevant than they seem; maybe thee would learn more humility; maybe the corporate body would benefit from thy contributions to accurate discernment and end up acting differently.

Beyond formal activities, it is important to seek one another out in all our activities, in work and recreation. When I have belonged to a meeting that included a physician among its members, I have made that Friend my primary physician. When a fellow member was an architect and I was working in non-profit housing, I enlisted that architect in every project I could. It seems to me that living in community involves helping one another out that way.

It also involves sharing meals together, and projects at one another's homes and in the community, and all the different ways we can spend time together. To some extent, we should spend time together to build community; to some extent, we want to spend time together to enjoy the community we share.

... Verse 44 They treated their belongings as held in common

See also Chapter 4:32-37: "The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all accorded great respect. None of their members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them, and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need.

"There was a Levite of Cypriot origin called Joseph whom the apostles surnamed Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). He owned a piece of land and he sold it and brought the money and presented it to the apostles."

The members of the community evidently still had personal possessions, but had given up their sense that they had a right to them they treated their possessions as held in common. The verb is imperfect, i.e., "used to sell", meaning that they sold things from time to time, as there was need not that there was one great yard sale.

The year 2000 was a Jubilee year, and with great fanfare this country proposed to forgive a little international debt. This church in Acts is practicing Jubilee with a vengeance. They are not just forgiving debt, they consider themselves stewards of all their material possessions, and are giving out of their own 401(k) plans to help other folks! Radical! This flies in the face of our dominant culture individualism.

Certainly the society that surrounds us today is quite different from that of first-century Palestine, and we can't blindly transfer financial practice from one era to another. But what remains constant is that how we use money illuminates our priorities in many areas. How do we use the material wealth that has been entrusted to us? Are we building up a stronghold to protect ourselves and our blood kin, or are we building up the community of faith, to ensure that everyone has enough and no one has too much?

About now some of you are getting a little uncomfortable, and a few are saying to yourselves that this made sense only because these Christians thought the world was going to end any day who needed money? I suggest something quite different was operating here. People who thought the world would end in a few weeks or days would not have bothered to write a history of the beginnings of their earliest church it would be a needless labor. Luke wrote this story, and others preserved it, precisely because they believed in an unfolding future that would need this story. And naturally, they put in it what they thought would be most important to remember. So far from discounting these early Christians' attitudes toward money and possessions, we must read their account in boldface, as something of utmost importance to us today.

... Verse 45 They shared their material wealth according to need

(See also Chapter 4:34)

There was not a needy person among them! This is not simply charitable giving as we practice it today, not simply giving out of our excess and surplus, but giving out of the need of the other person giving until their need is gone.

Note also that they shared their material goods according to need, not according to worthiness, either moral worthiness or standing in the community (seniority, positions filled, etc.) In fact, the people making the gifts aren't even the ones deciding who receives it the apostles do that (4:35).

Jewish teaching ascribes different levels of blessing to different kinds of gifts. The least blessed is the gift where the giver knows the recipient and vice versa. It is more blessed to give so the recipient will not know the identity of the giver, and most blessed to give so that neither giver

nor recipient knows the identity of the other. This flies in the face of our desire to limit giving to the identifiably "worthy poor", but the church in Acts was doing just this: the givers gave to the Apostles, who then distributed where there was need. Soon, of course, the Seven were appointed to take this task off the Apostle's hands.

When was the last time any of us gave until the need was gone, trusting that God will give to us until our need is gone, as well. These Christians set a hard example before us, but I think it is an important one. We aren't community, at least in this sense, while there is unmet need among us.

That there is "no unmet need" does not mean every person or every household has exactly the same resources, or the same amount of money per person. But the community knows if it does not go into denial true unmet need when it exists among its members. When the burden of that knowledge is placed on our hearts, our response is revealing.

... Verse 46 They spent much time together in daily worship

Think about our own faith tradition, with its relatively short history of less than four centuries. Friends used to attend two meetings for worship on First Day, each considerably longer than an hour, and gathered as well on Fifth Day mornings closing down their businesses and unhitching their plows to do so. Beyond this, daily devotions including reading the Bible and waiting worship were the standard practice in every household.

The church in Acts is meeting in one another's homes on a regular basis. Are we ready to bring one another home for meeting for worship? Are we ready to bring meeting for worship into our home?

Worship is the foundational and formational act of our faith community. In meeting for worship our covenant with God is articulated, renewed, strengthened, extended. In meeting for worship we are knit together with each other by the presence of God. In worship we receive our "marching orders" as God's hands and feet and voice in this world. We, too, should spend much time together in daily worship.

... Verse 46 They broke bread together daily

The importance of this practice is underlined by its repetition here. This is not a monthly potluck, but a daily gathering for what we often call the Quaker communion the common meal. You can't be on your best behavior every day at mealtime. Sooner or later the pressures of life are going to break through (Hallelujah!) and your fellows are going to know a little bit more about you.

Wonderful! Slowly we learn that we are all broken, all less than perfect, and that God loves us each one wonderfully even so. Slowly we learn that the real love for one another we crave is not the ideal love of my personal façade for your façade, but the imperfect intent to love that my flawed self can offer to the real you.

... Verse 46 They ate with glad and generous hearts

Well, who do you want to hang out with glad and generous people, or curmudgeons and Scrooges?

The kingdom of God is a party a wedding feast a banquet a celebration of finding what has been lost the joy of a bountiful harvest beyond all expectations. Remember the parables of losing and finding in Luke 15, and the rejoicing at the end of each one. Think of Zacchaeus called out of the tree by Jesus, and the joyful way he greeted Jesus. We Quakers often appear a dour, sober-faced people; it is no wonder that folks don't flock to our meetings for worship. Creation is good, God is in charge, and has come to dwell among us. What's not to celebrate?

... Verse 47 They praised God

Let's remind ourselves again of just who is throwing this party, and who issued all the invitations, and why we're so fortunate as to be invited. God is at the center of the story, not any one of us or even all of us together.

These folks knew why their lives had been changed, and were unashamed to claim that praise God, the author and perfecter of our faith!

Now Luke concludes his description with two statements about the fruit of community:

... Verse 47 They had the goodwill of all the people

Not the officials and power brokers, mind you, but the people: the ones at the margin.

And why not? The Christian life should be a mighty attractive one. Christian community is a testimony a prophetic voice of God to those not yet included see how those Christians love one another! It seems to me that one of the tests of a healthy community is whether it generates the good will of ordinary people, and especially of people at the margins of society.

... Verse 47 The Lord added to their number

Many Quakers today seem to think that there are only a few people in the world who have the special talents or inclination to be Friends. This is an elitism that has no analog in the experience of the early church. The church in Acts had the opinion that everyone was invited to participate in the life of Christ, and the Lord added to their number in very dramatic ways: from 120 persons (1:15) to 3,000 at Pentecost (2:41) and 5,000 more after the miracle at the Temple (4:4).

If there is fellowship every day, glad and generous hearts breaking bread together and sharing their blessings with those in need, don't you believe that would be an attractive life that folks would want to join in! Proselytizing is almost a dirty word among liberal and Conservative Friends. The matter here is not building up the church membership, but sharing the joy of the Kingdom with other folks. If we've truly had the experience of the Holy Spirit, we will want to share that joy with other people and they will want to be part of the experience.

Conclusion

Sometimes proudly, sometimes humbly, the Religious Society of Friends has always considered itself "primitive Christianity revived." This claim continues to be true only if we seek to understand and emulate these first, "primitive" Christians. It has merit only if early Christians continue to have something to teach us. I believe they do, and this description of their common

life is one of the most important messages we have to receive from them, to understand, and to put into practice in our own lives.

The church in Acts was gathered on the basis of belief, not assent to a creed or catechism, not as a kinship group or political action organization. Each one knew that something very special had happened to them and their response was to believe that God was at work in and among them.

Rather than telling us of personal rules of piety and spiritual discipline adopted by individual Christians, Luke describes four principles of corporate praxis adopted by the community: 1) Devotion to teaching and learning; 2) Table fellowship and other time together; 3) Prayer and worship and praise of God; and 4) Sharing material wealth according to need.

Community is and has always been a blessed gift from God. Like all of God's gifts, we can place ourselves in position to receive this gift more readily, or we can make it harder. When we open our hearts to believe, and adopt these four corporate practices, we make ourselves ready to receive and nurture the divine gift of community. In so doing, we become, and act as, the Body of Christ in this broken world.

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