



May 16, 2021

Living by the Upside-Down Values of Jesus
Pastor Vern Christopherson

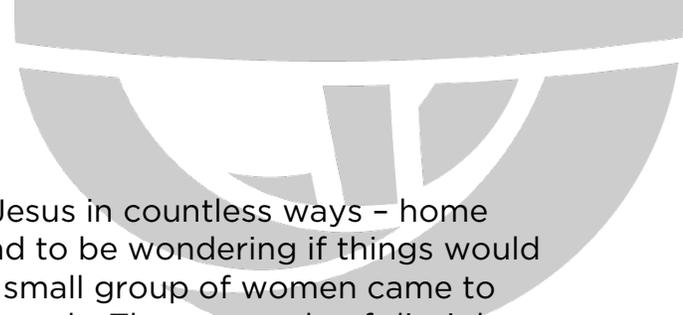
Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37 NSRV

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Th pandemic has changed us in countless ways – home life, work life, religious life. What do you think – are things ever going back to the way they were? We hope so, but some days it hardly seems possible. And we find ourselves impatient, weary, and sometimes even angry.

On the church side of things, I've heard many positive comments about us getting back together again. People are enthusiastic about our renovation project and are grateful to reconnect with friends they haven't seen in a long time. So, what do you think – are things at church ever going back to the way they were? We hope so. Then again, we've learned some lessons along the way that might help us in moving forward. Can any of you imagine not being able to stream worship, or to attend a virtual funeral or wedding when you aren't physically able to be there? How about a zoom Bible Study or a quick team meeting just to touch base? Life in the church is different – we've been changed. Some of those changes are hard, but hopefully – through the grace and strength of God – they can lead us in positive directions.



The events of Easter changed the followers of Jesus in countless ways – home life, work life, religious life. Much like us, they had to be wondering if things would ever be the same again. You know this story. A small group of women came to the tomb and claimed to have seen a vision of angels. Then a couple of disciples thought they recognized Jesus walking with them on the road to Emmaus. Then the Risen Christ mysteriously appeared in the Upper Room and, in case they had any doubts, he showed them the wounds in his hands and feet. In all these events and more, they began to get their hopes up. And then, in the blink of an eye, Jesus was gone.

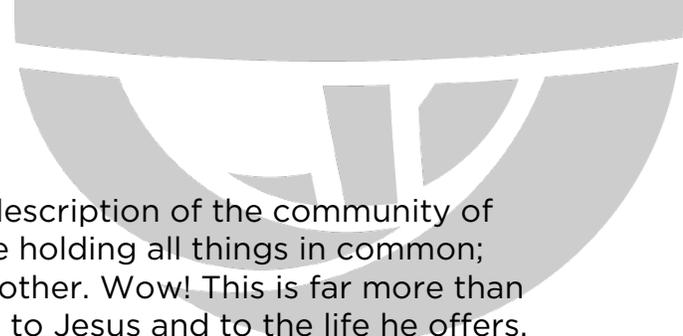
Now what? As you might know, we’ve skipped ahead a week in our storytelling. Literally, we ran out of texts. But Pentecost is coming – fifty days after Easter; we’ll celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. There will be great enthusiasm – not unlike the chance to be with the grandkids again, or to finally have that family wedding, or to resume in-person worship. Anytime enthusiasm comes, we have to decide if it’s merely a momentary impulse or instead might lead to a longer and deeper commitment.

In today’s reading, the early believers in Jesus are moving toward a longer and deeper commitment. They devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. Their religious life is bound to be different than before. They’d moved from being Jewish to Jewish-Christians. I doubt they saw it coming. Isn’t it interesting, the list of their activities sounds a little like our own list: teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers.

Let’s be honest: pre-pandemic, we often took these activities for granted. But then along came COVID and everything got rearranged. If you had to pick one aspect of church life that you’ve

missed the most, what would it be? 1) Teaching, preaching – have you been missing it? It’s important, but it doesn’t need to be first. 2) Fellowship – have you been missing it? The word in Greek is *koinonia*. I bumped into the Mary Circle and Deborah Circle this past week. They looked happy as clams to be together. These gatherings are important. 3) The breaking of bread – have you been missing it? Many of you have shared how hard it’s been to take communion alone; and how good it feels to again hear the words “given and shed for you.” The breaking of bread can refer to communion, but it can be more. When a blessing is said at the table, the table becomes a holy place and eating becomes a sacred activity. 4) Praying together – have you been missing it? The early believers continued to go to the temple for worship and prayer. During our pandemic, we’ve had to find some new activities to feed and inspire us, and maybe they’ve done the trick. But my hunch is that many of you have sometimes felt empty and alone.





So, where does this commitment lead? Luke's description of the community of believers in Acts is really quite amazing. They're holding all things in common; selling their possessions and sharing with each other. Wow! This is far more than simple enthusiasm. They're completely sold out to Jesus and to the life he offers. How literally are we supposed to take this? And what are we supposed to do in response? Should we be holding all things in common, selling our possessions and sharing them with each other?

Biblical interpreters often characterize Luke's description as an idealized picture of life in the early church. And maybe it was. Then again, my hunch is that there really were people like Barnabas who were moved by the life and teachings of Jesus, and by the power of his resurrection. So yes, quite possibly Barnabas - whose name means "son of encouragement" - did sell a piece of property, and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet, and then said, "Use this to help those who might need it more than me."

What was motivating these early believers? Certainly the life and teachings of Jesus. Traditional Judaism saw money as a sign of God's favor. If you kept the commandments, God would bless you with abundance.

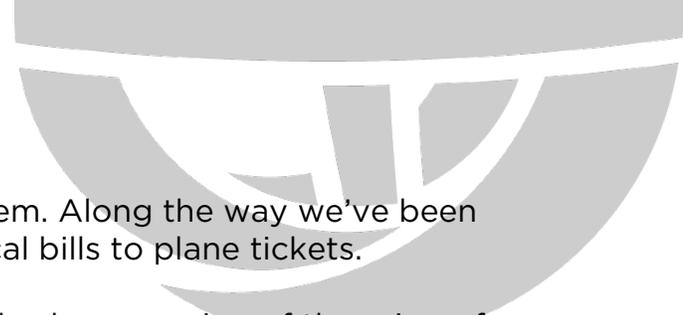
Jesus turned that kind of thinking upside down. As he envisioned the reign of God, he told story after story, not about the blessings of money, but about its danger. The Parable of the Rich Fool was about a farmer with an abundant crop. He tore down all his barns and built bigger ones. Then one night the farmer came to the end of his life and was found to be nothing but a fool. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He had all the money in the world, but something was missing. One day he heard that Jesus was coming to town. He climbed up in a tree to see him. By the time these two were done talking, Jesus got ahold of his life and Zacchaeus was vowing to give half his money to the poor.

Friends, are we supposed to be living by the upside-down values of Jesus? If so, how? Here's the truth: we regularly soften these stories and take them less literally. We want to do something, but we look for more practical solutions than selling our house and cars and cashing in our 401Ks.

A few years ago at Zumbro, we experimented with giving away gas cards and grocery cards and gift certificates to anyone who came through the door. The word spread quickly. Before we knew it, we were overwhelmed. We couldn't begin to keep up with the demand on our time and money.

Shortly after that, we decided to put our time and money into a Good Samaritan Fund. Our primary focus would not be on strangers walking in off the street, but on people from the congregation with a variety of needs. That felt better to us.





We knew these people. We would walk with them. Along the way we've been able to help with everything from rent to medical bills to plane tickets.

When Jesus walked this earth, he lived an upside-down version of the reign of God. He envisioned a world where the naked are clothed, the hungry are fed, and the poor have a roof over their heads. It's more than charity, I think. It's the love of Jesus that sometimes comes spilling out of your heart and mine. And when it does, it feels right and good.

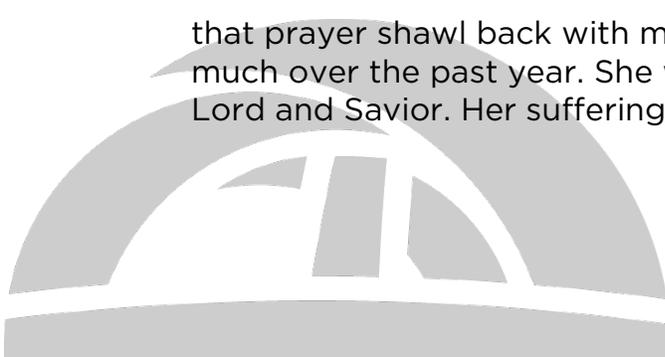
In our pandemic world, if you're wondering if things are ever going to be the same again, why not start there? Not with what's different, but with the love of Jesus, which is very much the same. That love regularly gives Jesus' followers an opportunity to simply be the church, whether if the first century or today.

Want an example of this? In the middle of July, we will begin renovating our second-floor youth room and turning it into a Youth Resource Center. Our Zumbro youth room will move down to the third floor. This project is being done in partnership with Lutheran Social Services. You can hear more about it by tuning in to the LSS fundraiser on Tuesday at noon. Our project will be featured. Our intention is to give youth at risk of homelessness a place to come and be welcome, a place to learn life skills, a place to get a bite to eat, and above all else, a place to belong. The resource center will be open from the middle of the afternoon to early evening. If the young adults who come don't have a place to spend the night, then LSS will find a place for them. And, get this, there might even be a few from Zumbro who'd be willing to take in one or two of these youth.

That sounds a little like the early church to me: believers devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. Believers being open to share what they can. Friends, are the things we do important? Probably more than we know. And the fact of the matter is, sometimes it takes a pandemic to help us see it.

A few weeks ago I got an email from Lori Windhorst of Zumbro. She'd lost her best friend to cancer. Lori wrote with gratitude: "Over the years, various people have prayed for my friend, Jeanne. She was a non-smoker but had developed oral cancer. She battled it bravely for over seven years. I know all of the pastors prayed for her when I asked. I'm a member of Rebecca Circle and they prayed for Jeanne too. Month after month we prayed. A while back, I was able to get a prayer shawl from church. I gave it to Jeanne. She was so very grateful. Now I have

that prayer shawl back with me. I'm honored to have it. Jeanne had suffered so much over the past year. She was finally called home on April 16. She's with our Lord and Savior. Her suffering is done."





Lori concluded: “What amazes me is that no one at Zumbro had ever met Jeanne, but they reached out with compassion and shared the love of Jesus. Thanks be to God! What a blessing it is to be part of this faith community. I know Jeanne appreciated all the prayers and love shown by total strangers and for that, I will forever be grateful. Lori.”

Lori’s description sounds a little like those early believers in Act. Their lives had been upended by the death and resurrection of Jesus, and by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly they were acting in ways they’d never acted before.

Were things ever going back to the way they were? Not exactly. There would be some adjustments for them to make. And for us too. But one thing never changes: the love of Jesus that turns our world upside down. Indeed, over time it transforms us into the people we are meant to be. Amen.

