

Acts 2:43-47  
August 21, 2011

South Plains

...the holy catholic church, the communion  
of saints, the forgiveness of sins

The wonderful thing about the book of the Acts of the Apostles is the way it describes the church of Jesus Christ from its sublime moments to its most ridiculous moments. Anyone reading these five verses in the second chapter might see this description in one of two ways: It could be the greatest manifestation of the generosity of the people of God or else it could be the most outrageous fib ever told about us. Can you imagine that the church ever held all the assets of its members in common, distributing gifts as anyone had need? When the Apostles Creed comes to the place where it affirms what we believe regarding the church, its claims may seem more modest. I would contend, however, that what we say about church in the creed stretches our faith to the utmost. But, that's OK. Church is the place where faith grows best, perhaps the only place faith grows at all.

Everybody knows stories about our failures as followers of Jesus: our scandals, our foolishness, the pride and arrogance that close people's ears to the gospel, as well as the hypocrisy and petty squabbles that waste our time. There will always be people and organizations within the church that want to use our failures as a springboard for their own agenda. I believe

the Apostles Creed presents a realistic optimism about our future.

First the realism. If you believe anything at all about the man Jesus, you probably agree that he was a loving and brave person. Therefore, it seems to me very likely that his disciples would try their best to imitate his love in bravely sharing their goods with one another. It's not only Christians who exhibit that generous spirit from time to time. During the rebellious sixties and seventies, communes sprang up around the country, some in central Virginia, where young people held their goods in common. Some of these communes were Christian. Many were not. All sought a better way of living in this world, something like the way described in Acts 2:44.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Granted, that utopian society did not last very long. Nevertheless, Christ's generous spirit is still alive in the church today. We see evidence whenever disaster strikes and thousands, often millions of dollars flow out of the pockets of Christians in order to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the injured. That's real holiness. Not the 'better-than-thou' kind of holiness. It's quiet, sacrificial, and strategic holiness more concerned about doing good than getting credit. I can believe in that sort of church.

Realistically, a holy generosity will attract others, albeit very slowly because it refuses to seek publicity. Paradoxically, attracting attention was not a problem for the early church, at least not in the first few years. People in Jerusalem heard the claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They saw and heard the results of Pentecost for themselves. Most significantly, miracles of healing abounded. Whether it was the love and grace of the Christian community or just the raw power of God, I cannot say. I suspect both played a part. And they still do.

Martha was elderly and sick with multiple problems. None of the drugs had stopped her slide downhill, so the primary care physician finally called hospice and prepared the family for her inevitable death within the next few months. All treatment was withdrawn except the powerful painkillers. Because some of those painkillers were narcotics, it was necessary for nurses to visit regularly. The home health aides and sitters had few responsibilities beyond keeping Martha company. They prayed with her and told stories for six months, for twelve months, for twenty-four months until no one could deny that Martha was no longer in imminent danger of dying. She did not live forever, but she lived well in the last years of her life because she was surrounded by loving care. If that's what was happening in Jerusalem in the middle of the first century as the church shared the love of Jesus, we should not be surprised at what Acts says:

Awe came upon everyone, because many

wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. (2:43)

If that picture seems too rosy, and those Christians seem too generous, listen to the story Acts tells a few chapters later. The early church wasn't all peaches and cream.

Once upon a time, there was a Christian couple in the church in Jerusalem who were landowners. When the opportunity arose for them to sell a piece of land, they talked together as a good family would do and decided to sell. The husband divided the money and kept part of it for his family and gave part of the money to the church. That's a good thing to do. However, he told the church leaders that he was giving all the money from the sale to the church. That was a bad thing to do. Somehow, the church knew he was lying and told him so. He was so embarrassed about lying that he fell down dead right there in church. Three hours later, his wife came to the church. They asked about her part in the sale of the land and their gift. She also fell dead in front of the church.

I think Christians remembered their story and wrote it down in the book of Acts for three reasons. Naturally, Christians shouldn't tell lies. Just as important, we need to remember that many times, the truth will come out and embarrass or humiliate the liar. Perhaps the third and best reason for keeping this story is to remember how rare and unusual real generosity can be. It's one of God's miracles, and the miracle is not the appearance of a lot of money in the offering plate but the

appearance of genuine kindness in the lives of Christians, the evidence of a sacrifice without any benefit to the person making the sacrifice, those wonderful occasions when the communion of the saints means we are truly working together. We work together than way here at South Plains some of the time, and we celebrate those moments of grace.

The Apostles Creed is pretty realistic about human nature. There are no embarrassing scandals referenced in the creed. But, right after the communion of the saints we acknowledge what kind of saints we are. We are sinners who need to have our sins forgiven. Small sins of backbiting such as whether The Roman Catholic Church has exclusive rights to the words “Catholic” and “Church” spelled with a capital ‘c’. Big sins such as which manifestation of the body of Christ can have the most outrageous sex scandals. We live by grace.

There are two ways to interpret a sinful church. Some good Christians look at this flawed institution and conclude it’s better to endure the sin of schism than to associate with people so sinful in other ways. I have heard that side of the argument throughout my adult life among Presbyterians. Other good Christians will look at the same institution and conclude it’s better to associate with sinners like themselves and trust God to sanctify us all. I’m not sure which way requires more faith. I find that separating myself from Christians who believe and act differently leads to diminishing returns. I’m never good enough to satisfy myself, much less God. And, I

get lonely when I’m separated from all those “terrible sinners.” Nothing is more realistic than acknowledging Sunday after Sunday that I believe in the forgiveness of sins.

I said the Apostles Creed is also optimistic. The Creed calls us saints, literally ‘holy ones,’ an overly optimistic assessment of this rag-tag bunch of wannabee Christians except for the fact of that forgiving grace. It doesn’t mean that we are perfect or even that we make good examples for other people to emulate. It points instead to the touch of grace on our lives.

Last week I officiated at a funeral for a man I scarcely knew, the friend of a friend of a friend. It’s always a privilege to be asked under those circumstances, even though I struggle with ‘why?’ They described him with words such as eccentric and outrageous. The room was packed. Laughter and tears flowed freely. He had grown up in the Episcopal Church where the words and ritual of that tradition were very important to the family and, I believe, also to the deceased. So I put on my collar and used some of the prayers common to our orders of worship. What happens in such worship? What can the church contribute when we have a tenuous, almost invisible relationship to the parties involved?

The only answer I can come up with is that we, all of us in that funeral service who give ourselves to the hymns and prayers, the scripture and praise, we witness

to the communion of saints. We remind ourselves that the ties binding us to Jesus Christ and to each other are so much more than we can understand. We acknowledge the irony of calling ourselves 'saints' in the hope that by the grace of God someday it will be true in every sense. We affirm by our presence the catholicity, the oneness of the church of Jesus Christ.

In the final analysis, I suppose most church services are like that, an act of faith that God's love will cover our inadequacies. And an act of hope that in our worship, God is slowly and surely bringing us out of the ridiculous and a little closer to the sublime.