

April 15, 2018  
Third Sunday in Easter  
Acts 4:32-35;

### **BE THE CHURCH**

I know a Presbyterian pastor who graduated from seminary about the same time I did. His first call was to a rural church in North Dakota. Much to his surprise, there was no stewardship tradition in that church in the way that most churches do—as we are entering today here at Fellowship. These kinds of funding programs come in a variety of formats. Sometimes its called a pledge drive. When I first started at Fellowship we were using a program out of a book called Consecration Sunday. It focused on celebrating the gifts of the spirit, emphasizing that financial support of the church is at its heart a spiritual discipline. The words stewardship and pledge were banned. Instead of turning in pledge cards, members turned in their “estimate of giving” cards. The program was entirely led by members of the congregation. The pastor was not to be involved at all. I thought that was great! The first two years I was here, Rodney Weismann was the session member in charge and it was a lot of work that worked well.

Then about five years ago another book came out called: “Not Your Parents Offering Plate.” This book said whatever type of program you follow, you need to change it up every three or four years at the most. It also said the pastor needs to be the spokesperson and central figure in all church related fundraising efforts. To do that, the book said the pastor should review the giving records of all church members and make personal calls to the highest givers every year to persuade them to increase their giving. I guess we weren’t supposed to waste our time visiting those at the low end of the giving pool.

Here at Fellowship, we’ve used variations of the ideas in these and other programs that show up in my email in box over the years. I never bought into that

idea of checking up on members' giving record and deciding who would get the personal dunning visit from me. The truth is, there are dozens of "how to raise enough money to keep your church going" books on the market. Just do a search on Amazon and you'll find them. They all involve detailed, step by step how-to programs.

But this small congregation in North Dakota consisting primarily of farmers and small business owners doesn't do any of that. Their weekly offering is more than enough to fund the day to day ministries, utilities, pastor's salary etc. When there is a major need, like a new roof or heating system—they don't have to worry about air conditioning—the session gets the word out and the money comes in. I was like how do you do that? My friend said I don't do it. That's just the way this church has always functioned.

Wow. I'm sure everyone would like to do that. Maybe Fellowship will give it a try in the future. It's pretty clear that that is what was going on in the earliest days of the Church according to the Book of Acts. But there is a lot more than that going on as well. I often wonder how Christians who say the Bible is a book of rules for living and everyone should be required to adhere to those rules, deal with this passage. I'm talking about the kind of people who have bumper stickers that say "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." I mean if this is telling us how to be Christians in the modern world, I don't see any room for economic and political systems that embrace ideas like private property and capitalism.

Fortunately, or maybe not fortunately depending on your perspective, this passage isn't about how we must be the church. It is a description of the powerful way the Holy Spirit worked among those first generation Christians. From the very beginning, Christians understood that following the "Way" of Jesus Christ meant living in communities of believers, gathering together to hear Scripture read and preached, celebrating the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism,

praying, singing and worshipping together. And of course caring for each other. Making sure the bills got paid and the poor were clothed, fed and sheltered.

This passage does remind us that the whole idea of a stewardship season is something of an anomaly in the church. If we all would let the Holy Spirit work within us as that first generation did, there would be no need for stewardship drives.

But this passage really isn't about whether stewardship drives are appropriate or not appropriate. There is a lot here that is inspiring and useful to those of us who are committed to the church of Jesus Christ; those of us who have some understanding that we are the body of Christ; some understanding that the church is the heart of the Kingdom of God on earth. Some understanding that being a Christian and being an active member of church are inseparable. Some understanding that being a member of a church means practicing spiritual disciplines. Some understanding that financial giving is an indispensable spiritual discipline for anyone who claims the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

All of the post-resurrection stories about Jesus lead us to this understanding. According to the Gospel of John, when Jesus appeared in a locked room, he appeared to the gathered disciples and breathed his Spirit upon them. Then he sent them out to live and teach as he had taught them. In Luke's slightly different version of the same event that we heard today, he sends them out to proclaim the new Way to all the nations. In Matthew, Jesus met the disciples on a mountain top in Galilee and he sent them out to teach all nations everything that he had taught them. And he said remember, by the power of the Spirit, I am with you to the end of the age. The end of time.

That is why the passage from Acts about how churches grew and thrived from the very beginning informs our understanding about how to be the church today. It is not about stewardship season, or Consecration Sunday, or any other

how-to fund your church program. It is about receiving the gift of the Spirit and responding in gratitude by being the church of Jesus Christ. Be the church period; twenty four/seven, 365 days a year, year in and year out.

Pastors come and go. The church isn't the pastor, it is the members. Your time and your place to be the Spirit-filled church Christ calls you to be is right here, right now. Be the Church. It's just that simple and it's just that hard.