

“Made for Each Other”
Acts 2:42-47
First Presbyterian Church
May 7, 2017
Rev. Glen Bell

The math just doesn't add up.

No matter how carefully we plan, how hard we try, it just seems impossible to get it all done. We want our children or grandchildren (or other cherished ones) to go to the best camps this summer, where they will both learn a lot and enjoy themselves. We want at least a day or two with faraway family, perhaps somewhere special, like New York City, or at least in the beauty of the north Georgia mountains. At the same time, we like to eat out occasionally, drive a nice car, give a little help to our loved ones, and make a regular gift to the church.

We don't have limitless resources, but we do have some – and some of us have quite a bit. Every hour, we listen to the radio, watch the television, read the paper and scan the internet, seeing ad after ad for goods and services. Every single advertisement sells us something that promises to make our lives better, easier, more fulfilling, more complete.

Every single ad seems to be about me.

But the math doesn't add up.

The thrust and focus of 99% of marketing campaigns ever designed is me – my approval, my perceived benefit, my felt needs, my wants and whims. If you are hungry, there is a suggested restaurant; thirsty, a wine or beer or other beverage. There seems to be something – indeed, many somethings – to meet every single one of our desires.

If you take this world in which we live and move and have our being – a world all about me and my desires – and set it next to the New Testament lesson this morning, the contrast is breathtaking. In our day to day lives, we are invited to focus on ourselves, but the gospel directs us to the importance of genuine, deep fellowship. In this world of marketing, both corporate and personal, we are directed to just the right goods and services, all focused on my pleasure and well-being, while this reading from Acts to be together, truly together, and to sell our possessions for the benefit of others.

Day to day life is all about me, all about getting. But following Christ is all about others, all about giving. The math doesn't add up.

Today's lesson is the conclusion of the second chapter of Acts. If you sit down this afternoon and read the first two chapters of Acts – it will not take you more than ten minutes, you will discover all kinds of parallels between the life of the early church with our spiritual lives today.

- The followers of Jesus wonder if he will restore God's kingdom, if this is the time he will make it all happen and brings things to a close. Jesus reminds them – and us – that right now is our opportunity and responsibility to share the gospel, to love and serve others.
- The early church prays a lot, asking for guidance and strength. We do as well, seeking God's help and direction as we comfort the bereaved, support the suffering and work for justice in Christ's name.
- The followers of the risen Christ are blessed with the power of the Holy Spirit, in order to do and be far more than they first imagined. We too are invited to stretch and grow, as our relationship with God in Christ deepens and forms us in unexpected ways.

It's not just the life of the earliest disciples. It's our life too.

But it rubs – to tell the truth, sometimes painfully – against our own self-image, sending our children or grandchildren to camp and vacationing somewhere (at least for a few days) and going out to eat occasionally and driving a nice car.

Jesus is blunt about this in the gospels. Kenda Creasy, Dean of Princeton Seminary, reminds us of the story in Mark when “Jesus was having supper at Simon’s house. In walked a woman with an alabaster jar. She smashed it and poured its precious contents of nard – worth about \$35,000 in today’s dollars – over Jesus. Biblical scholars,” she writes, “read her anointing both as a sign of Jesus’ impending death and of his reign as Lord, but the disciples missed the symbolism. Thinking about what such a sum would have meant for a local non-profit, the disciples were aghast. ‘Why?’ they asked. ‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way?’ (Mark 14:4)

In a world which measures everything according to me, “that word ‘waste’ is important. Presbyterian pastor Emily Anderson reminds us that this is not the first time we hear it in Mark’s gospel. Just a few chapters earlier, we hear the same Greek root, though in that passage the Greek is usually translated as ‘lose.’ ‘Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.’ (Mark 8:35) Those who waste their lives for Jesus, who squander their time and talent on the church, who throw away their lives in servant ministry will gain it.

“Following Jesus is a waste. The Bible tells us so.”

That’s why those of you who are dedicated servant leadership in the church sometimes feel a little concern and frustration in the midst of your commitment. Our deacons and elders who visit the bereft and lonely and homebound, sometimes serving them communion, may sometimes hear a tiny voice inviting them to give it up, and instead spend that time figuring out the best summer camps for their children or grandchildren. Those of you who faithfully serve our homeless guests through Family Promise, instead of baking a casserole for those so desperately in need, could be out on their own enjoying a meal at a nice restaurant. The members of our Imagine the Future task force, who have now labored for more than three years on our renovation, may well have been tempted on a number of occasions to further their careers or spend time with their families instead of working so hard on behalf of the church.

It’s a mystery, a seeming waste.

But Jesus is clear. This is the path. We discover ourselves only as we get beyond ourselves, as we release ourselves. We discover who we are only as we gather around this table, as we pray together, as we listen to the teaching of God’s Word.

We find ourselves only as we open our hearts to others, to otherness.

I am in the midst of reading *Upstream*, a series of essays by the poet Mary Oliver. As a young woman, through her experience both of the natural world and literature, she discovered something essential about life and heart. She writes, “In the natural world I felt at ease; nature was full of beauty and interest and mystery, but never misuse. The world of literature offered both the pleasures of form and the sustenance of empathy. I ran for it. I relaxed in it. I stood willingly and gladly in the characters of everything – other people, trees, clouds.

“And this is what I learned,” she concludes. “The world’s otherness is antidote to confusion. Standing within this otherness – the beauty and mystery of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books – can re-dignify the worst-stung heart.”

I believe this is the most important kind of wisdom, even though it doesn’t add up according to the world’s calculations. We find ourselves only as we open our hearts to others.

I always cry when I watch *Beauty and the Beast*. It doesn’t matter if it’s the animated film from twenty years ago or the new version with Emma Watson and Dan Stevens. At every turn the characters

make decisions on behalf of others. Maurice, Belle's father, spends his life offering his best for his daughter, rather than his own welfare. After he is captured and imprisoned in the Beast's castle, Belle exchanges herself to win her father's release. There in the castle we encounter all of the faithful servants of the Beast – teapot, wardrobe, clock, candelabra, feather duster – still serving him with love and devotion, even when hope and love seem in such short supply. The odds of anything good happening in the end are overwhelmingly long.

But redemption takes place when the characters discover the awe and wonder of love. They find it in the strangest of places: in acts of sacrifice that renounce any self-centered concerns.

Today as you come to this table, I invite you to the promise that Jesus Christ is made for us and we are made for one another. In the breaking of this bread and the sharing of his cup, the spiritual presence of Christ's body and blood, let us be caught up anew in this awe and wonder.

At this table, God grants us the gifts of glad and generous hearts, and the Spirit empowers us to give ourselves away, to offer our best to neighbors in need, to offer our best gifts to the programs supported by our general fund and our Imagine the Future renovations. Let us give with all our hearts.

It's a mystery. Following Christ is all about others, all about giving. And there, right there, we discover the best and the beauty of life itself.