

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A, RCL)

A RADICAL ETHIC OF LOVE (Acts 2:42-47)

By Shane Claiborne

One of the first things that happened as the Church was born that first Pentecost 2000 years ago... is that they started sharing everything they had. They worshipped in their homes. The Gospel was lived out of dinner tables and living rooms. And just as amazing as speaking in tongues, was this: **THEY SHARED.**

Scripture says, “No one claimed any of their possessions were their own, but they shared everything they had... and there were no needy persons among them... They put their offerings at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed as people had need.”

And it goes on to say that “there were no needy persons among them.”

One of the first signs of the birthday of the church is that they ended poverty... because they held their possessions with open hands.

It was a radical ethic of love.

This witness has so much to teach our contemporary world.

We are living in a time of unprecedented economic disparity between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. Masses of people live in poverty so that a handful of people can live as they wish.

Just consider this: The world’s three richest people own more than the combined economies of 48 countries.

In contrast, it was the ethic of the early Christians that no one has a right to more than they need while others have less. Basil the Great said: If someone steals a person’s clothes we call them a thief, but shouldn’t we give the same name to the Christian who has more than they need while their neighbor goes without. Vincent de Paul who the great charity is named after once said that when he gives food to the hungry he gets on his knees and asks forgiveness – for he’s only returning what was stolen. It was said that if the early Christians did not have enough food for all the hungry folks in their midst, then they would all fast until there was enough – until everyone could eat, no one would eat. An ethic so radical John Wesley said if he were to die with more than 10 dollars every person should call him a liar and a thief for betraying the Gospel of Christ. And Dorothy Day declared, “If you have two coats, you’ve stolen one... one of them belongs to the poor.”

But here’s the deal. Generosity cannot be forced. It cannot be legislated. It has to be provoked... by love. That’s

why we're not talking about a new form of socialism or communism or anything that ends in "-ism." As we like to say at The Simple Way: "Once we catch the vision of loving our neighbors as ourselves, capitalism as we see it will not be possible and Marxism will not be necessary." Redistribution comes from community, not before community – the early Christians did not have community because they shared stuff... just the opposite – they shared stuff because they had community. It is simply what happens when we are driven by a love ethic... to love our neighbor as ourselves.

What we are talking about is a global movement committed to loving our neighbor as ourselves. And the love we are talking about is not the sentimental love of fairy tales but the harsh and dreadful love that keeps us up at night. It's hard to keep buying stuff when we realize we have brothers and sisters that are dying because they don't have a mosquito net that will prevent malaria... a mosquito net that costs \$3, the price we pay for coffee.

The deepest tragedy in our world is not that rich folks don't care about poor folks. The tragedy is that rich folks don't know poor folks. Statistics are not enough. Campaigns are not enough. We will never make poverty history until we first make poverty personal. That's what happened in the early church – they had a new vision of family. They no longer had "rich" and "poor" but only "brother" and "sister."

When we know the names and faces of those who live and die in poverty and hunger, we can't help but respond. But the entire culture tries to insulate us from the suffering -- and hide the invisible faces of those whose pain accommodates our comfort. Jesus is not saying to the poor, come find the Church. Jesus is saying to the Church: go into the world. Find me where I am hungry. And homeless. And naked. And in prison. In the end, the final judgment according to Jesus is this. All of us are gathered before God, and we will be asked a few questions. It is not a doctrinal test about eschatology, inerrancy of scripture. We will not be asked if we believe Mary was a virgin or the world was really made in 7 days. We will be asked, "When I was hungry did you feed me?" When I was a stranger did you welcome me in. When I was sick did you take care of me. The true test of our faith is how it is expressed in love, and compassion to the most beat up and broken people in this world. And it's not that our works earn our salvation -- our works demonstrate our salvation.

Nearly every day I hear of new experiments in sharing that inspire me. An experiment called Common Change, where folks around the world are pooling money like the early church and bringing needs that arise before the group – now sharing hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Another group of 20,000 Christians committed to covering each other's medical bills amid America's health-care-crisis. Then there are small experiments like cul-de-sacs creating tool shares where neighbors can share tools or lawn equipment. A suburban family for whom loving their neighbor as themselves means creating a scholarship fund for at-risk youth, matching dollar-for-dollar the money they spend to send their own kids to college. A congregation that created a Jubilee fund to match the capital campaign on their new fellowship hall – so as they built their building they created clean water for a village of people overseas. That's what it can look like to love our neighbor as ourselves today.

But here's something important – it is not about guilt – Jesus did not come to give us guilt but to give us life. Someone once said to Mother Teresa: “I couldn't live like you if someone paid me a million dollars.” And she responded by saying, “I wouldn't do it if someone paid me a million dollars either... I do it because it is what I am made for.” In the end what we are talking about is the life we are made for. We are talking about joy, and love, and freedom.

I will never forget learning this from a homeless kid in India. Every week we would throw a party for the street kids, kids 8-10 years old who were homeless, begging all day to survive. Each Tuesday we would get about 100 of them together and throw a party, play games, eat a big meal. One week, one of the kids I had grown close to told me it was his birthday. So I got him an ice cream. He was so excited he stared at it mesmerized. I have no idea how long it had been since he had eaten ice cream. But what he did next was brilliant. He yelled at all the other kids and told them to come over. He lined them up and gave them all a lick. His instinct was: this is so good I can't keep it for myself. In the end, that's what this whole idea of generosity is all about. Not guilt. It's about the joy of sharing. It's about realizing the good things in life – like ice cream – are too good to keep for ourselves.

Reflection Questions:

1. Where have you seen the people share in inspirational ways like the early Christians?
2. What are the obstacles in your own life that make it difficult to share, and to live in proximity to those who suffer?
3. What are some ways that you might want to “experiment” in sharing this next year?

Shane Claiborne graduated from Eastern University and did graduate work at Princeton Seminary. In 2010, he received an Honorary Doctorate from Eastern. His adventures have taken him from the streets of Calcutta where he worked with Mother Teresa to the wealthy suburbs of Chicago where he served at the influential mega-church Willow Creek. As a peacemaker, his journeys have taken him to some of the most troubled regions of the world – from Rwanda to the West Bank – and he's been on peace delegations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Shane is a founder and board member of The Simple Way, a faith community in inner city Philadelphia that has helped birth and connect radical faith communities around the world. He is married to Katie Jo, a North Carolina girl who also fell in love with the city (and with Shane).

They were wed in St. Edwards church, the formerly abandoned cathedral into which homeless families relocated in 1995, launching the beginning of the Simple Way community and a new phase of faith-based justice making.

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