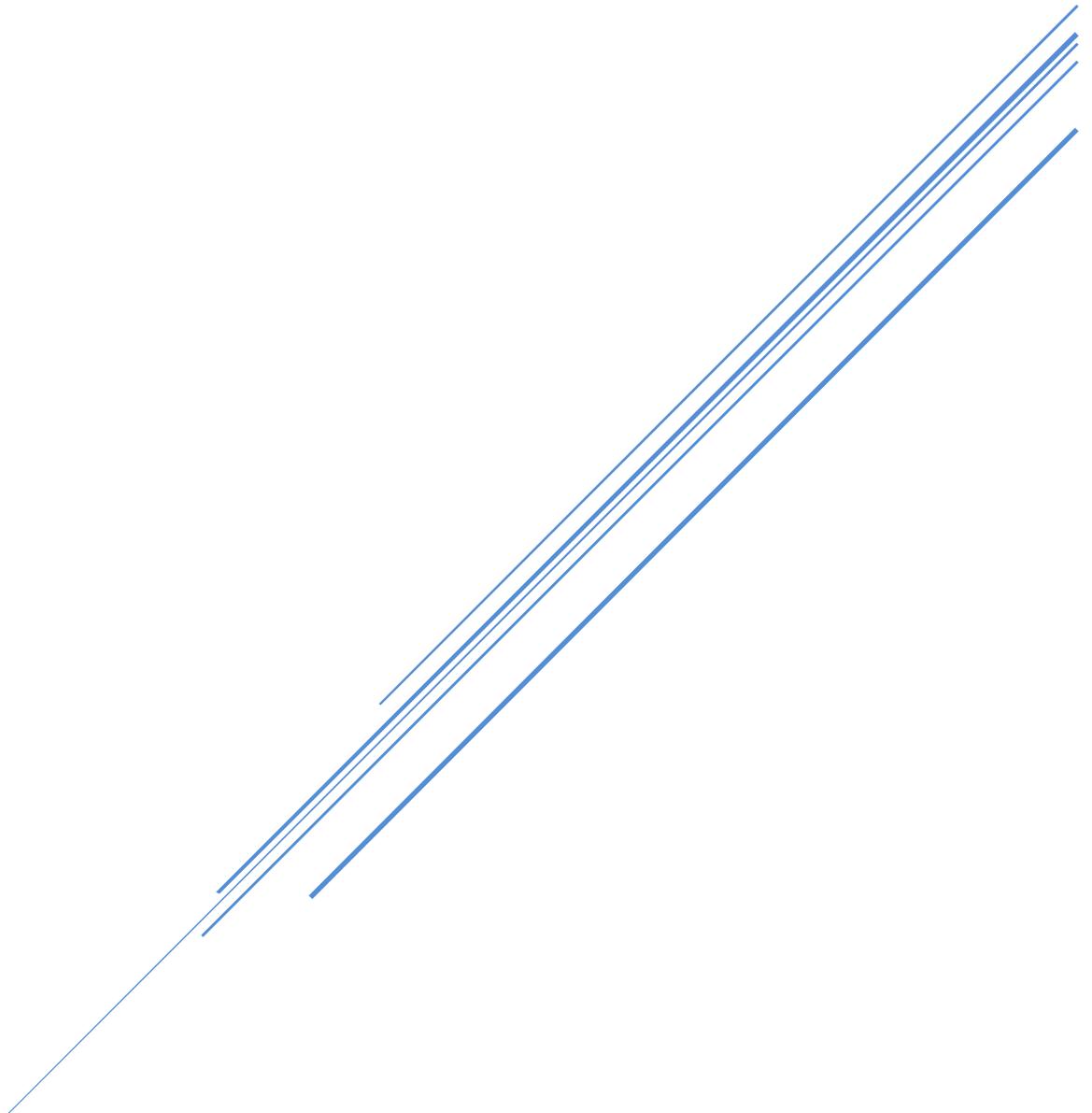


“THAT’S IN THE BIBLE?”

Acts 2:42-47



Brad Walston, May 11, 2014

From a sermon by Rev. Schuyler Rhodes

“That’s in the Bible?” – Acts 2:42-47

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This sermon might make a few people uncomfortable. But they say if I don’t make a few people uncomfortable every once in a while I’m not doing my job. So here goes nothin’!

My mom saved everything from my childhood -- little clay ashtrays (who lets little kids make ashtrays anyway?) drawings, my school uniform from when I was 6...and of course report cards. I have report cards from high school all the way back to elementary school. They certainly make for some interesting reading. One teacher praised my cheerful spirit but scolded me for talking when I should be, well, NOT talking! Mostly I find little notes that say something like, “Bradley has so much potential! If only he would do the work.” One teacher thought that perhaps I might be bored... Ya’ think?

There’s one that keeps coming back to me though... Mom never mentioned it, probably didn’t think it amounted to much – hardly worth noting. But there it was, in red ink at the bottom of my 3rd grade report card, “Shares well with others.”

“Shares well with others...” Sharing is an interesting thing to be teaching our children, isn’t it? It’s a good thing, really. On the playground, in the sandbox, we want our kids to learn to share toys and building blocks and crayons... We hope our kids will learn how to take turns on the swings and see-saws. We hope as we raise our kids that they will learn something of sharing of themselves.

“Sharing is Caring” is from an old TV commercial. Anyone remember, “It’s nice to share”?

We work hard to teach our kids to share, don’t we? We guide play time, share the lessons, and help our children to learn that sharing is an essential component to getting along in this world. “Shares well with others.” We’d all like to be able to say that about our kids, right?

Now – the truth of the matter is that after all that teaching, all that cajoling and guiding, we send these children who have learned how to share well with others out into a world that does not share well with others. In fact, the child who has learned how to share at home or in church is often the object of bullies and thieves. The child who

has learned gentleness and openness at home hits the schoolyard to find that suddenly the world isn't the way Mom & Dad or Pastor Brad said it was. Ouch!

This is the feeling I get when I read this passage from Acts. My initial response to it is, "Is this really in the Bible? Do you know what would happen if we actually tried this – in the real world? They can't mean...well...that's ridiculous! It's naïve! It sounds like communism!" In any discussion I've had regarding this scripture, folks get defensive, dismissive, even angry. I'm told that things like that could never work in 'today's world,' and that there's 'nothing wrong with making a profit.'

It's hard... to be faced with the truth that scripture, it seems, wants us to share so well with others that we divest ourselves of the notion of private property altogether. The idea is that in Christian community, or *koinonia*, the welfare of the individual is the found in the welfare of the community. Sound familiar?

In 1Cor 12:26 we read, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." In this way, everyone gives everything they have to the community to be distributed according to need.

What?!?! Wait. According to....need? But if I work harder, don't I deserve more? What if that guy is just lazy? Or, "They don't mean that – not literally, anyway – do they?"

So, yes, this IS one of those "difficult sayings." Difficult -- not because it's complicated or problematic, not because it raises any complex theological or doctrinal issues – it's really quite straightforward and simple. But it's difficult because of the socio-political location of the people reading it. In the US, we consume an absurdly huge proportion of the world's resources. We are wealthy beyond imagination while the majority of the world's population lives on less than one dollar a day. We suffer the health effects of obesity while much of the world suffers from malnutrition. Our country is one of the nations that's responsible for the vast majority of greenhouse gases that are accelerating global climate change, and our corporations chase ceaselessly around the world looking for the next country that will let its workers be paid less than \$1.00/day to make our shirts and jeans and sneakers, phones and computers.

The truth is that the economy of the early church is hard for us because we have so much. The other harsh reality is that we really do not "share well with others."

OK – so – check this out. I live in the same world as the rest of you, right? And I think sharing is great – everyone should do it! BUT ... I work hard. I'm saving for my retirement. I struggle to put money aside to pay the IRS and my student loans. Ok, fine -- I should put money aside to cover my student loans! I take my paycheck home every twice a month to pay for my food, my clothing, my gas, my school supplies, and whatnot for me and mine. And if I could be frank for minute, I would not be first in line to give everything over to the church to be distributed out to all the members based on need. And as I say those words, I have a confession to make. See if this sounds familiar...

I won't give everything I have to the church because I don't trust you. God help me, there – I've said it. I don't trust. If I give everything – everything – over to the church, can I trust you to take of me? My health, my welfare? If I had a wife and kids could I trust you to take of them? Do I trust the community to care for all of us? Sadly, no.

But it's worse than that. The real deal is that my trust in God is being put to the test. Ultimately it's all, finally, about trust. Do I trust you? Do I trust God? AND...am I willing to live my life according to that trust? I'm a pastor – surely I can answer with an enthusiastic “Yes!” right? Wrong. And I can feel the shame as the word ‘No’ begins to form on my lips...

But no matter how I might feel about it, I have to deal with the fact that this call to ‘share well with others’ is not only here in scripture before us, it also seems pretty clear that the early church did indeed try to live this way. In fact, there are still Christian communities across the globe striving to reach for this ideal. And it's not just me. As a community committed to authenticity we really have to confront the depth of this passage and all that supports it as we seek to be faithful.

Do we trust one another? Do we trust God?

Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm fairly sure that nobody sitting here today is about to turn everything they own over to the church. Is that right? 'Cause if you are I'll gladly meet with you and – who's here from finance? – Meet me in the office after church. Since we're not planning on giving everything to the church, I think it would behoove us to consider how we might at least make a beginning. In most Christian communities the average member gives about 2% of their income to the church. In a community where more than 20% of our neighbors have no health insurance, what can we do? I get a phone call once or twice a month from someone who can't make ends

meet for whatever reason. We have limited funds in our Good Samaritan fund for that. It'll be gone well before the end of the year. How should we proceed?

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[a] to all, as any had need.” -- Shares well with others...

Let me make a few suggestions... Are you getting uncomfortable yet? First, let me suggest that each person in this congregation tithe. There. I said it. And I won't mention it again until fall – unless the finance committee makes me... Malachi 3:10, I think, is the only place in the Bible where it's OK to test God. *“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”*

As you probably know, pledges are your financial commitments to the church on which we base our entire budget for the year. Pledges this year were lower than last year. So I suggest that we make a solemn covenant today to give 10 % of our earnings to the church. And that's gross!

I know – that's difficult for some, and if it is difficult, you might consider a 1% or 2% increase each year to work up to 10%. If you can't you can't. Maybe you're more on the 'as needed' side of the issue.... That's OK! Nobody is going to police you, and nobody is going to judge you. These are only suggestions to ponder. We could do it. It would be an awesome indicator of our trust – in each other and in God. I'm sure you found the little chart in the bulletin you can use as a guide, and pledge cards are available on the back table. Just think about it.

Second, let's get together and share with each other. Let's learn about the needs and the wants in our community, and let's set about devising a strategy to meet them. Does anyone in our church need healthcare? Jobs? Help around the house – yardwork or handyman stuff? Do the children need help in school or – God forbid – do they need a decent meal? Let's learn more about the needs around us and make a commitment to meet those needs. Let's make certain that those in our community who have needs are care for by their sisters and brothers.

Shares well with others...

And finally, let's be clear that these steps are only a beginning. If we tithe this year can we do a little more next year? Can we build up our Good Samaritan emergency fund to provide better assistance to anyone – as the need arises? What else can we do? What more can we give?

How much more deeply might we learn to trust – one another, and God?

So let's challenge our own situation, our own circumstances; let's confront our lack of trust and take the next joyful step down the road toward faithfulness to God in Jesus Christ. If you would consider this not only a challenge, but also as a prayer – God, please help us to share well with others.

Amen.