

Recipe for a Contagious Faith!

Acts 22: 36-46

June 12, 2022

One of my favorite stories to tell on my oldest sister is about her banana bread recipe. She tells it about herself too, so I figure its fair game! So, she was creating a “favorite family recipes” cook-booklet for her daughter as a graduation gift, and faithfully copied all of her daughter’s favorite recipes of hers into this little booklet. So then later on that year, when Rachel had decided to make her mom’s banana bread, she called her mom, with some concern and disbelief: “Mom, she said, “do you really make banana bread with NO bananas?!” Wow! Somehow, that signature ingredient was left off the list!

We probably each could tell a recipe failure story – cooking fails and flops, some more disastrous than others. As I shared with the children, I remember making fudge with granulated sugar when I was young, and young enough to not know the difference between sugars. Still tasted good though! Just more crunchy....!

Our scripture for today tells us how the first disciples followed and shared Jesus’ recipe for God’s beloved community with people in Jerusalem, just after receiving the Holy Spirit. Pastor Rob led us last week in hearing the story of Pentecost, God sending the Holy Spirit upon the first disciples. Jesus had told them the week before, just before his Ascension, that once they received the Holy Spirit, they were to continue sharing Jesus’ message and ministry here in Jerusalem, nearby in Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and far away, to the ends of the earth. In today’s scripture, as Peter shares the message with their first crowds, people are convicted of God’s Word and work in Jesus and ask what they are to do. Peter invites them to repent, to turn from their own destructive ways, to be baptized and then to follow in God’s way of love and beloved community that Jesus taught us. So, 3000 people repent and are baptized, and then they are brought into the community of faith, learning from the disciples’ teaching how they are to live out Jesus’ love with each other, sharing in fellowship and a common life; they broke bread, sharing meals together with each other in their homes, and prayed together at the Temple and in their homes. Those with abundant resources shared with those in need. “And day by day,” scripture says, “the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Saved is a word in Hebrew and Greek that has deep meaning, including physical healing, rescue from danger, as well as spiritual salvation.

People, day by day, were coming to see and experience and join, this community of faith and love embodied in their common life: the fellowship, meals, teaching and prayer that broke down the prejudices and divisions between races and cultures, economic classes, and even the politics of their Roman occupied societies. Jerusalem at Pentecost was filled with Roman troops to keep the peace, with Jews from all over the Mediterranean and beyond, come home for the harvest festival, people of various economic stations. In polite Jewish and Roman societies, you did not mix with people of a different class or economic status. In strict Jewish observance, you also would not eat with people who may or may not observe the same religious dietary laws as you; for example, people from different cultures may not keep kosher food laws in the same way or to the same degree. Politically, people were divided into various political parties, from collaboration with Rome at one end of the spectrum, to advocating armed insurrection at the other end. Jesus had some of every stripe in his first chosen 12 disciples, and on Pentecost we see these blended disciples welcoming 3000 very different people into their homes, their meals, their teaching and their prayers – bridging language, economic, dietary and political divides. The Holy Spirit gave them the love, the languages, the compassion and staying power and generosity to bridge all these divides and care for needs. No wonder more and more people kept coming! What a wonderful blessing of welcome, acceptance, and care for one and all!

Next, the Holy Spirit compelled them to tell of God's recipe for beloved community that could heal the wounds and the damage that self-centered divisions were causing in Judaism and in the empire. This recipe for healing and creating beloved community was the one Jesus began living, and which the disciples were now sharing. It's fairly simple: turn from your selfish and destructive ways and choose baptism into God's way of healing and salvation; then, 1) live by Jesus' teaching, 2) share a common life in fellowship with all others, caring for one another's needs, 3) share meals and conversation together with one another, and 4) last but not least, share in prayer with one another and with God, bringing heaven and earth together for continued healing and blessing and support. As we know from Paul's letters in the Bible, it was a continuous journey of discovery and course correction, learning how to implement the common life, as the early churches struggled to bridge gender, economic class, and cultural divisions, not the least of which was dietary differences, in the early Roman empire. The way forward was blessed as they included, and difficult when they excluded. Over the centuries, the church has continued to struggle with this.

We see today how our world has been divided and destroyed by the selfish greed of various empires, by race divisions that have caused genocides of whole populations, not to mention the mass extinctions of plants and animals that we are witnessing in just the last two centuries, thanks to human greed. Our world today is living a recipe for disaster...Could the church's recipe, if humanely and compassionately implemented for all of creation, be a path to healing our communities and our world? I believe so; this is why my life has been given to preaching and living this message, and why I love the message of Acts so much: it gives me hope, that God and the Holy Spirit and Jesus are still working to empower **US** today, to follow and share this recipe to heal and save our world today, as they began to do so long ago.

Dr. Will Willimon, in one of the Bible commentaries I read, said "When Peter's sermon ends in Acts 2, no one is in doubt that there is a God who is busy in the world!..And then, Luke (the author of Acts) shows an immediate embodiment of the Pentecost enthusiasm." (Interpretation: Acts) The early disciples immediately put into practice the inclusive and saving love of God, sharing family goods with one another, sitting at table for meals together, learning and praying across all languages and cultures with the people. Dr. N. T. Wright, another Bible scholar today, says it was shocking then, and still today, for families to liquidate some of their inheritance and properties to support strangers, but when we believe that **God** sees no strangers, but rather cherishes us all, we are simply extending the arms of God to embrace and care for a brother or sister's need. This is what Jesus demonstrated for us, as he reached out to heal rich and poor, native and foreigner, young and old, male and female. We are all and each, God's beloved. And we have the recipe now, to heal one another and create better, beloved communities that allow us to taste and see that God's kin-dom is good, very good indeed: where all are loved, and all are blessed to bless each other and the whole community together.

The movie "Encanto" explores some of these very themes, in its story of a community broken by hatred and greed, from which a young family escapes. The father is killed, holding off marauders while the mother and children flee. The spirit of the father and perhaps the Holy Spirit, provide escape and a home and new community where all are protected, and family members are gifted as they grow up, with gifts to bless the entire community. When these gifts are shunned (as in Bruno's case) or abused (as in Luisa's case) or not recognized (in Mirabel's case), then the family and community suffer, and the home and gifts begin to break and erode away. There are

many poignant songs and scenes, but the message of Mirabel as she discovers her gift echoes the message of our text today: We will thrive as we embrace and empower and unite the gifts of each for the well being of the whole community, and when we do not abuse or neglect some, because that harms the whole. This is the Gospel message that we read and see lived out in the book of Acts, specifically.

So how are we doing, at following this recipe, in our lives, in our congregation? Are we learning together from our Scripture's teaching, do we share a common life with each other, helping to meet the needs of our congregation and community and wider world? Do we share meals together, and pray together? How are we doing at renouncing selfish, destructive ways, and embracing and adopting God's beloved way, like Jesus? There are seasons in the life of the church, and perhaps in our own lives as well, when we are short on one or more of these ingredients. Then we may experience some unrest, a sense of imbalance, some decay or loss in our sense of well-being. Without times of fellowship, such as we experienced during the pandemic, our beloved connections and sense of support from one another, can suffer. Without prayer, our sense of connection to God and neighbor is strained, and we do not feel as close to God, or as close to our local and global brothers and sisters. Without teaching, we lose our code, or guidelines, and our foundation and structure for how to live out the way of Love that God teaches us in Christ. Without common meals and breaking of bread, we do not break down the barriers of class and race and gender, and our sharing with one another does not reach as deep to touch our hearts and lives. We do not hear or care as much about one another's pain, suffering, joy or struggles. Our lives, and our faith, can become very superficial, and shrink to very isolated, selfish, and lonely habits. Each ingredient of this recipe for life that Jesus taught, is essential as a grounding pillar for our growth in faith and in beloved community with God and neighbor.

Our commitment to sharing the recipe of our text for today is critical to the well-being and survival of our world. We don't have time to be lukewarm Christians anymore. We must live the recipe ourselves and share it with others. So, let's inventory how we spend our time and our income: where are you investing your money? Where are you investing your time? How are you investing in these four pillars of God's recipe for life in beloved community? Please take notes on your bulletin, or a separate sheet of paper, and make plans to follow up!

- 1) Do you read and study scripture each week? Perhaps with the Upper Room, if not a Bible study group. Scriptures help us to reflect upon life from a broader perspective, sharing some of the history of peoples' lives following God, some of the traditions people developed as they lived their lives with God, and share some of the poetry, songs, and legends they created to help them express their heartaches, celebrations, struggles and frustrations as they experienced their lives with and (what they felt was) without God. We read of their mistakes, and their blessings; we learn from their questions, and what they perceived as answers. We catch glimpses of God's greatness and Holy Spirit as we read, and we encounter Jesus and walk with Christ, through the stories of his life and his disciples.
- 2) Do you spend time and some of your income in fellowship, supporting and encouraging friends in church, and friends in community? With a church group or committee, or with a community group or neighbors? Some built a garden at Hesed House; some have volunteered with Habitat locally, and some of our folks have gone to West Virginia, to serve with ASP! What other ways do you hang out and help folks? A fellowship of care-giving, of sharing resources, talents, gifts and knowledge with each other can develop, where we see a need and meet a need with one another. We see more and more opportunities to build better lives **together**, rather than live in lonely isolation.
- 3) Do you spend time and income breaking bread together, sharing in meals with family, friends like you, and in larger diverse community groups? Some help out with meal trains, some give to our monthly food collections, some give and/or serve meals at Hesed House and Lazarus House...! When we break bread together, not only our hands open as we pass the food around, but our eyes and our hearts can open to see and care about the lives of others, learning what are the struggles and blessings in their lives as we talk and eat together.
- 4) Do you pray alone and with others regularly, keeping the phone line between you and God open, and well-worn? Do you share your heart's joys and concerns, and those of your family and friends, the needs of the world, with God and Christ and the Holy Spirit, and then listen, so that God has a way to share insights and opportunities with you, as well as hear your concerns? How does God help you sift through and address your concerns? Do you watch for people and answers and opportunities God sends in response to your prayers?

This is a great recipe for life, that helps create and nurture beloved communities, the kin-dom of God, when we build with all four pillars. What pillars might you need to invest more in, now? How will you explore growing and developing your life across these four pillars? How might you share this recipe with others?

A few years ago, at my last church, I decided to invest more of myself in relationship with some of the children of our church, and I began reaching out to the fourth graders. I invited them over to bake brownies with me, I helped them break the eggs, sift the flour (ha! That's flour! (:) and baking powder, and melt the chocolate and butter. After they mixed these together and then poured the batter into the pan, then we added chocolate chips (of course!), and finally put it into the oven to bake. Then we had half an hour to play ping pong and chat together. We were making a double batch, so when they went home, I sent them with half the brownies, as well as the recipe which had been given to me in my childhood. It was a blessed sweet time in so many ways!

How do you invest in others, to grow in loving, kind and generous relationships, and encourage next generations with some of the best gifts from our traditions? What gifts do you have that can help us to build better, beloved communities, and the kin-dom of God where all are welcomed, and supported as part of God's family?

This is our greatest challenge today, I believe. We as the disciples of Christ, have the recipe. Will we use it to heal and save our communities and world? Will we share the recipe with others, to elicit their help in serving our community and world? Will we invite others to come to the meal as we make the recipe, so that they can know the chef, the author of the recipe, our God and Christ and Holy Spirit? May God bless us, and encourage us to become extraordinary, Holy Spirit infused cooks, healing and blessing our communities and world, with Christ as we live and serve this delicious and life-changing recipe! Amen!

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