

I have always appreciated the conclusion of the second chapter of Acts. Let me quickly set it up for you.

- Acts is the continuation of the gospel of Luke – that gospel ends with the resurrected Jesus appearing to a variety of disciples.
  - With two, unbeknownst to them, Jesus walks along a road until they come to a house at a transition point in their journey. The two invite the stranger in for a meal, and when the stranger breaks bread with them, they recognize their guest as the resurrected Jesus. Their hearts soar, and the Christ disappears.
  - The Christ appears to another group – tells them that everything that was promised to them from Jesus has occurred, and they are called to be the witnesses of the gospel. They are also promised that they will soon receive “power from on high” (24:49) to equip them for their witness.
  - In a transitional story that appears at the end of Luke and at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, the Resurrected Jesus is drawn up into the sky, making it obvious that the disciples are left to continue the work Jesus started.
  - In the beginning of Acts 2 – from which Jill read the end – the promise of empowerment occurs when the Holy Spirit blows through a group of Jews from all over the known world who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost Festival.
  - Today’s reading from 1 Corinthians reminds us that the Spirit dispersed a variety of gifts upon the believers so that as the people

employed them together they would, as our theme today implores us,  
Promote the Common Good! (1 Cor 12:7)

And as the portion from Acts 2 which Jill read to us bears witness, that is precisely what the first generation of disciples/apostles did:

44 All who believed were together, and had all things in common;

45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

46 Day by day,

- they spent much time together in the temple,
- they broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, (stewardship team, did you hear that? They gathered together with GLAD AND GENEROUS HEARTS!
- 47 They praised God,
- And they had the goodwill of all the people.

Sounds to me like a pretty good template for promoting the common good of those within one's community!

- The chapter ends by saying that “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

People recognize when a community is engaged in specific, intentional spiritual practices – ACTS, if you will – that are geared to developing everyone else in the community. Generosity was an innate character trait of such a body, and because of it people were attracted to the community of believers. Growth wasn't the

primary objective – love, service, and generosity to the community was, and it attracted people of like heart.

Let me pause here and draw attention to the fact that these early followers of Jesus had a very balanced understanding of how life in the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ was to be lived. I don't know if Luke prioritized the list in verses 44-47, but it is of note that "life in the temple" wasn't the number 1 act of the apostles. The practices at the head of the list are holding things in common, and ensuring that equity was being maintained – equal distribution of all proceeds as any were in need.

It is of equal interest to me that Luke mentions praying in the temple in the same sentence as sharing meals in each others' homes – sustenance for the spirit and sustenance for the body are of equal importance.

I dare say that we have inherited a tradition of discipleship, if you will, that overly emphasizes participating in Sunday worship. Sunday worship is important for gathering the body together for praising God and hearing the Word proclaimed. But, we've gravitated away from that earliest model of Christian discipleship where believers held things in common and lived life together.

My mind travels back to last week's sermon and the story I told of Frances Perkins having to mitigate the overarching American cultural milieu of "rugged individualism." In that instance it was the idea that men, as the "heads of the family," bore the sole responsibility for providing for the household. It's not a far cry to stretch that idea from the man to the house itself – believing that we really don't need the community to care for us, we can manage on our own.

That of course, was a lie back then just as much as it is today, and like it was during the lives of the early Christians.

Leaning on the community when we most need it is critical. Just this week, Pat Baker (who gave me permission to tell this story) let the morning prayer group know how vital they have been (as well as many of you have been!) in helping her get through trying times. She did not have such a support network at the church 15 years ago when her husband's health was failing and he eventually died – and now she does, and she bears witness to how it makes all the difference in the world.

And – AND – I dare say that Pat has been a pillar of support on which others have been able to lean in their times of need!

We all rely on each other, and the early Christians set for us a powerful model to live in a manner that promotes the common good.

Now it could be enough to rely on the good feeling that comes when we serve one another. Unfortunately, as we see in the world today, expecting kindness and generosity to be the norm doesn't mean that it will pan out that way.

Humans seem to have a propensity for not only NOT caring for one another, but also *looking* to do harm. Throughout the biblical witness, prophetic voices have warned the community that God is **offended** by those who claim to worship God, and yet turn a blind eye on those in need, or worse, intentionally cause calamity, misfortune and anguish on all with whom we share this planet.

The prophet Amos reminds us that God can see past our attempts to please God through our “solemn” assemblies. Worship alone is empty without complimentary care of the community:

5:22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The prophet Isaiah makes our responsibility to the Common Good even more explicit in these words from chapter 58:

5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

6 Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you; the glory of Adonai shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and Adonai will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and (God) will say, “Here I am.”

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ... then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

11 Adonai will guide you continually and satisfy your needs in parched places and make your bones strong,  
and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water  
whose waters never fail.

12 ... You shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

13 If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests or pursuing your own affairs; 14 then you shall take delight in God.

The prophet cannot make it any clearer - seeking to live a self-serving life causes us to be distant from the One who can fill our lives with life and delight.

Our assemblies are crucial, as they give us proper perspective; as they remind us to buck the trend of “rugged individualism” and to bolster our holistic approach to life that is living in community.

One prayer I read this week used these words:

O God, remind us of who we are, what we're made of, that a (transcendent) image of You is dwelling in and through us. May we (free) ourselves (to) become faithful keepers of (the collective) cosmic birthright to beauty, justice, and belonging. *Amen.*

(Black Liturgies, *For Being Human*, "Confession," p12)

Our guest speaker today is Anele Zondo from the faith-based organization Building Hope in the City. Anele, who has gone by the name of "Fortunate" most of her life, is originally from South Africa.

Born in 1993, at the end of Apartheid, Anele grew up witnessing the transformative power of compassion and kindness. Her life is a testament to the impact of selfless love, shaped by both her biological and adoptive families, who provided her with a rare and life-changing path during a time of historical transition. Their unwavering belief in her potential instilled a deep commitment to serving others, fueling her passion for justice, empowerment, and global impact.

Having been granted academic scholarships in the 7th grade, her journey led her from the International School of Johannesburg in South Africa to Scotland, where she graduated from the International School of Aberdeen, and then to the United States in 2012 to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Cottey College.

Prior to working at BHITC, Anele worked at Convoy of Hope in Springfield, MO for almost six years. As the Youth Program Manager, she played a pivotal role in launching and expanding programs in over 20 countries, collaborating with dedicated local teams. ...Through her strategic and prayerful approach to partnership-building, she advocated for vulnerable women and girls, raising awareness of systemic disparities.

Beyond her professional achievements, Anele is deeply committed to social justice, community empowerment, and compassionate, Christ-centered, people-first leadership. In a way she never expected, God opened doors at Building Hope. While she once prayed to eventually live and serve globally, the Holy Spirit had other plans. Through a series of miraculous events, God called her here. This, too, is the field—a place to serve immigrants and newcomers, to mobilize and inspire the local church, and to create pathways for the community to engage in their own giftings. She is constantly reminded that hope is alive and at work. Anele, welcome!