



Welcoming and *Nurturing* Community I

Acts 4:32-35 & Psalm 133

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Washington Street UMC

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We believe God is love, and we're making a place for everyone to know that love. That is our mission at Washington Street United Methodist Church.

It is with great joy that I have been reappointed to this church, to serve at least another year in this community, as your pastor. This is year four for our ministry together in Alexandria.

When I arrived at Washington Street, I found this mission statement to be most fitting for a church who cared so deeply about its community. I remember asking folks what this meant to them – how did this mission statement come to be? Does it really define who we are? In the answers I received, I focused in on one word that seemed to stand out: *making*. More often than not, we shorten the full statement to just read, *Making a place for everyone*. That's what's printed on the back of our t-shirts (of which we have extras, I'd love to have you wear them around town!). That word, *making*, carries the brunt of the charge.

If you look up the word *making* in the dictionary, you get a really unsatisfactory definition. The dictionary, whether you're using the Cambridge English, Merriam-Webster, or even the Oxford Dictionary, they all break the number one cardinal sin of defining a word. They use the word in its definition. They define *making* as, "the process of making or producing something." Not the most helpful of definitions. Yet, I do like how the definition starts – making is a process.

The word *making* indicates that what we're doing is not something we have already accomplished, but that we are in the process of becoming. *Making* indicates we have more work to do. *Making* identifies the reality that we are not yet where we believe God has called us to be. *Making ... making* acknowledges that God is not yet done working in us or through us.

Over the past week since the renovation of this space was mostly completed I've had some friends and colleagues ask if I have had time to rest now that the majority of the work is over. Rest? ... What is that? ... I started to look that one up in the dictionary too just to clarify what they were asking. ... But seriously, the work we have had done in the sanctuary was not undertaken so that we can rest as a church. We didn't put new pew pads in the pews so you could get overly comfortable. We didn't replace the carpet so you'd have a place to lie down and nap. We didn't upgrade the HVAC so that you'd have a cool place to spend the week. The work we have had done in this space was done in pursuit of our mission, not as a conclusion. Our mission calls us to continue the work God has begun in and through us. And our mission statement says to us, we are not yet there, but we are in the process of *making a place for everyone*. That work continues, and you each are called to be a part of it.

As we have more work to do, over the next month we're going to look deeper at what our mission statement requires of us. We are going to look more intentionally at the core values that undergird our

mission statement, and define what it means to be a faithful part of this church, in this community, in this season of life. What does it mean to be part of Washington Street United Methodist Church, and what does it mean to be part of a community that believes God is love, and is therefore making a place for everyone to know that love?

We have three core values that offer the foundational framework for our mission statement. This week and next week, we take on the first core value: We are a *Welcoming and Nurturing Community*. Our focus today is on the nurturing aspect. **We are called to more intentional care for one another by establishing a more nurturing faith community.**

Over the past 2000 years, the Christian church has gone through many different iterations. From the days of its founding in the Mediterranean region, when Christians met only in the homes of fellow believers, to the rise of Christian sects and denominations across the globe, the life of the Christian church has taken on many different forms and practices. We have some in our faith who worship in \$100 million dollar sanctuaries, and others who gather in secret to read the Bible under oppressive regimes. We have people who have been lifelong Christians, baptized as infants, confirmed as teens, and who still make their way to church on Sundays late in their life. And still, there are others who do not yet fully believe, but who gather with interest, looking for a truth that cannot be written off as 'fake'.

For all the churches, the worshipping communities, the denominational affiliations, the patterns of discipleship, the songs we sing, the prayers we pray ... for all the ways Christianity presents itself across the globe, there are some tenants that should remain constant throughout. We can learn some of these from the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, as it defines the life of the early church – the first Christian churches. It tells the story of God's empowerment of the church through the Spirit, and lays out the practical and theological foundations of the first church communities who believed in Christ as Lord. Yet, Acts is, like Paul's letters, written in the first century for and about the first century Christian community. Acts wasn't written for us, some 2,000 years later, it was written for the Christians of the first century. Luke wrote with many purposes for and about the first century church. He wrote to consolidate faith communities that were spread throughout the region – to give them a single identity; he wrote to deepen the faith of new believers; he wrote to define the Christian church's mission; and he wrote to describe faithful Christian practices and traditions.

Like all Biblical texts, underlying each story in Acts is a foundational truth of God. As we read about the early church, we don't just copy and paste the first century practices in the modern day – practices of being church are based as much on cultural awareness as they are theological convictions. The church has long adjusted its practices from community to community and century to century to faithfully witness to God's eternal love in each generation and location, adjusting and altering the witness of God's call while still seeking to remain faithful to the foundational truths of God we believe and profess. This kind of shift in our witness is little more than modeling Christ, who himself deviated from the practices of long-held Jewish beliefs and laws (like working on the Sabbath to proclaim the value of life, or dining with sinners and tax collectors to redefine who is welcome). Our call as a faith community and as disciples is to maintain faithfulness to the foundational truths of God as laid out in the Biblical witness, while proclaiming these truths in Northern Virginia – in Alexandria – in the 21st

Century. So, as we read this story in Acts, our goal is to identify the foundational truths of God present so that we can learn how to live as a community of faith *today*.

By the time we get to Acts 4, where our text is located today, the community of Christians has been empowered by the Spirit, they've grown significantly in size, and they've been in the community doing great signs and wonders. Yet, the community was facing serious problems. The Christian church was being opposed by temple leaders in the Jewish community, and it would become a capital offense in the Roman Empire to proclaim Christ as Lord, because the emperor was seen as lord. It was not easy to live as a Christian in the first century.

With such difficulty living as those who professed Christ, many believers having to hide their faith from the public realm, it seems like our reading today makes perfect sense as a practice in the community of believers. Where many faced difficulties, the rest offered care. "The whole group," Luke begins, "were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned land and houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

To implement this practice, this early structure of the first Christian communities, beginning today, if you want to be a member of or maintain your membership in this church, you will be asked to refinance your mortgages, rewrite your loans, and restructure your direct deposits to include the name and bank accounts of Washington Street United Methodist Church.

Surely the Bishop would move me tomorrow if she were watching the Live Stream right now!

Ok – so, perhaps we won't implement this today. Let me meet with the Leadership Board about this idea before we put it in to effect. But this idea is worth us exploring – perhaps not from a practical perspective (maybe?), but definitely from a theological one. The reality of this idea is that it's not foreign from the rest of scripture. Consider Deuteronomy 15, a steeped Hebrew Bible text, a part of the foundational law of Jesus' Judaism, reads, "There will be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you ... If there is among you anyone in need ... do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be."

Shy of advocating for socialism, which admittedly this text in Deuteronomy 15 and our text in Acts have been used to do, we have to consider, how is this text still speaking to us today as modern Christians in a globally connected world, not first century Christians trying to figure out what church really is? If we don't think this is the right practice to maintain faithfulness today, what's the underlying foundational truth of God it speaks to? And how do we implement that underlying truth of God in our church and in our community today?

I believe the answer to these questions lies in the intended purpose of such communal sharing, rather than in the practice itself. "The fact of common possessions has less to do with some chosen system of economics than with the appropriate response to the power of the resurrection of Jesus. The apostles hold all their goods in common so as to better witness to the resurrection of the one they call Lord."ⁱ

“These texts say less about model church practice and more about the dynamic power of God among believers.”ⁱⁱ

What the early community of Christian believers understood was that they had a responsibility to care for one another, *not* because they were going to be held accountable for another person’s wealth or hunger, but because, as people filled with immense joy in the love and light of Christ, they couldn’t stand to see any other person suffering without. They believed that to embody the redemptive truth of God’s love in Jesus Christ, it meant finding ways to care for one another so that all could enjoy the fullness of life God intends. And let’s be real, what kind of witness does the church have to offer if it proclaims a promise of new life, preachers hope for the future, and says you can find true fulfillment in the Lord, and yet, a small number within its walls are suffering from the lack of the most basic of necessities like food and shelter, while others are living abundantly? If the church can’t even care for its own, why would anyone else in the world find hope in its message? “The community’s generosity itself becomes a tangible *sign* that authenticates its message of Jesus.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Going back to Luke’s intentions in sharing these practices, Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles to help give the multiplying Christian communities a single identity; he wrote to deepen the faith of new believers; he wrote to define the Christian church’s mission; and he wrote to describe faithful Christian practices and traditions. What if this practice is more about unifying the church in a single witness of God’s love so that others may know God’s love more fully? What if this practice is more about unifying the church in a single witness of God’s love so that others may know God’s love more fully?

Now, shy of implementing this Acts 4 model of communal ownership, if that’s not where we’re going in today’s world, how do we respond to the redemptive truth of God’s love in Jesus Christ, caring for one another, so that others may know God’s love more fully? This is the foundation of what it means to be a nurturing community. It means checking in on one another when someone is absent; it means providing a meal for someone who may be experiencing difficulty; it means offering educational support for those who need a degree to get a job; it means holding each other accountable when we’re saying and sharing inaccurate and false truths; it means praising each other for major accomplishments and crying with each other when we’re grieving; it means getting to know each other and sharing in life together; it means being a community that offers God’s blessing to one another and refusing to be a burden for each other; it means speaking truth in love to each other because together, we represent more than ourselves, we represent for the world God’s love. And we are called to more intentional care for one another by establishing a more nurturing faith community, because that’s part of what it means to be making a place for everyone to know God’s love. For it is a foundational truth of God, that God cares for all, God desires new life for all, and God provides love for all. We have more work to do, so let us continue in the process of making a place that is built on such a nurturing community. For the glory of God. Amen.

ⁱ John Holbert. *Holding All Things in Common: Reflections on Acts 4:32-34*. Patheos.com. Retrieved July 3, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Troy Troftgruben. *Commentary on Acts 4:32-35*. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved July 3, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.