

Everything In Common

Acts 2:42-47

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In a few short weeks, the disciples watched their Lord and friend crucified, mourned his death, witnessed his resurrection, and rejoiced in his ascension into heaven. What a roller coaster they experienced! During those beginning days, they hid in a locked room, fearful for their lives. In the midst of tragedy they came together to comfort one another. But only a few short days later, the most amazing transformation was seen as Jesus walked among them and then was taken up to heaven. How do you keep something like that inside? They had to share! And so they continued to meet together and preach the news of Jesus Christ. Their numbers grew. Hope came from despair and darkness.

Our world is filled with dark moments: loss of job and the financial difficulties that result, death of a loved one and the loneliness that accompanies, loss of friendship and the betrayal we experience, natural disasters that turn good fortune into utter ruin, and wars that pit nation against nation.

I'd like to read a portion of a letter written to Bishop William Willemon from Rev. Mike Butler, the pastor of Fairview First UMC in Fairview, Alabama not too far from Cullman where several massive tornadoes touched down not quite a month ago.

A Letter of Thanks

Just wanted to write you all a letter of thanks from Fairview First United Methodist Church. I have served as a United Methodist pastor for 15 years and a UMCOR volunteer since Katrina. I have always had a respect for our United Methodist connectional system, but I have never seen it work more effectively and efficiently as the response to these recent storms.

It began Wednesday April 27, 2011 around 2:20 pm. I received a phone call from my friend Rev. Ricky Smith (UMCOR volunteer) and we (my family) quickly went to the Church. As it passed, a 70 year old pecan tree crushed the bedroom where my wife had been moments before. After that dark day ended we had two tornado's that passed through our small community. The same tornado that hit Cullman, AL came within 800 yards of our church and it only damaged our parsonage. The horror came when we found out other areas got hit a lot harder than us.

That first Saturday our treasurer's company and Auburn University fed 1,800 people in the park... Our Conference UMCOR responded with a disaster call center that became fully functional last Wednesday (May 4). This has been such a blessing and proven to be an effective communication tool for our needs. Supplies came in from everywhere... We have been distributing supplies and are currently stocked up to continue in the months ahead... UMCOR teams began arriving last week (May 1)... One team cleared the debris from my bedroom. Two teams did much needed tree work in the community. The fourth went out with our members to deliver supplies to neglected areas where the damage was the greatest. It was a good week.

This past Sunday was the first worship gathering for our Church. We opened up our service with this video done by a Cullman resident.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=275CyCkmpn4>)

The message was the journey to Emmaus. It was a journey of loss and grief for those weary travelers. Yet Christ partnered with them in that journey and his presence redeemed what they thought was a dead dream. We are confident our Risen Lord will redeem the dreams of our community. I'm sending this to you so you know that you ALL have been part of that redemptive work.

When chaos strikes and our lives are turned upside, we turn to each other and we turn to God. Part of Rev. Butler's letter talks about worship services held outside for the people of their town- many who were not regular church goers. In the midst of tragedy, we seek out God and those around us. And the most awesome thing is that God meets us there.

When life takes an unexpected turn and we are left with nothing, what becomes important in our lives? What do we cling to? Where do we turn? The early believers chose to come together to pray, read scripture, share a meal and join in fellowship with one another. And God showed up. God increased their faith and the number of the saved. They were reconnected to what was most important in their lives- relationship with God and relationship with one another.

This passage can seem a little unrealistic to us Americans living in the lap of luxury. It says that they gave their possessions for the poor and all had

enough. Our world is filled with material possessions and self-gain. We want to walk as Jesus walked, but it is no easy road. We struggle even to give up simple pleasures like pretty flower pots for our front step, another pair of summer flip flops, a cup of coffee from Starbucks or a new song for our iPod. It's only when all that is taken from us that we begin to take time to refocus on God, on family and on our community.

How many times have you gathered for one of life's events and heard someone say, "We should do this more often"? Deep down we know what's important. We feel better when we take the time. But making that happen is very challenging.

So how do we begin to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit- preferably before tragedy strikes and we are forced to re-evaluate our lives? Our scripture lesson this morning gives us a clear understanding of how to do this:

1. Read the scriptures
2. Come together for fellowship and care for one another
3. Eat a meal together
4. Pray
5. Share God's love with those around you

And do them all daily. Make this a priority in your life.

John Wesley advocated two aspects of spiritual discipline in our lives- personal holiness and social holiness. Personal holiness is spending time with God through scripture reading, prayer and devotionals. I Corinthians 13

says that if I have prophetic power, faith and give away all I have but don't have love, I am nothing. We must have God in our lives as our personal Lord and Savior to truly grasp what it means to be a Christian- to be in relationship with God. Social holiness are the acts we do as Christ's ambassadors through missions, evangelism and general care for one another. James tells us that faith without works is dead. Having relationship with God is only half of what God calls us to do. Being in close relationship with those around us allows us to share God's love and make disciples for the transformation of the world. Finding balance is key to our spiritual growth and the building of God's kingdom.

Many of you attend Bible Studies and deepen your faith with others in our community. Many of you are present for the multitude of ways that we reach out into our community and the world at large to share the love of God. And some of you struggle with finding the time to be more involved than coming on Sunday morning. I encourage you not to wait until disaster strikes before you take the time to discover what is really important.

We have begun partnering with Rolling Ridge and some other churches in our community to feed our hungry neighbors. There are children right here in Sterling who do not get enough food to eat and who struggle with their school work who are crying out for help to do well and feel as if they belong. Don't wait for God to cast you aside in judgment because you did not feed the hungry and care for your neighbor.

Many of you read the devotionals during Lent and took time to focus on God's direction in your life. I pray that you continue to have daily time with

God in prayer and meditation digging deep into God's word and asking God to guide your steps all day every day.

On Memorial Weekend, we will be sending our first Early Response Team out to Georgia to help restore what has been shattered by tornadoes. They will be giving up a long weekend of rest and fun to share all that we have in common with our neighbors- a love of God, their resources and time, their prayers, their fellowship, their working abilities. My prayer for you today is that you don't wait for tragedy to strike to live out the example of Christ in your lives.

I encourage you to seek a closer walk with God. Spend time in the scriptures, meet with the community of believers regularly- as often as you can! Get involved with Habitat for Humanity, Backpack Buddies, our Hispanic/Latino Ministry, All God's Children Camp, ERT, Mission trips (I hear we still need prayer partners!), the Yard Sale, a Bible Study, or whatever else God lays on your heart. Think about it. If we are not the voice of hope in the midst of despair, who will be? Who will go and clean up the streets of Alabama and Georgia and Haiti and Japan? Who will offer shelter and food in our community? Who will welcome the stranger? Who will be the glimmer of light and hope in despair?

I believe Micah 6:8 says it best: "What does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God". Before seeing to the extras in life, look at how you can advocate for justice to the least, the last and the lost. Before you open your mouth with hurtful words, find

compassion and mercy as you seek God's image in the other person. And remember to daily go to God first and ask for guidance and wisdom as you navigate your day to day living. And at the end of the day, remember to thank God for the many blessings you have received this day and those you will experience tomorrow.