

## Stewardship Means... Giving or Sharing or Both?

Acts 4:32-35

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*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Christ Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or 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.*

Acts 4:32-35

Will there be enough? That is a question we may ask in different contexts.

Enough TP at the store if there is another run on it during the pandemic?

Enough batteries and candles and lanterns when we have another power outage?

Enough patience to walk in this season of post-election emotions, concerns & hopes?

We used to wonder in previous years...

If there would be enough food for a crowd at Thanksgiving or  
maybe enough for plenty of leftovers

If there would be enough of a certain item so we could purchase  
for someone we love for Christmas and watch her open it on Christmas morning?

Is there enough? Do I have enough? How will I know? How will we know? And how do we know if we should keep what we have away or share what we have? Will I still have enough?

One of the pastors I knew when Jeffrey and I were starting a new church in Eastern PA was Virginia Miner. She was a great storyteller and preacher. I recently re-read one of her stories:

When we were young, my brother and sister and I would be fascinated watching cars slip and slide on the snowy dirt road on the steep hill next to our house. Neighbors driving home during a snowstorm would build up speed on the highway, turn right on the dirt road, and race up the hill. Hoping to maintain the necessary momentum to reach the top. From our window seat, we would cheer for those who succeeded and groan for those who landed in the ditch. Then we would run downstairs to find Dad already heading out to get the tractor to pull them out and my mother pulling out more plates to set on the table.

When new snowy mishaps created the possibility of unexpected guests at the table, we often heard mom say, "Don't touch the chicken until we see if they are hungry." Some families called this F.H.B.(Family Hold Back), but in our house it was called "Don't Touch

the chicken! (even if it was spaghetti.) Because of this, a meal for five often fed seven or eight, and no one went hungry. We met most of our neighbors for the first time at these spontaneous meals, sharing what we had. While they ate, my father would pull their cars out of the ditch, and then we would all wait for the township plow to pass by spraying ashes all over the ice.

The process of stretching the family meal taught us children two key spiritual lessons. First, we gained a healthy belief in the miracles of Jesus. Watching Mom feed many with a little, the feeding of the 5000 did not seem all that impossible to us! Second, we learned the difference between giving and sharing, the contrast between a condescending handout and the joyful gathering of neighbors around the table to share what we had. (1)

In Acts 4:32-37, the writer Luke says that the first Christians were one in mind and heart. What is even more amazing, they claimed for themselves no personal possessions but shared with one another everything they had. With a new faith came also a new way of life with an emphasis on sharing more than giving. This wasn't about handouts; it was about pulling together resources so all could have what was needed. Need was defined by what was required in order to go into the world and tell the good news of Christ's life, ministry, death and resurrection. They invited people to know, be baptized, and enter into this new community not based on your ethnic background or class or religious heritage. Those who had resources shared what they had so all could serve the call of Christ and feel part of the community of believers.

Indeed, there is a difference between giving and sharing. Perhaps this is what the early Church knew as it began its life together. They knew that sharing was kinder than giving. They knew that sharing was not a means for controlling others but a means for providing help for those in need.

This distinction between giving and sharing home become clearer to me at different times in my life. One example was as a young person in my church youth group. I remember going on a youth group mission trip to a Navajo Indian reservation in Arizona. We were bringing educational supplies and art supplies and games for children as well as other needed items. A goal was to get to know the Navajo community and children and to play games with them, not simply give them the items and to learn their games and songs. It was to be a shared experience.

I also remember being in Guatemala and I stayed with a family while I was attending language school. My home church and some friends had given me some items to take with me for some of the communities where I would be visiting. The family I stayed with had children. I had brought some simple games so when I gave them to the children and we played together. And of course they helped me practice my Spanish!

Maybe this passage from Acts challenges us as individuals, as members and friends of a church, even as citizens of the United States. Could we live in a world, in a country where “no one claimed ownership of private possessions that how everything they owned was held in common?” I am not sure we can imagine it, but maybe we could take some steps in that direction. Could we live in a world that had a passion for sharing? The Greek word here *koina*, which is translated “shared,” is the same word that is at the root of *koinonia* which means “community.” Maybe the essence of any authentic community is its ability to share?

Part of our larger vision is to share resources to build people up so that they can fully embrace a life God has intended. When we share what we have, we make sure that there are resources for spiritual, physical, and even economic well-being. We are still figuring out how churches do that these days. During this pandemic, shelter in place and historic job loss and economic downturn, our church has been generous in sharing and supporting. Provided funds to people in our church pay rent and utilities so they did not lose their housing. We have shared time and resources to help distribute food and soon putting Thanksgiving food bags together.

Sharing together can be part of our larger vision. We don't give money to the church expecting the church to hold onto it. It is meant to be shared. It is shared through our budget so that we have a beautiful and safe building, an excellent staff, wonderful musicians, do mission locally and globally, help people develop a rich contemplative life, and programming and worship that feeds us and sustains us

The stewardship committee has invited all active members and friends to consider making a financial pledge for next year to support the ministries in mission of the church. If you have made your pledge, thank you. If you are still prayerfully considering what you can share in the coming year, I invite you to think about what it means to share an order that together we are building up this community for resilience, deep love, and hope.

When you have very little, how much is enough? When you have everything, how much is enough? Perhaps it is not a question of how much but a better question of how well. How well do we use and share what is entrusted to us by God for the benefit of those with whom we share this planet?

Sharing what we have is hard. It is hard for children. It is hard for young people. Is hard for adults of almost any age. It requires a different mindset.

I was leading a retreat quite a few years ago. I divided the people into groups of 12. We played a game. I told them to imagine that they were about to be taken away to a deserted island. The idea was that each group was all going to be together, but each of person could only take one item. The question was - what would you take? After a little time to think about this question and talk, the groups all reported back on their choices.

I have played this game several times with several different groups of different ages, but only once did a group work together so that the group, the community, would have 12 different, necessary items for the good of the whole. Every other time, each person did an independent thing, and the group ended up with 6 Bibles, 1 toothbrush, 2 novels & many photographs.

It isn't a simple task to live together and share with a concern for and awareness of the needs of others. It requires a change in how we think before we can change how we act. It requires a focus on a common goal and the common good.

We can give and share for different reasons. We certainly receive constant requests from many good organizations to give. We may give to a variety of them. Some out of commitment to a larger vision, some out of obligation, some out of responsibility. The church is an organization that has a slightly different emphasis and purpose. We share to build up others. We share because FPCSR is place of both contemplative life and activism. We share because this community helps us deepen our understanding of who we are called to be and what we are called to do. Life is a gift and life is a task.

One of my favorite quotes is from E. B. White —

*“If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning, torn between the desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. That makes it hard to plan the day!”*

Save the world, Savor the world. Share what we have so can be engaged in the world and continue the journey of balancing these callings.

I invite you to reflect on what your money and resources mean to you.

Do you hold tight to what you have?

Do you sense a nudging to share what you have in some new or different or deeper ways?

Who has been a person who demonstrated generosity and sharing in your life?

How might God be calling us as a church to share what we have as part of *koininia*?

May we be open to the Spirit as we savor the world,  
find ways to offer moments of saving someone from hopelessness,  
and share what we have in love. Amen.

1) Rev. Virginia Miner, “Don’t Touch the Chicken Until We Know If They Are Hungry.” Featured in *Speaking of Stewardship: Model Sermons on Money and Possessions*, William Carter, editor. 1998 Homiletical Feast. pp. 109-110.