

Recently in the news there was a story about the resurrection of a small Lutheran Church. When their new pastor arrived there, they decided that due to their financial situation, they would only be able to be open for 18 months. So, they decided in their own words:

...if they were to die, they would die well. So, they took loving thy neighbor to a practical extreme. Peace leafleted Lauderdale with 700 fliers, offering to roof houses, fix plumbing, repair anything in need, free of charge. The idea was to deliver neighbors from the duress of big-ticket bills, the kind that leave families punished by debt, or unable to pay at all.

They would get your furnace running, make your kitchen handicap accessible, ensure your car started in time for work. Your quality of life can be improved if the toilet works,” says Carlsen, a grief counselor by day.¹

At first only two people responded in need of help, but they kept at it. Soon many people in the community joined their cause. The word spread that if you needed help Peace Lutheran Church would be there to take care of you.

Many people in the community began to donate items and their ministry continued. They were even able to build a community gathering place where art classes were offered. One member of the congregation said: “It’s overwhelming...At the end of the day, all anybody’s hoping for is to get help when you’re in trouble. Everything today is so monetized. You’re supposed to pay for all that stuff. What we lacked in money, we made up for it in just being part of a community. And that’s very powerful.”ⁱⁱ

As we had our Bible Study this past week, we spent a lot of time talking about the early church in Acts 2. Right after the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples of Christ were baptized and started to live in Christian community together. Acts 2 tells us:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

What is interesting is that Peace Lutheran Church was not doing something new, they were going back to the model of the Early Church. A time when all the followers of Christ depended on each other to survive and thrive each day. This is what being part of a Christian community is all about. It is knowing we can trust each other so that when we need help, we can share our resources and help each other.

This is something everyone in the community wants to be part of whether they know who Jesus is or not. They want to be part of supporting each other. They want to share their skills and their resources. And the beautiful thing is that we all have something we can share to help our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is how the church grows and how we see in Scripture in Acts 2: “Each day God added disciples to their community.”

Community grows when people know they are loved and know they belong. That is who we are called to be at the church. A community where people can feel safe, loved, and accepted all by the grace of God.

This week in our lectionary Scripture from Luke we see the two types of mindsets that are at play when we look at each other. A mindset of judgement and a mindset of praise.

The first man we hear about, a Pharisee, starts his prayer: “I thank you God that I am not like other people” (Luke 18:11). Which let’s just be honest, it not ever a good way to start a prayer to God. Also, this prayer is boasting more about the Pharisees perceived accolades than praising the God he serves. Immediately this prayer starts in a divisive manner. Immediately we see that this person thinks he is better than various groups of people.

Sometimes we find ourselves trapped in this judgmental mindset. I know I do. We think we know other people. We think we know who they are and their needs. We are weary of people and I think that is because we live in a world and time where our nation is divided and there is a lot of distrust of one another, but that is opposite of the life that Jesus Christ calls us to live.

When we are trapped in this mindset, we view our neighbors as other, as different, as a threat, instead of seeing them as children of God. It is also because of the sin that lives within us that we see people this way.

When we judge others, we turn ourselves off to the possibility that we are connected to each other.

But we are connected to each other, the church is all about the ways in which God brings us together.

This past week I attended a clergy event, led by Bishop Sharma Lewis. The purpose of this event called “Re-Calibrate” was for her to officially come back to leadership after her time away and unite us in our calling to “make disciples of Jesus Christ” (Matthew 28:19).

It was wonderful to be among clergy colleagues. People I have known for 15 years and people I have only known for a couple of months. We are all appointed and scattered

across the Commonwealth of Virginia, yet when we come together, the Holy Spirit is present because we remember our common purpose and we care for one another.

I got so many hugs and shoulder squeezes and smiles as we all relished in one another’s company. This is what the church should feel like. Something you look forward to receiving, a beautiful gift from God.

We see that the second man in Luke, the tax collector, understood that the correct posture to take in prayer is one of humility.

He could not ever bear to look up to heaven as he prayed, as was the tradition at the time and he prayed this simple prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Instead of starting with the word: “I” like the Pharisee, he began his prayer with God. Now, this is the right way to start our prayer.

Our humanity is the great equalizer. In this life we share in a common experience. We are born, we live, and we die. We are all sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace.

The good news is that God in God’s mercy bestows this grace upon us through our faith in Jesus Christ. The good news for our lives is that God gives us the gift of the church to help us keep our faith and grow in our discipleship.

So, I ask you Rappahannock Charge, how will we embrace our neighbors? Sure, we are doing some good things already. We have our discretionary fund at the ready to help those in need monetarily, but how are we building relationships with each other?

We had a wonderful breakfast yesterday at Reager where we continued to show the community that we care about them.

Effective evangelism is about building relationships with other people so that they can see Jesus Christ embodied in you and then they come to believe through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the coming weeks we have two wonderful opportunities to build relationships in the community.

The first is through Trunk or Treat this coming Thursday at Flint Hill United Methodist Church. Just as the beautiful time we had with our community through the Farmer’s Market, this is our opportunity to see our neighbors face to face and remind them we are here for them. They are invited to become a part of the beloved community at Flint Hill UMC, Willis Chapel UMC, or Sperryville UMC.

The second opportunity we have is a new one. It is opportunity to help our neighbors much in the same way that Peace Lutheran Church started their ministry to the

community. For the first time this year on Saturday November 9, the churches of Rappahannock County are pulling together to have a community service workday.

Sponsored by Habitat for Humanity, this day will be called “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” and is a county-wide initiative to recruit volunteers to perform needed repairs on homes of elderly and low-income residents in Rappahannock County. Examples of work to be done include minor carpentry projects, painting, cleaning gutters, trimming hedges, and hauling trash.

Work teams—including adult team leaders and teen volunteers—will meet for breakfast at the Washington Fire Hall at 7:30 am, after which they will receive their assignments, get organized, and disperse to begin working at project sites by 8:30 am.

On behalf of our church I am going to be a part of this community-wide workday and I hope you will join me. Next Sunday I will ask for a firm commitment from anyone who will go with me from all three churches.

There are so many opportunities to embrace our neighbors with the love of Christ each day. May we continue to pray for God to be merciful open us and to continue to open our eyes to these many opportunities. And may we always remember we love others because God first loved us as we strive to embody our faith. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.citypages.com/news/peace-lutheran-staved-off-death-by-taking-love-thy-neighbor-to-a-radical-extreme/563648921?fbclid=IwAR23AFG49XexnA5ioOXO4KgzavHhCJIBTIV-PjrI2v6P59jSMqrvODhjnI8>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

Additional Resource

New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol 2. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1998.