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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Fourth Sunday of Easter
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Acts 2.42-47
John 10.1-10

The Common Life

All who believed were together and had all things in common... —
Acts 2.44

At two prominent places in the book of Acts, it is mentioned in passing that the first Christians shared their possessions in common. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts as well as the gospel carrying his name, tells us that they did this in response to the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Commentators on the text have noted for centuries, and with great relief, that this picture of communal living isn't really shared in the rest of the New Testament. In the other books, and even other places in Acts, there are references to Christians owning things of their own. And so, Luke's reporting of the communal life in early Christianity is triumphantly dubbed an "idealization" and we no longer have to take it seriously.

This suits us just fine. The last thing we want to do is share everything in common! So, when we read these sections of Acts—if we read them at all—we treat them generally, as instances of shared love among Christians. That idea, if it is general enough, we can tolerate. But the text itself is specific: "and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." (Acts 2:45)

One of the tasks of the Christian life is for us to "get specific" about love and sharing. The Church does not exist as a society to advance and revere the "ideals" of Christianity. Rather, the Church exists as a community where we can experiment—in specific ways—with our Christian ideals. It is a community of practice...an experiment

...a work in progress. It is in the church that we can learn about what it means to put the teachings of Jesus to work in our lives.

The early disciples felt those teachings led them to share possessions. Though we do it in smaller and in less radical ways, we do it as well. We give money to the church, not just to support an institution, but to learn what it means to give up control of what we have. When we give to the church, we turn over our money—we give up the right to make decisions individually about how it is used. We make those decisions together—through committees, budgets, and the like. We don't often think of it this way, but it is really an exercise in trust. Sharing money complicates—and at the same time, deepens—the relationship we have with one another.

Another example would be the way we share possessions with our mission partners in Haiti. When we give, we do not tell them exactly what to do with the money. We listen to their concerns and plans and then we give them some money. We trust them to use it as God guides them, or we enter together in a spirit of discernment. And they often share things with us—not as payments, but as free gifts. Those who travel to Haiti, myself included, have been overwhelmed by the beautiful gifts that we receive.

Once again, our mutual sharing of possessions complicates our relationship. It would be easier to keep tight control of our money so that we could “help them” in the ways we see fit. Instead, we enter into the spirit of sharing. In so doing, we grow closer in Christ. This has been happening for 10 years now and the difference in closeness is very plain to me, even after just half of that time.

Sharing possessions can do that. It can complicate things, but it can also bring people closer to one another. I'd like to share a story from my life that provided an early lesson in this truth. While I was in seminary at Yale, I became especially close to a small group of friends. Our second year six of us shared a house together on Ellsworth Street. Those folks continued to be my closest Christian friends and we dubbed ourselves “The

Ellsworth Gang.” We are now spread out all over the country. And we still keep in pretty close touch.

Way back when I was 29 or so, one member of the Ellsworth Gang was going through a rough time. Most of us lived in New England at that time but he lived in Georgia where he was going to graduate school. Jeff’s father had died recently of cancer. It came on suddenly and was unexpected. Just before that, Jeff had decided that he was not happy in his position as chaplain at a prep school, and so he decided to pursue his dream of attending film school—to learn more about making movies.

Because he had no background in drama, he was not accepted at the schools he wanted to attend. (Maybe some of our Longmeadow high school seniors can relate to that about now.) Just after his father’s death, he enrolled in a “dramatic writing” program at the University of Georgia to obtain the necessary background. It was a good program, but it wasn’t his dream. (Now he’s a very happy and successful drama teacher out in Chicago. But he didn’t know about that vocation back then.)

One day, Jeff called on the phone and was more upset than I had ever heard him. For one thing, he was broke, and if it had not been for a recent loan from his mother, he would not have been able to pay his tuition. But the big problem concerned his mother. He was calling from his family home in Arkansas, where he had just returned after admitting his mother to a residential psychiatric hospital. She had been going down hill since the death of Jeff’s dad, and she finally hit rock bottom.

Jeff and I talked for a long time on the phone and when he finally hung up, I knew he felt better. But still I wished that his friends could do more for him. We couldn’t visit, we couldn’t cure his mother—then it occurred to me, we could give him some money. We could help to solve at least one of his problems.

The next day I started making phone calls to the Ellsworth gang to tell them of Jeff’s situation, to elicit their prayers, and to suggest my radical idea. Everyone agreed,

and I asked them to send to me what they could for Jeff. I would buy an Easter card and send the gift to him during Holy Week.

Now, few of us would think twice about devoting hours and hours of our time to a friend who is in need. But somewhere along the way we've become so enchanted by the power of money that we cringe at the prospect of giving cash to the same person. It just isn't done! But what is money except another form of our labors, another indication of our efforts and exertions? Why should one form be treated any differently than the other? The Prince of Darkness must be pleased that he has so easily succeeded in separating humanity's most common medium of exchange from the power of the Christian convictions that we seek to apply to the rest of our lives!

Although it was a long way from the ideal of New Testament ethics, when the Ellsworth Gang gave some money to a friend in need, we took a small step away from the devilish power that would separate part of our lives from the judgment and grace of God. Sure, this giving of money might be a bit awkward, both for those who give and for the one who receives. But the New Testament never says faithful living won't be awkward, and in anticipation of our awkwardness it promises that "great grace" will be upon us all.

Going through some papers, I recently found a folder of stuff related to Jeff's time of crisis. Here's the note we sent to him:

Dear Jeff:

In these difficult weeks you have borne emotional and spiritual burdens that we can share only through prayer. In a more concrete (but still limited) way, we can share your present financial hardship. The enclosed check for \$600 can do nothing to relieve the former pain and anxiety, but we give it with the hope that it will slightly lessen the latter.

It is a joy to share ourselves with a friend who has brought so much love into each of our lives. In this difficult time we know that you do

not doubt God's love and care for you. This gift is a small token and reminder of ours.

Your Friends In Christ,
THE ELLSWORTH GANG

That act was a hurdle for our group. We'd done lots of things for each other, but we'd never shared money. A week after we sent the money, we each received a copy of a six-page (typed, single spaced) letter of thanks. I can't resist sharing a bit of it with you:

April 6, 1990

Dear Ellsworth Gang:

When I was a teenager, I spent a week in New Mexico at Glorieta Baptist Assembly, a Southern Baptist conference center, at a nationwide youth assembly for college students. Basically, it's like church camp on a gigantic scale. I remember that at certain times each day we met in small groups with randomly selected strangers. As usual, we thought it a great way to scope out members of the opposite sex.

My group had a special connection, and we had wonderful week of Bible study, discussion, and fun. I had found a very short-lived girlfriend in my very own church group, but I made some new friends in my small group nevertheless. I remember very little about the others except that we diverse and lively group.

The last day, we were to find a partner within our group and give him/her something very personal to us to be a reminder of our connection. People gave each other pictures of family and friends, a ticket stub to a very special concert, a driver's license (I thought that was a bit unusual), a book mark that had belonged to a grandparent, and

such. In short, people gave others things that had great sentimental value but little monetary value.

I don't remember my partner's name, and ironically, I don't even remember what I gave him, though I do remember thinking it was a pretty meaningful item. When it was my partner's turn to give me something, he said he had noticed I did not have a watch. He took off his watch and gave it to me. It was a beautiful gold Seiko, I believe.

Growing up in a church I had heard many times that it is more blessed to give than to receive. But I did not remember anything about it being a virtue to receive. I was stunned, shocked, and almost horrified at the prospect of being given a valuable watch from someone who I had known a week before and would probably never see again. I adamantly refused the watch, for it was too valuable a gift to receive in these circumstances.

He seemed a bit hurt and insisted I take the watch. I refused again, explaining it was too valuable. Finally, he emphasized that he *wanted* me to have the watch. Well, it was getting pretty weird for me, and I do not remember what happened next. Did he say something about his? Or did I suddenly just realize it? Whatever happened, I finally knew that it was my stubborn pride that would not allow me to accept the watch. He was freely giving me this gift; he was hurt that I would not take it. So I swallowed my pride and accepted the gift.

I realized it is also blessed to receive. Our stubborn pride and desire for power often make us want to always be the giver, the nurturer, the helper. I felt like I had learned something about God's grace by accepting that watch. I learned what it means to accept an unearned and underserved gift, and I wondered how many times I had

refused the gifts of God and God's people because of my pride and my inability to humbly admit my need for concern and help.

You may be wondering why I've gone to the trouble of telling you this story. After all, the watch-giver was stranger, you are my friends; he gave me a watch, which I really didn't need no matter how nice it was, while you gave me money, which I admit I do need.

Well, I'm telling you the story because when I saw the check I felt a pang of guilt for telling people of my financial troubles and receiving a check from friends who are not rich. I felt a brief moment of shame that I was in need of money and because if I had just decided to go to Georgia earlier I could have applied for financial aid. And I felt my pride bristle at the thought of receiving a (gasp) handout.

After these thoughts of grace, of love, of friendship my mind drifted to other, more mundane matters. I thought of how I was on the verge of becoming an outlaw in my home state because I couldn't afford to pay the speeding ticket I got coming home from the hospital. I thought of the application fees to film schools I couldn't pay. I thought of the phone bill I'm racking up calling people to help me deal with my emotional crisis. And I thought of the rent which almost did not get paid this month and which will come around again soon.

Lately, I have been downplaying my financial troubles for myself and others, and I was hoping that I would be able to make it financially, but your gift gives me breathing room and enables me to remove finances from my worries (as long as I don't decide I need a yacht or something – just kidding). My mom's gift meant that I could go to school this quarter, your gift means I can stay in school without fears. Thanks you very much for your generous gift, and even more

importantly, for your love and friendship. I feel kind of like Jimmy Stewart in *It's A Wonderful Life* and I remember Clarence's dedication in the Mark Twain book: "No man is a failure who has friends." It's a pretty nice feeling.

It was a minor thing really: \$600 from a half-dozen friends hardly constituted the communal ideal of the Acts stories. Nevertheless, it was an important step for us and it helped us all to grow in faith.

Remembering this story has helped me to get specific about a topic that all too often remains vague. Christians should share. Everything. Including money. That's the lesson the Ellsworth Gang learned during Lent and Easter of 1990 and that is the lesson I hope we will all consider as we worship together this morning.