

**Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 56:1-8**

*Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.*

**New Testament Lesson—Acts 2:37-47**

*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 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.*

We live in a vastly different world from the early Church. And I mean that literally—not another planet, of course, but the planet is very different than it was two thousand years ago.

Yes, the earth itself has changed in many ways. Human beings have altered—have drastically changed the world God created—and usually not for the better. Especially over the last two hundred years, especially thanks to rich nations like the United States, we have willfully contributed to the suffering of earth and its inhabitants.

From interrupting weather patterns to destroying entire ecosystems, (and I won't mince words here) we have been dealers in not only death, but extinction.

Because of our all-consuming desire to consume, more and more, faster, more convenient instant gratification and one-click purchases and single-use plastics—because of our greed, we continue to do harm to our home and to each other—to future generations. We act as if our resources are limitless and enough is never enough.

Never mind the fact that the very first responsibility God gives us is...wait for it...environmental stewardship! Yes, you heard that right. Our primary job—our first task in the book of Genesis is to take care of the earth.

But, you see: Human beings these days have a remarkable talent of making anything into a commodity, including much of the earth's natural resources. We can find a way to profit off anything—even healthcare, even prisons—and in some instances, even the gospel itself.

Yes, even the gospel itself. Singer/songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter puts this perfectly in one of her songs. She has in mind one of those slick TV preachers and writes, “He’d show me the way according to him in return for my personal check.”

You see: The earth's resources have always been vulnerable to abuse by the greedy and those in power—and especially by the powerful who are greedy. Today, this includes not only our natural resources, but our financial resources and (sadly) human resources, too.

During his ministry, Jesus actively and intentionally pushed back against this greed—against the hunger for power and influence that so often leads to the oppression of vulnerable communities. It's why he had the audacity to flip over tables in the Temple!

He knew what the love of money does to people—how it corrupts hearts and minds—leading to violence, exploitation, and willful ignorance. It is, after all, the root of all evil.

The early Church, however, showed us that another way is possible. Thank God—another way is possible! Now, don't get me wrong. The early Church wasn't perfect and they had their share of disagreements. But they were also very intentional about how they used the resources God gave them.

The way they thought about stewardship, according to Acts, was very different from how we do today—especially in the United States. Yes, we live in a vastly different world from the early Church in many ways.

Let's face it: Modern-day American culture is hyper-individualistic. It is egocentric. We've convinced ourselves we're the most important country in the world because we believe our culture and governance and (yes) “Western civilization” are God's greatest gifts to humanity.

Though we may not say it out loud, we live with an attitude of American supremacy in our hearts. American lives are more valuable than those of other nations, right?—worth taking risks to save American citizens but not others. Why are red, white, and blue children more precious than those carried by Israeli men in yarmulkes or Palestinian women in hijabs?

And I know that sounds harsh. But, here's the thing...We may not *say* that's what we believe, but our actions are saying it for us—with astonishing volume—louder than a bomb's explosion—more deafening than the screams of grieving parents.

It's true: Actions *do* speak louder than words. What we choose to do with our resources—the actions we take matter more than well-crafted statements and platitudes: “All persons are created equal.” “A House of prayer for all peoples”—“a place for everyone.” Lovely words, for sure. But do we practice what we preach?

We can learn a lot, I think, from the early Church. We've been reading about them in Acts 2 for over a month now. And I get it. It's easy to look at this community in Acts and think, “too good to be true.”

It almost sounds like some farfetched, fictional Utopia: “sharing all things in common?” Redistributing wealth based on need? Really? In twenty-first century America? Give me a break. Never gonna happen!

Some of us, though, may wish that kind of society was possible in this day and age. And let’s be honest. All of us today are deeply jealous of the early Church’s ability to grow by leaps and bounds. Three thousand people in a day? You can barely imagine it. Three thousand new baptisms? I mean, we’re gonna need a bigger font!

Especially today when all we seem to hear about is “aging congregations” and “declining membership” and all the other depressing statistics, God knows we long for that kind of vibrant and robust growth. We crave it. We’ve been starved for it for so long it seems—especially since COVID came along and changed everything.

And perhaps it *is* a fantasy to expect three thousand new members—but not in a global sense. No, I think it’s completely realistic if we think more broadly. Three thousand new believers—people rededicating, recommitting their lives to Christ all over the world? Well that doesn’t sound like a fantasy at all. It sounds like motivation.

It’s no accident that Luke, the author of Acts, connects the community’s stewardship practices with the Church’s success: *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.*

Luke connects responsible stewardship—the equitable distribution of resources with the early Church’s happiness and growth. That’s intentional. If today’s Church seems stagnate to you or, worse, dying, then I’d suggest reconsidering what we’re doing with our time, talents, and treasures.

Friends, I’m convinced that if we want to see the Church grow and thrive in ways we recognize—if we’re truly devoted to adding more to this global family, our attitudes about stewardship need to evolve—and I think it looks more like the first-century Church than the Church of twenty-first century America—more like wealth redistribution than wealth concentration—more direct outreach to oppressed peoples and those historically unwelcome in the pews—the “outcasts of Israel” as Isaiah puts it.

The incomparable Maya Angelou gives us these words: “I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver.”

Siblings in Christ: Deep in my heart, I do believe that we need to be liberated—freed from systems and structures that perpetuate injustice—freed from short-term solutions and hyper-individualism and yes, freed from our not-so-secret belief in American supremacy.

And I’ll take it one step further. Too often that American supremacy goes hand in hand with Christian supremacy. And that, too, is holding us back.

Because until we in the United States realize that we need Russians and we need Iranians and North Koreans and all our so-called “enemies”—until we realize that, the world will not be at peace. Until Israelis realize their future depends on the Palestinians and vice versa, war will keep rearing its ugly head.

Until Catholics and Protestants understand their mutual interdependence, along with Jew and Gentile, Sunni and Shia, Tori and Whig, gay and straight, citizen and immigrant, Capitalist and Socialist, cisgender and transgender, Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, Black and White, religious and atheist.

Friends: Our futures depend on each other. And the starting point must be the humanity we share. We *need* one another.

Think about it. America alone can't end hunger and disease. Christians alone can't mitigate the worst effects of climate change. And the Western world cannot prevent war through its own sheer force of will. No, we have to actually listen to our neighbors.

We can only overcome the great challenges of our time with a spirit of global citizenship. It can only happen if we work together—only then do we stand a chance of facing down the larger than life, intimidating crises already on the horizon.

But it *is* possible. I *know* it is. Because with God, *all* things are possible—especially when we're good stewards of God's gifts. And so we have every reason to be hopeful.

Be encouraged, my friends! We can start a new journey today—a journey defined by a commitment to work with one another.

Let's start that journey by throwing away our self-righteousness—by snubbing our sense of superiority. Let's get off our high horses and realize our future depends on each other.

So let's reach across the aisle, across the tracks, across the river, across the border, the picket line, the ocean, the cultural divide and celebrate our common humanity.

Because there is no way forward except together.

Amen.