

“Abundant Life,” Acts 2:43-47; John 10:1-10; 4/13/08; Albany UMC

A farmer named Bert traveled from his home in rural Maine to Boston. There he heard a lecture on socialism. To Bert, socialism sounded like a pretty good thing: everyone sharing with each other and helping each other out. He went back home and announced to his friend and neighbor, Harry, that he had become a socialist.

“So, tell me what this socialism thing is, Bert,” said Harry. Bert explained that it was all about sharing with each other and helping each other out. “Let me see if I understand this. Are you saying that, if you had two farms, you’d give me one?” “Sure,” said Bert. “If you had two pickup trucks, would you give me one?” “Sure.” “If you had two pigs, would you give me one?” Bert suddenly got red in the face and began looking at his shoes. “That’s pretty low, Harry,” he said. “You know I’ve got two pigs!” (Emphasis, March-April, 2008, p.60)

Today’s first lesson from the Book of Acts is a very famous one; it gives us probably one of the most radical forms of Christian community. Basically, what it says is that the members of the early Christian community sold their stuff and became one family; they literally became a family; as a family they had to do what a family does—sharing; they shared everything with one another.

Of course, we do not know how long this particular congregation lasted. In the New Testament, there is no further information on this church; that means the church or that kind of community did not last very long. Why didn’t it last long? It is not that hard to guess why; sharing is an excellent idea; it is what we are supposed to do as Christians; but when it comes to reality, it is not easy. You cannot force sharing; it has to come out of our hearts.

Ideologically, socialism has a wonderful promise; can you imagine a world where everyone is treated equally and everything is free? Wouldn’t it be really cool if this could really happen in our world? Imagine a world where no one goes to bed hungry; no one has to

worry about a place to sleep; no one has to pay for medical care?

But someone has to pay for these! And recent history shows that the fantastic idea of socialism was not really realistic to materialize in this world.

When I went to China four years ago, a man told me what had happened when he was growing up in the early 60s. He said that every house and every piece of land belonged to the government; the ideal was that everyone was to show up early in the morning at the farm but there were too many excuses and even those who did not come early to work were not to worry about food because that was what the government promised for them. What happened was that no one wanted to work hard; and not everyone was treated equally. Eventually communist idealism failed.

Then what is the answer? Is the way of our capitalist country ok? The poor become poorer and the rich become richer. It is not just an issue here in this country; it is the same wherever you go in the world.

One of my students from Uganda at the seminary was sharing last Wednesday evening that in the 1960s when he was growing up, it really didn't matter whether you lived in a village or in a city in his country; if you are smart enough and study hard at school, you could go to college one way or another. But now, he said, everything is privatized and college education is only for the rich. If you are born poor in a rural village, there is no way for you even to go to high school. Things are too expensive and education is just terrible!

Capitalism and globalism only made the rich people richer, the poor people even poorer, and the crime rate is sky rising. Then what does the Acts text tell us? Is the text still relevant today? As Christians do we need to sell everything we have and share with others? Or should we continue to do what we do now to get rich and enjoy ourselves?

One way or another we all came to this great country, the United

States of America, with dreams. If you are not the ones who made a choice to be here; your parents or their parents did it. And whatever others say, my understanding is that a big part of the American dream is a dream of better life—an abundant life, no more hunger, no more worries, and more opportunities for a better life!

I am no exception either! For me, I didn't know what I was getting into when I came to this country for the first time. I just came because I wanted to study more. But that was a part of it. By studying and getting a degree, I wanted to live a better life, an abundant life! When I visited Korea three weeks ago, I realized once again how much blessed I am compared to those who live back in my home country. Just everything we have here is an extra blessing: the cleaner air, cheaper gasoline, and less populated cities to name a few!

Then what should we do? What do the texts tell us? I can tell you two things. First, no matter how tight and difficult our lives here in this country are, we are better off in many ways than those who live in other parts of the world.

So we need to share what we have. Even in this country, there are many more people out there who are less fortunate than us. We need to identify down; we need to ally ourselves in heart and soul with those who are economically poor. According to Luke who is the author of Acts, that is what we need to do as a church. The gospel has nothing to do with socialism nor with Capitalism; it just tells us to love the poor because God has loved us first.

The second point is that we can only share with others when our hearts and spirits are wealthy. You can have lot of money and lot of things under your name but that does not necessarily mean you can be wealthy in your hearts.

The members of the early Jerusalem church we see in the scripture were poor people; they didn't have money; they were women; they were just lower class people in that society; but they were rich in their

spirits; the Spirit of God was with them; their hearts were warm; they met Jesus; they had the risen Christ in their hearts and minds and lives too. So they could happily sell things and share with others. To me, they were the richest people.

In John's gospel, Jesus says that he is the good shepherd. He said that the reason why he came to us is that we may have life. Here life is a life of abundance; and this kind of life does not come from things; it comes from the Spirit.

As a good shepherd, Jesus knows what his flock needs. He knows that his role is to keep his flock happy. He know that how we can have a happy life. Sure, things are needed; we need to drink water when we are thirsty and we need to be fed when we are hungry. But that does not really make us happy. We need to be fed spiritually. Our souls and minds need to be fed too.

“Man does not live by bread alone,” Jesus said. We live by his words. We live by his promise. We live by his power. We live by his comfort. We live by his strength.

The abundant life comes from above, not from here.

I know there are times we become overwhelmed by all kinds of worldly concerns and worries. When the balance of our checking account becomes low, we start to worry. But we have to know that worry and concern are not the friends of Jesus.

God, the good shepherd, who knows our needs, knows our weakness too. So what we have to do is always call upon him and call upon his spirit for help. Jesus, our good shepherd, not only comes to help us with abundance; he also helps us to help others.

May the Spirit of God come and help you to have this blessing. Amen.