

PRAISING GOD: Reflection for 1st Sunday after Pentecost, 12 June 2022

Acts 2; Luke 10:1–9

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**[The first half of this sermon was prepared by Andrew Hyde, designated lay minister and chaplain for the Ecumenical Campus Ministry (Anglican, Presbyterian, United) at the University of Guelph and Lisa Leffler, a diaconal ministry student at the Centre for Christian Studies in Winnipeg for The United Church of Canada's "Called to Be the Church" program. Rev. Barb has contextualized it for EPUC, adding the second half.]*

This is the last Sunday in our five-week exploration of what it means to be “Called to Be the Church.” Over this time, we’ve been looking to the Early Church as our example of what it means to be the kind of church community God is calling us to be. Starting from a place of awe and wonder, we noted how God’s call knits people together in community, expands our sense of that community, and challenges us to gladly break bread and generously share our resources.

Today we end our exploration by noting how the Early Church community praised God in all they did. Acts 2:47 describes the Early Church as constantly “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.”

I invite you to take a deep breath. Breathe in deeply. Draw all the life-giving air into your lungs that you can. (Our yoga teacher would love this!) As you do so, imagine what is happening within you—how oxygen is passing into your blood stream, how that enriched blood courses through you to nourish all parts of your being. Consider all that is going on within you as you draw breath into your self.

And now take another deep breath...and hold it. Keep holding. What do you notice? Tension? Pressure? If you held your breath for too long, we could be in for some serious consequences. So let go. Exhale!

Just as drawing breath into us is important and the work of that breath within us is important, so, too, is it important to let that breath out, to exhale, to maintain an equilibrium between in and out, in order for us to be healthy.

It is no mere coincidence that I mention breath on this second Sunday of Pentecost. Rev. Harold mentioned last week that another name for the Spirit that came to the early Church at Pentecost, is Ruach or Ruah, breath.

When we look at the example of the Early Church, we realize that it’s important to take in, notice, and observe with awe and wonder the amazing works of God around us (we talked about this in our first week together). It’s important to let those mighty actions work on us, calling us into deeper community, broadening our imaginations, and moving us toward generosity (we talked about those things over the past few weeks as well). But it’s also important to express outwardly, to put out into the world our sense of what God is doing within us by praising God, proclaiming God’s goodness, and witnessing to others what God has done for us.

“Shout, sister, shout!” is the cry of the old gospel singer. “Tell the whole world what it’s all about.” I don’t know that one. Perhaps you do?

“How can I keep from singing your praise?” asks the contemporary worship singer. “How can I ever say enough? How amazing is your love!”

“O for a thousand tongues to sing,” pleads the hymn writer, “my great redeemer’s praise.”

When the Holy Spirit came upon the Early Church at Pentecost, God gave those hearing the witness of the disciples the ability to hear them in their own languages. People from all corners of the known world at the time asked, “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native languages?”

This wasn’t some party trick meant to impress onlookers. It wasn’t meant to pad a resume or beef up a college application. The Holy Spirit empowered them in this way so the glory of God could be expressed and heard and appreciated.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is a summary of Christian faith from our Presbyterian and Reformed roots, begins by inquiring about the chief aim of humanity. What are we meant for? For what are we designed? It describes our chief aim as being twofold—to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. And, indeed, that is expressed in EPUC’s new Vision Statement and identified Values.

EPUC Vision Statement:

“We are an inclusive and welcoming community, worshipping God, working for justice, and caring for creation.”

Values:

1. We celebrate God in worship and in service.
2. We nurture and build relationships within and outside our faith community.
3. We serve our wider community and the world through pursuing social and environmental justice issues.

So let’s take a few moments to give voice to how we do that. Turn to a neighbour and share a quick story about where you experience the glory of God. What lately has caused you to say, “Wow, God, thank you”? Where have you witnessed God at work in the world around you?

(Allow a few minutes for conversations among members, invite a person or two to share a story.)

And now, secondly, turn to a different neighbour and have another conversation. What is it you enjoy about your community of faith? What do you enjoy about being a follower of Jesus here at EPUC? Turn to a new neighbour and give voice to the joy you find in living out your Christian calling through being part of this community of faith.

(Again, allow a few minutes for conversation, invite a person or two to share.)

In our New Creed, which we said together earlier in the service, we are “called to be the church.” That means we notice, take in, and are aware of the presence of God and the Holy Spirit working among us. We are shaped and formed by that work into a **community with imagination and joyful generosity**. It means we **give voice and outward expression—we proclaim** the goodness of God for others to hear.

And now I am going to talk about how money fits in with all we have been talking about. Many, if not most, ministers shy away from talking about money in sermons. Not me! I was your national Stewardship Development Minister in the General Council Offices for nearly twelve years and went all over Canada (and sometimes into the U.S.) talking about money.

Why? Because I follow Jesus of Nazareth, who spoke about money frequently and how our relationship with it, including our decisions about how we invest or spend it, affects our relationship with God and with all others!

Interactive time again! What was Jesus’ favourite topic for preaching and teaching? (*Allow for reponses.*) Trick question! It was not money. Jesus talked more about the kingdom of heaven (or the kin-dom, as we now often say today), what the world would be like if we all lived as beloved children of God, sharing the toys, loving our siblings.

His SECOND favourite topic was money and stuff and how they affect our ability to live the kin-dom life. How our relationship with money and stuff affects our relationship with God and others.

On the front of your bulletin are four words: Believe-Give-Love-Pray. Put a 1 above the word you think is found most often in the Bible, 2 above the second most often used word, 3 for 3rd, 4 for the word used least in the Bible.

Sorry, friends at home, I am not giving away the answers before Sunday. Come to church to find out! Or ask someone who was there.

Now, how many Bible verses are there about money? There are over 2,300 Bible verses about money. This includes topics like wealth, possessions, greed, money mindset, contentment, investing, and more.ⁱ

Eleven of Jesus’ 39 parables talk about money, wealth, and belongings. Oftentimes Jesus is simply using money as an illustration to a bigger point, but consider the fact that he used money to get his lessons across rather than anything else.ⁱⁱ That is because it plays such a huge part in our lives.

When I was doing the stewardship development work for our national church, I came to think the way we live this out could be expressed very simply:

We love God with our **gratitude** and love all others, including earth itself and all that is on it, through our **generosity**. Gratitude and generosity—two sides of the coin of loving God and others. Loving Earth as our dwelling place and God as our spiritual dwelling place—deep stuff!

I mentioned in the introduction to today's service that the whole season of Pentecost—from Pentecost Sunday in the spring, clear to Advent, the four weeks before Christmas—is a Season of Thanksgiving and gratitude. Gratitude as **attitude**—informing both our spiritual life and how we relate to each other.

Meanwhile, the generosity part of the equation of loving others includes generosity of lifestyle and generosity in how we make our decisions about money.

Gratitude and generosity can be spiritual disciplines that shape and inform our faith, and—therefore—our lifestyle choices. They are lenses to inform our identity as followers of Jesus—in all we do. I think they are already foundational for the ministries at EPUC. I have seen such a generous spirit in how you respond to people who are marginalized, and how you respond when there is a pastoral care need in our community, such as when someone has been ill or there has been a death. Generosity, how we carry out loving our neighbours, is part of being human.

This resonates with what I read in a book that I reviewed for *Mandate* magazine a while ago: ***Why Good Things Happen to Good People: How to Live a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life by the Simple Act of Giving***. The author, Stephen Post, supervises a research institute funded by Sir John Templeton at Case Western University Medical School, where Post taught medical ethics. Post and his colleagues had done over 500 serious scientific studies that show the power of unselfish love to enhance the health of the giver! Here are three of their findings:

1. Giving delays mortality significantly later in life, even when you start being generous late in life. The effect of giving (44%) on delaying death is greater than mobility (39%), exercising **4x a week** (30%), or attendance at religious services (29%). I love that part about being generous having a greater effect on how long I will likely live than whether or not I exercise!! Because I sure do not exercise enough!
2. Generosity is highly protective for youth—reducing risky behaviours, depression and suicide risk, while increasing well-being and self-esteem. So, interact with the young people in your lives, telling them why and where you give, possibly inviting them to help you choose a special place to give at Thanksgiving or Christmas.
3. The third, I tell every sick person I visit: Praying for **others** improves the health of the one praying!

Post's research provides evidence that compassion and generosity are hardwired in us. They can actually be identified by functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) of the brain.

Post also documents the profound effects of **gratitude** on health and healing, including proof that cultivating appreciation and gratitude for life increases DHEA, a beneficial hormone, and lowers destructive stress hormones like cortisol. Just five minutes of intentional expressing of gratitude can shift the nervous system to a calm state.

I shared with you a few years ago how I accidentally discovered that myself during a turbulent airplane flight, where I thought we were going to die and my anxiety went down after I began thinking back on my life, about all the things for which I am grateful.

In addition to being scientifically supported, this stuff is radically spiritual. If every life decision, every action, came from a profound sense of gratitude for everything we are and have, what a difference that could make in the world!

It calls for profound conversion in our lives. And if every decision we make, every action we take came from a sense of **who** and **whose** we are—humans created in God’s image—embraced as family, as kin, through Jesus, then what powerhouses for mission our church would be, living in the kin-dom NOW! Because we would live out our identity as God’s loving and caring children—loving God and loving each other **all the time**, in every decision we make individually and collectively as a church.

Questions I will leave with you to ponder: How would you live differently if **EVERY** decision you make was done out of gratitude because you loved God with your whole heart, soul, mind and all your desires? Ask yourself: What if my **way of being** in the world, living IN God, was one of **deep generosity** because I loved all others, including the Earth herself, with that same kind of love?

You will soon receive a letter in the mail or by email, inviting you to prayerfully reflect on your giving to God’s mission through EPUC. How much you give reflects your relationship with God. Full disclosure here: When I had a new car payment, my offering is more—quite a bit more—than that was, important as my car is to my life.

When you reflect on how much you will give to EPUC, does your offering say your church is as important as two coffees at Tim’s in a week? A dinner out? Or more? Hopefully, much more?! Consider that prayerfully, then please return the enclosed estimate of what you want to give, so your EPUC family can plan its budget, just as any family does!

Gratitude and Generosity are the breath of life. In and out and in again. We are called to be a community, alive and living in God, following Jesus. We are “Called to Be the Church.” Thanks be to God!

Amen.

ⁱ <https://agapeinvests.com/over-100-bible-verses-about-money/>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.