

“Utopia”

Rev. Stephen Milton

Lawrence Park Community Church

Camping Sunday

April 26, 2026

Acts 2:42–47

Today’s scripture reading comes from the Book of Acts. It is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. It chronicles what happened to the apostles after the resurrected Jesus has returned to God. The events in today’s reading occur shortly after Pentecost, that day when the Holy Spirit entered the disciples, looking like flames of fire. Filled with the holy spirit, the apostles decide to devote their lives to spreading the good news about Jesus to anyone who will listen. They start in Jerusalem.

In today’s reading we get a peek at what life was like for them in this early phase of their work. Filled with the spirit, they decide to share everything they have, and distribute it to anyone in their community who is in need. People who join the growing Jesus movement are expected to liquidate their assets and bring the money to the Apostles. This was not considered a payment, but as a donation to the common cause. Some new members sold all their land and gave the proceeds to the movement (Acts 4: 32ff).

In today’s passage, there is a sense of nostalgia for these early days. The sharing of all their possessions is told in the past tense, as though this was a golden period that did not last. And that’s true. As the Jesus movement grows in Jerusalem, trouble arises, too. The chief priests at the temple take offence at the growing popularity of the Apostles and their cult. They are brought in for questioning several times, and the crowds in Jerusalem even kill the Apostle Stephen by stoning (Acts 7:58). Eventually, the apostles are run out of town.

But did this practice of sharing everything end? The rest of the book of Acts describes the Apostles as travelling evangelists, going from town to town spreading the word about Jesus. They would find a place to stay, often someone sympathetic, then they would start talking to people. In synagogues, in homes, in the market place. Christianity spread one person at a time, picking up believers here and there, often first among enslaved people, and women, those who are most oppressed by Roman life. If the head of a household converted, their entire household would be baptized, too. They met in secret, down on beaches or in homes at night after the work day was over. Some wealthy women paid the bills for travelling Apostles, and provided space in their homes for worship services.

And that original impulse to share everything persisted. When the believers came together for these services, they brought food. These were potlucks, like the one we had last week in the community hall. People would bring what food they had, and shared it with everyone who gathered. These meetings featured people who came from many walks of life and income levels. Enslaved people found themselves eating next to free men and women, many of whom owned enslaved people. In one of his letters, Paul admonishes the wealthy members at these dinners, because they brought food, but ate it themselves, not sharing it with the poorer believers. (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). Paul wants everyone to eat together, erasing social differences. These meals were known as “agape” meals - agape being a Greek word for the highest form of love. These love feasts were meant to be a place where society’s normal rules of hierarchy and power were forgotten.

Later, in the 4th century, Christianity was legalized, and many more people came to the faith. The first churches were built, Christians no longer had to meet in secret in homes. But even in these more formal church services, that communal ethic of sharing persisted. People would bring food to the altar - dead chickens, vegetables and fruit. Formal communion rites were observed with just bread and wine, administered by priests. But the extra food from congregants was still expected. It would be shared with believers in need, the poor, the ill, as well as shut ins and prisoners. The food from the service would spread out through the town. Strangers sharing with strangers, united by belief and care.

That early era of sharing among the first believers continued to inspire Christians as the faith grew larger and more powerful. It came to be seen as a kind of utopia which Christians wanted to recreate even though so much had changed.

Monks

The monasteries were inspired by it. New monks and nuns were expected to give up everything they owned when they entered , even their books and pens. This was directly inspired by the example of the apostles in the Book of Acts. Over the centuries, many Christian groups adopted this ethic of communal sharing, often when they thought the end of the world was near.

There is a new movie out about the group called the Shakers, entitled “ The Testament of Ann Lee.” They were established in the 18th century, and are now mostly known for their elegant, simple style of wood furniture.

Testament of Ann Lee

But they were also known for worshipping God by ecstatic dancing and shouting. They created entire towns where all property was held in common, and all members had to be celibate.

Their movement mostly died out in the 20th century, but that dream of living in harmony on the land with no private property persisted. In the 1960s, hippie communes did the same thing, even when they didn’t believe in Christianity. This idea of a utopia where people can live together in harmony sharing all has proven too strong to completely shake.

For those of us who have not grown up in communes, private property is the rule, not the exception. We are encouraged to express ourselves through the accumulation of stuff. We are what we wear, we express our values in the kind of cars we drive, the kind of homes we live in, how we decorate them. Our modern credo could be, "I own, therefore I am."

But there is one notable exception to this rule: summer camp. For city people, summer camp is seen as a precious opportunity to get away from school, from the noise and busy ness of the city, and, let's face it, a chance to get away from parents, too. Summer camp is a chance to be outside almost all of the time, to enjoy the outdoors, to swim, to hike, to play games. It is also a place where campers are expected to live much more communally than they are used to in the city. As a camper you don't bring much with you, and suddenly you are eating the same food with large groups of kids you don't know. You're paddling in the camp canoe, not your own, and you're expected to help each other out.

It's not surprising that many summer camps started out as Christian camps, often run by the YMCA. Christian parents liked the idea of sending their kids away to a safe place where they could have fun in nature, and learn more about the Christian values of sharing and caring for each other. A little later in the service we will hear about Camp Scugog, which this church has been supporting for many years.

Camp Scugog

Today it is a camp for impoverished urban moms and their kids. It was founded by the Presbyterians in 1913, and it became a United Church camp in 1925.

Summer camps are amazing experiences. Summer camps are, and I mean this in a nice way, sort of like cults. They seem to have a different name for everything. There are special names for crafts. The young adult leaders often go under assumed names, different from the names they use in the city. Campers often pick up nicknames. Summer camps have their own sub culture, which new campers have to learn quickly, and which returning campers take great pride in knowing. These camps are places which glory in being different from everyday life, where you can meet a camper on the first day, and become best friends in just a week or two, friendships which often last a lifetime.

Summer camps are often remembered so fondly, you'd think someone was describing a utopia. And perhaps that's right. Utopia refers to a place where everything works, with a minimum of conflict. It also means a no-place, a place that cannot last. Everyone at summer camp returns home, to a society where sharing, playing and caring are not the most important thing. But, having spoken to many of you over the years, it appears that those weeks at summer camp left a deep impression. Just this week, one of you told me that you learnt more about yourself and life at summer camp than you ever did in school. Children are changed by that taste of sharing and caring in nature offered by summer camp. That is one of the reasons why this church continues to offer such strong support to Camp Scugog - you want a new generation of children to experience the same thing.

The early Christians who shared all they had were also surrounded by a world that didn't share their values. Christianity was considered insane for practicing a faith where money didn't matter, and neither did social status. A place where rich and poor people broke bread side by side. That is the Christian ideal, something we often do not live up to. But that ideal is important. It is what inspired the creation of public health care in this country, led by Baptist minister Tommy Douglas. The idea that we should give our money so that strangers may thrive led to the creation of the modern welfare state. It continues in the idea that taxes should be used for public education, public health care, public roads, disability benefits and welfare payments for people who can't work, either temporarily or permanently. It is no coincidence that the welfare state emerged in Christian nations first. Since the days of the early Apostles, we have known that we are called to care not just for people we know, but for strangers, fellow citizens, too, who need help. We are all in this together.

This idea is easy to dismiss when self interest takes hold. Politicians have found that it is easier to get elected when they promise to cut taxes, even when it means cutting social services. This is always short sighted. Our politicians are not elected to act like CEOs running a profitable business, and flying in their own jets. As Canadians, we know that our climate is too harsh, the economy is too unpredictable, for us to make it on our own. As calls to privatize more and more services grow, we need to remember that early period of Christianity when the apostles shared everything in common. It ignited a dream. One that reminds us that societies thrive when we share with each other. It can make a few weeks at camp into an experience that lasts a lifetime, and it can make our society more stable, more just, and more loving. Even for people we don't know, and may never meet. But God knows them, and considers them our brothers and sisters. We are called to do the same. Amen.