

On the Rise: Growing Onward

Preached by

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

Sunday May 1, 2022

Third Sunday of Easter

The Lord's Supper

For Reflection: *"When we break bread and give it to each other, fear vanishes and God becomes very close."*

Henri J.M. Nouwen

Hebrew Scripture: *Isaiah 61:1-3*

61The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

Reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles: *Acts 2:42-47*

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Meditation: *On the Rise: Growing Outward*

Today is the third in our Eastertide sermon series, *On the Rise*. The title piggy-backs on our Easter sermon reflecting on the risen Christ, and how we, as Christians, are called to rise with him. While I intended this series, the Easter title proved serendipitous for moving ahead. Altogether I am discovering there is a nice convergence of images and experiences weaving together the risen Christ, a people still celebrating that resurrection, the new birth that springtime brings to the earth, the rebirth of life following a pandemic, and the return of need for rising discipleship and strengthening of the church—work in many ways delayed or suspended by the pandemic.

More than ever, we need to spend less time looking back and making our goal to restore what was before, than to looking ahead and making our goal building a life for a new day and time, and addressing needs we knew we had even before the pandemic. Like it or not, we are on a rising tide, demanding our energy and attention, now. This is our time to be aware and take advantage of all the opportunities and challenges it creates.

Today's text is commonly read during Eastertide—the history of the early church. There is much to commend it. In fact, this text alone could be a series in itself. My prayerful reflections about this text and sermon were already well in the works, when the Women's Wednesday Bible Study gathered this week. You may remember that we are studying the letters of Paul. We have been most recently focused on his letter to the church at Corinth and his very practical guidance for being the church in the world. As the class has learned, I have little interest in bible study that doesn't eventually come off the page and speak to us today. In our studies, we have repeatedly found that Paul's guidance and challenges are not time-constrained but have a good deal to say to the Church in the world today, which includes us.

The particular text we studied was Paul challenging the Corinthian congregation to distinguish between cultural measures of success and Christian measure of success. So, I asked the class, "In our day and time, what might be cultural measures of success the Church has adopted?"

The responses ranged from: money to numbers of people to the appearance of the building, inside and out, to music programs, and to the social, political or educational status of membership.

Then I asked the logical next question: “What are Christian measures of success we might adopt, return to or strengthen?”

The first response was, “Getting back to basics.” There was a lot of nodding, so I asked folk to unpack what basics were.

The responses began with gratitude to God and recognizing the extraordinary gifts we had received. From there, discussion led to education and a lifelong commitment to learning that didn’t end with confirmation, service to others and prayer. Their responses sounded a lot like the opening verses of our text today:

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God.

There is nothing that says that those sets of values might not overlap, but our faith calls us to prioritize one set over the other. It also calls us to redefine our purpose and understanding for what success is and what it means. Here, we have been struggling with the loss of people—those who have moved away, died or otherwise sought other shores. There is no disagreement about that, no lack of grief or discouragement. There is no disagreement with statements that we need to invite more people to join us. But we need to re-evaluate our end goal.

It is the rare occasion when I can with confidence speak for everyone here. In fact, I can remember no other time. But I do today. No one here—no one ever- anywhere—joined a community of faith because they wanted to sit on a committee or give away their money.

They joined because they found a place of shared values and a relationship with the holy; because they found a welcome; because they found a sense of purpose and service for all that they had—spiritual, physical and economic; because they found a spirit of hope for the world and vision for what it might yet be. They joined because they found a community that devoted itself

...to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God

The possibility, the promise, the hope and the mystery of this story is how it ends:

and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Perhaps frustratingly for us, the text does not provide a roadmap—how to get from the basics of gratitude, study, prayer, the breaking of bread and service—to the good will of all people and the growing of the number of those who were being saved. That is for us to pray about, study, and seek God’s guidance. But it does remind us of a very important thing as we go about those efforts—

These pews should be full; this Table should be crowded, not because we need those people, but because they have found what they need here—much that we have already found—faith, hope, promise, possibility, community and purpose. Let that be our first shift in value—to the glory of God in Christ.