

## **“THE THINGS WE TAKE FOR GRANTED”**

**Acts 2:42-47**

**Immigration Sunday**

**May 7, 2017**

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

### **Life among the Believers**

<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

<sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds<sup>[a]</sup> to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home<sup>[b]</sup> and ate their food with glad and generous<sup>[c]</sup> hearts, <sup>47</sup> 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 was in the hotel, packing our bags. Chris and I were at our last stop on our trip to South Africa and Zimbabwe some years ago. I took frequent breaks during my work to stand underneath the ceiling fan. The air was hot and humid, uncomfortably so. I was looking forward to concluding our time in Africa, for as spectacular the experience among wild creatures and untamed land, I was ready for the comforts of home.

I had been sick for a few days—sick like I had never been sick before in my life. My travel group for a time thought that they would have to leave Chris and me behind in Mozambique to catch up with our

group, if we could, once I was mobile again. I had eaten something at a game reserve and my entire body had violently rebelled against it.

It was bad enough an episode that if I had been home, I probably would have had Chris take me to Urgent Care. He would have been able to then drive to the store just a few blocks away and get any prescriptions written for me and over-the-counter medicines to ease my pain. But in Africa, I was never more aware that I was not at home. There was not a Walgreens or King Soopers or Safeway or Rite Aid anywhere on the continent, and surely no Urgent Care center within striking distance of where we were staying.

I suffered. Another person on the trip had some antibiotics, and she gave me some of that. I rallied somewhat. Our van stopped for restroom facilities the following day at a small souvenir shop in the middle of nowhere and there, in a makeshift cooler, Chris miraculously found some Gatorade for me. It was a Godsend. The impossible became the possible; the Gatorade helped me rehydrate and carry on with our group, still partly doubled over, but now able to "tough it out." We

middle class Americans take for granted our ready and easy access to medical care, medicines, and... Gatorade.

It was our packing day, as I said. We had found a laundry service which meant that a local village woman took our dirty clothes and washed and wrung and dried every one of them by hand. She smoothed out the wrinkles herself and placed heavy objects on the clothes to keep them from curling up again. It took her the better part of two days to wash and dry the laundry from our party of 8 persons and we paid her \$10 American for the whole lot, her asking price plus two dollars' tip. It was a king's ransom to her.

As I carefully folded our socks, underwear, shorts, and T shirts into my luggage, I didn't think much about the washer woman washing my clothes by hand. I thought about how, once home in Colorado, I would immediately run everything I had through our washing machine to make sure it was free of unwanted African bugs or things that might be living on or in the fibers of our clothing. We middle class Americans

take for granted our full closets and our washing machines that hold and wash and sanitize our abundant clothes collections.

This particular day, we were set to visit a local artisans' market in Victoria Falls. We were hoping to perhaps pick up one last reminder of our trip. I was looking for a hand-woven tablecloth or an interesting packable piece of wall art for our front room. Chris was, of course, looking for yet another photo opportunity.

Passing by the local casino in our air-conditioned van, we saw dark-skinned, emaciated people huddled all around the outer walls of the building. They obviously were not well. We saw mothers holding babies, young listless children sitting and lying down, adults, and older folks, too. They were not moving around much. Our driver explained that virtually no one goes into the Casino, because nobody around there has spare money with which to gamble.

The casino stays open for the privileged government officials and for the unwary, unaccompanied tourists who are drawn to the lights and sounds inside. Our guide explained further that the people sitting

around the outside were afflicted with AIDS and the cooling vents eases their daily discomfort.

He explained this rather matter-of-factly, for he was a white Afrikaner and he had made it clear during the past three weeks that he had little use for "the blacks." No one spoke a word in the van. We Americans all took for granted our homes, our privileged status, and our whiteness. What was there to say?

We arrived at the market. We no sooner got out of our van than were accosted by the local marketeers, begging us to come to their booth, offering us bottled water and treats, and calling us "Mum" and "Seer." One of the fellows gently grabbed Chris by the arm and exclaimed to his friends, "This one! This one is Big Man with Smile!"

Chris was delighted and went readily to see the man's wares, camera over his shoulder, hoping to get some nice shots in the marketplace. I followed along more warily, determined not to get swindled, mugged, or tricked into something. Always the cautious one.

But what happened next I never could have imagined....

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The leftover remnant of the Jesus movement spends their time after the crucifixion trying to figure out what to do next. They are frightened and they are physically and emotionally beaten down, never expecting that they would lose their Lord and Rabbi so soon and so definitively.

Christ has been taken away: arrested, tortured, and executed. There are rumors that when women went to his tomb to dress his body for burial, they were met by an angel of the Lord. The angel told the women that the tomb was empty. They were informed that Jesus had been resurrected! What a *fantastic* proposition was being told to the new converts, which Luke said totaled in the thousands.

Not only do they hear of resurrection glory and the promise to all of eternal life, they also hear stories that Jesus had appeared *after his death* to some of the apostles and offered them power through a Holy Spirit. He had commissioned them to spread his Word of Love and Eternal Life to all the world, and had given them a secret weapon to use.

Some of the new converts speak of being touched by this Holy Spirit such that they could speak in tongues and could heal people through its power! Think about it for a moment--the stories that are circulating around Jerusalem *must be* intoxicating to a persecuted and depressed people! The thought that God will enter the world again soon to set the faithful free and establish an invincible *kingdom on earth* is very appealing to persons whose very souls are being crushed by their oppressors!

And now, this day, they hear yet a new story, a reported event proving to the novice followers of the Way that Jesus has not abandoned them after all. He has made good on his promise to send them a Helper, an Advocate, a More Powerful One to meet head-on the Roman Empire. The excited crowd experiences the Pentecost, if not directly, then by proxy.

Tongues of fire and loud talking in many tongues, singing and shouting—all of this attracts the Jews and the Gentiles living in Jerusalem to all the cacophony. Some say those participating have been affected by strong wine, but Peter says, “No! Indeed, these

people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning [I love this line]."

At this introduction, Peter launches into a public speech about how the old testament prophecies of Joel and David have been proven in the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. The Jews, upon hearing this, cry out to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

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This question, "Brothers, what should we do?" is the question that puts us all on the threshold of Christian action. When we are at the bottom, the scrape-the-bottom of the bottom of the barrel of our life's bottom, we ask God, "What should we do?"

When we realize that we have been living a selfish life, a soul-less life, a take-it-for-granted life, we fall to our knees and pray to Jesus, "What should we do?" And when we have been turned on to the Gospel good news, when our lives have been reborn in an understanding of our place as a Beloved child of God within the entire framework of God's loving plan for this Creation, we can't sit back on our throne of



privilege and plenty, waiting to be waited on by the adoring angels and servant Universe.

No, when we are lit up on fire for God, we ask the Holy Spirit, "What should we do? What should we do to build the kingdom of heaven on earth for *all* the earth? What should we do to spread your Love and your Justice and your Abundant Compassion throughout the world?"

*That's what we ask when we have been touched by the presence of God breaking into our lives.*

And that's what the new converts to the Jesus Way were asking when they heard and believed the story of the resurrection and the reappearance of Jesus. Baptism was the way in which new members were added to the Beloved Community, the sacrament through which they connect to the whole. Baptism went hand in hand with the rededication of one's life to living it as Jesus taught. Baptism and rededication meant a rejection of the me-first principle. No longer were the converts to take their lives for granted. From now on, they

were to love God with all their hearts, their souls, and their minds, and they were to love and look out for their neighbors as for themselves.

And so, they partied. In our passage today, the newly baptized folks partied. They spent quality time together at the temple and they broke bread together in their homes and ate their food with “glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” They were on a high for God; they felt empowered by the Holy Spirit, empowered by community, and empowered by divine purpose. When they shouted, “Praise God!” they meant it. They took nothing for granted.

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Last week, we considered the story of Prisca, one of the very first women leaders of the early Christian Way. We broke down her story and we both solemnized and celebrated her great sacrifices for the birth of the Jesus movement. She was not able to take her life for granted. She was harassed and threatened by the Romans. She was persecuted and sanctioned by the Pharisees. She was forced from her

home and city, forced to flee to a whole new world a world away, deprived of all her comforts and wealth, possessions and home.

Yet, she persevered and she thrived in the light and love of God, in mission-fire on behalf of Jesus, and with the power of the Holy Spirit. When she cried out, "Amen! Alleluia!" she meant it. She took nothing for granted.

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In Zimbabwe, in the marketplace, desperately poor people were selling their wares to a van-full of American tourists that day. While Chris was engaging in lively conversation away from me, I was led by a man to an area where beautiful sculptures were displayed. I looked at all of them, but I had no room in my luggage for such an item and I had no interest in spending money for anything that large and expensive. I started to walk away and the man panicked.

It was not a ploy on my part; I was a bit nervous and I wanted to rejoin Chris across the yard. The man spoke no English, but he was insistent that I look at his artwork. He called another fellow over and said something to him in his native language.

Then the friend said to me, quietly, "your socks, Mum. He wants your socks. Your choice of his art for your socks."

"These socks? The socks I am wearing? You must be kidding." He was not. He literally traded me the dirty socks on my feet for this piece of art work.

My God. My socks for this artwork, this 40 lb., beautiful sculpt.

The next day, all of us on the trip got dressed, got in the van, went back to the market, and gave the people there all our socks and underwear, spare shirts, toiletries, medicines-- everything we had. And it was not enough.

On Immigration Sunday, perhaps we can take a moment in thanksgiving prayer for what we have, for what our ancestors in faith and in history gave up so that we could make a better life, and for those who struggle today to realize their same dream. Rather than taking our lives and our privileges and our wealth for granted, we might instead turn to Jesus and ask, "Brother, what should we do?"

*May It Be So.*