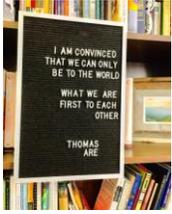


Your End of the Boat Is Sinking; My Gospel and the Church  
Acts 2:42,44-47; 4:32-35



“I am convinced  
that we can only be to the world  
what we are first to each other.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you know the Greek word for church?

It is *ecclesia*.

Can you imagine all of us  
trying to ask people  
to come to our *ecclesia*?

Even after studying biblical Greek,  
it is hard for me to say.

Join us for worship at First Presbyterian Ecclesia.

‘*Church*’ is what we call it these days,  
at least around here.

I know if you go a little further down south  
they call it *la iglesia*

—but they also call it that on Springs Road.  
Go north towards Bethlehem on 127  
they call it a Temple.

Just a few miles up hwy 40  
on Bethel St. in Morganton,  
they call it a mosque.

I love the that the mosque  
is on Bethel St.,  
‘cause ‘*Beth-el*’ is a Hebrew word  
that means house of God.

I’m not trying  
to make a political point here.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas L. Are, *My Gospel of Stewardship* Lay Renewal Publications, Tucker, GA 1977

What I'm trying to say  
is that God's people  
in all kinds of varieties and ways  
like to be together.

God's people need to come together.  
Maybe once a week,  
maybe more, maybe less.  
But being together,  
it's important,  
we're a testimony to that.

So for most of us,  
being together means **church**.  
Frederick Buechner says,  
*"the visible church*  
is all the people who get together  
from time to time in God's name;  
and *the invisible church*  
is all the people God uses  
for his hands and feet in this world."<sup>2</sup>

Which one do you suppose we are?  
I hope our answer is a little bit of both.

Last week when we talked about Stewardship,  
I mentioned that Paul uses the phrase,  
*My Gospel*, which describes,  
not his possession of the good news,  
but how the good news possess him.



Paul's gospel was so central  
and so life changing

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* HarperSanFrancisco 1993

that he traveled all over Asia Minor  
and the Near East  
telling people about the gospel,  
his gospel.

He gathered folks in and started groups,  
house churches, fellowships.  
There was something crucial  
to the message he shared  
and the way it shaped  
what became a new community  
within the community.

Obviously these home groups  
and gatherings became  
what is a world wide movement  
of being together in God's name.  
And our being together  
continues to shape  
not only our churchy community,  
but the community around us.



Let's go back to this quote from earlier,  
"I am convinced that we can only be to the world  
what we are first to each other,"  
Rev. Dr. Thomas Are says  
in his chapter on his gospel of stewardship  
and the church.

It is in this gathered church  
that we keep telling the story of  
God's unconditional love.<sup>3</sup>  
Because that message of love is so different

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas L. Are, My Gospel of Stewardship Lay Renewal Publications, Tucker, GA 1977

than all the other messages of love  
we can think of,  
it becomes paramount for the church  
to model this in a way that is both visible  
and invisible,  
wouldn't you agree?

As the church,  
we have certain responsibilities  
to each other and to the world.  
Are's quote about being to each other  
what we hope to be in the world  
starts first of all with stewardship  
—taking care of each other and the world.

We all know  
that in order to be seen  
as a loving person,  
you must first be a loving person  
to the people that are closest to you.  
If you want teach your children  
kindness,  
then you must first model  
kindness.  
Understanding that we first must learn  
within our own walls and our own lives  
how to love and care for each other,  
has every implication  
for our lives as Christians  
outside of these walls.

If we come to this place  
and hear the story  
of God's unconditional love  
we are called to go out from here  
and live our gospel,  
the gospel we tell inside.  
Everything we do inside these walls  
needs to match what we do outside these walls

and everything we do outside  
needs to match the inside.

Clearly we don't immediately  
make the jump  
to this affecting our stewardship.  
But our taking care of each other,  
taking care of others around us  
is at the very core  
of what the church  
is called to be.



Think back to early days of church  
or temple or those old tent meetings  
under a brush arbor;  
what were they all about?

Offering a gospel  
that could transform the life  
of every sinner and saint  
who might listen.

But in order preach and teach transformation,  
the church had to model  
what a transformed life was.  
Early on, Christian transformation  
directly affected stewardship;  
this is how Acts  
describes the earliest days of church:

“They devoted themselves  
to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship,  
to the breaking of bread and the prayers  
...all who believed were together  
and had all things in common;  
they would sell their possessions and goods

and distribute the proceeds  
to all as  
any had need.

Day 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,  
praising God  
and having the goodwill  
of all the people.” (Acts 2:42, 44-47)

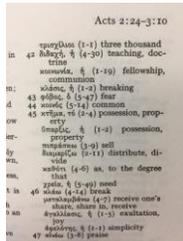


That, quite frankly  
puts my stewardship to shame;  
“They would sell  
all their possessions and goods  
and distribute the proceeds  
to all as any had need.”

I can't tell you  
how many places I have looked,  
how deeply I have dug,  
to figure out what those verses  
actually mean.  
Commentaries, articles, microfiche—  
just kidding about the microfiche,  
it is the one thing we haven't held onto  
here at the church, (that and overhead projectors).

But I even went so far as to  
look up in my Greek New Testament dictionary

the words for *sell*, *possessions*, and *all*—  
because those are the English words  
that are tripping me up  
in these verses.



And do you know,  
that they are the same words in English  
and in Greek?

There is no translation error.  
What the what.



Sold all their possessions  
and then put it all in one pot  
for anyone that needed it.  
That idea of a common purse  
to draw funds as needed  
isn't as odd as it might sound.  
You'll remember that Jesus and the disciples  
had a common purse,  
because the gospel of John  
claims that poor Judas  
used to steal money out of it. (John 12:6)

So, the early church  
followed the model  
of Jesus and the disciples.  
Which means what it sounds like to me,  
and you all correct me  
if you think I'm way off course,  
it sounds like what Acts is telling us,  
*is that they sold all of their possessions  
and from that distributed  
the profit to anyone who needed it.*

Now I will say that it doesn't always mean  
they sold their houses  
because they met in their houses  
to have fellowship,  
break bread and pray.

Many of them sold land,  
land that had been in the family  
for generations.  
They paired down their lives to be more simple  
so that others might simply live.  
They sold their excess  
and open up their lives  
to each other.

By bringing their resources together  
they started living as though they were  
the Walton's.  
They lived together under one roof,  
worshiped together  
—they took turns emptying the dishwasher together;  
they **acted like** and **lived like**  
—they were a family.

Can you imagine some of us  
living together, with each other?

Ha.

That's what I thought.  
I will say that Tripp and I  
have no problems moving in with you

if you have a pool—  
watch out White/McKinney family.

This new family of believers,  
starts living in a way  
that is counter to the culture.  
They began to live in a way  
where you took care of each other  
and loved each other  
even when you weren't related  
to each other.

In fact this meant there was a mix social classes  
and social statuses  
and that just wasn't done.  
Your new family of believers  
might have bosses and slaves,  
different races  
and ethnicities.  
My guess is that the earliest church groups  
were anything but homogenous.

And in these new family communities  
within communities,  
you held each other in mutual care  
and affection;  
even when you voted  
for the other candidate;  
even if you didn't have health care.  
If you were both committed  
to living your life in Christ,  
then you were family.  
And this family was called,  
ecclesia...church.

Frankly this is still a new way to live;  
it is still counter cultural  
—living in a way that says  
what is central to our life  
is that we live together

as though we are one big family  
who takes care of each other  
and the world around us.  
And that does sound like stewardship.

What if the church today  
looked at stewardship  
like it did then?

What if we were giving from our excess  
and collecting for the common purse here,  
so that when there is a need,  
we are able to meet it?

What if we were bringing  
our resources together  
for each other and others?

When folks in wheel chairs  
can't get in the building easily,  
we pull from the common purse  
to build a better ramps  
and better parking lot access.

When our preschool children  
need more room to run around  
when they play dinosaur tag,  
we pull from the common purse  
and build a better playground.

When our neighbors in  
Houston  
are homeless because the their  
homes  
have been flooded,  
well we pull from the common purse  
and we send buckets and buckets  
and a truck load of water and diapers  
and stuff they'll need.



Stewardship is pulling  
from the common purse of our resources  
to live like we are a family;  
a family that well quite frankly,  
extends to the ends of the earth.

N.T. Wright says, “The challenge remains  
for every generation in the church,  
especially now that Jesus’ followers  
number several million  
all around the world.

Many Christians and agencies  
give themselves tirelessly  
to the work of making this practical sharing of resources  
a reality in all the complexities  
of our contemporary world.

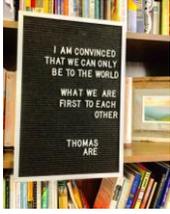
When Jesus’ followers behave like this,  
they sometimes find,  
to their surprise,  
that they have a new spring in their step.

There is an attractiveness,  
an energy about a life  
in which we stop clinging  
on to everything we can get  
and start sharing it, giving it away,  
celebrating God’s generosity  
by being generous ourselves.

And that attractiveness  
is one of the things that draws  
other people in.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> NT Wright, Acts for Everyone (Part 1), Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville KY 2008



“I am convinced  
that we can only be to the world  
what we are first to each other.”<sup>5</sup>

If we are going to accept the challenge  
that Acts presents to us  
to care for each other  
and to care for the world  
we will have to be the church  
that practices the kind of love we preach.

And we will be called to do this first  
to each other and then  
to the world.

And our hope is that by living  
like a family the walls we normally  
would put up out there,  
get broken down and dismantled  
in here.

Our stewardship  
of living from a common purse  
where the excess we have  
becomes a way to profit our brother and sister,  
that is a stewardship gospel of true church.

It becomes a way of seeing,  
as we sang, we are here,  
for all of us.

It combines the visible gathering of church,  
the temple, the mosque,  
it combines the visible gather of God’s people  
with the sometimes invisible

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas L. Are, My Gospel of Stewardship Lay Renewal Publications, Tucker, GA 1977

and on-going work  
of God's people in the world.

This gospel of stewardship and church  
understands that to hoard  
what we have  
and not be good stewards of our resources  
is about as churchy  
as saying to our brothers or sisters in need,  
“um, excuse me,  
your end of the boat is sinking.”

<sup>32</sup>Now the whole group of those who believed  
were of one heart and soul,  
and no one claimed  
private ownership of any possessions,  
but everything they owned  
was held in common.

<sup>33</sup>With great power  
the apostles gave their testimony  
to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,  
and great grace was upon them all.

<sup>34</sup>There was not a needy person among them,  
for as many as owned lands or houses sold them  
and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

<sup>35</sup>They laid it at the apostles' feet,  
and it was distributed to each  
as any had need.”

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Amen.