

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Fourth Sunday of Easter- April 30, 2023

Scripture lesson: Acts 2:42-47

TURNED LOOSE

Every year in the Easter season our church's lectionary at some point- as for instance today- leaps past the gospel stories of Jesus' Easter time on earth. It jumps ahead to the book of Acts, urging us to hear again about the early church that's born after Jesus ascends and pours out the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The lectionary can't seem to wait until the Pentecost season arrives to give us those stories. I suppose it's because they're frequently so amazing.

But we've heard them for a couple thousand years now, so we easily grow dull to just how remarkable many of those first church communities were. My aim today in this sermon time is to help us sharpen again our sense of those beginnings and to be inspired anew by them.

In Acts, chapter 1, the last thing that Jesus does before he ascends into heaven is gather his disciples to give them his final earthly instructions. He says, "Here's my plan. I'm turning you loose. You've all seen what I do and heard what I teach. I'm leaving now, but the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. I'm turning you *loose*."

How does this strategy work out? Today's lectionary Scripture from Acts gives us a glimpse into the initial results. Just before this, the Spirit has come on the day of Pentecost and thousands of people in Jerusalem have embraced Peter's message about Jesus. Hear again then what Acts chapter 2, verses 42-47 says this about this first Christian community:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 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."

Notice once more that last line- they had "the goodwill of all the people." Why was that so? Why did so many people like what they saw in the early Christian church? To understand that, it helps to know more about what life generally was like in the Roman Empire when the church first took root and grew.

Imperial Rome had enormous class divisions. At the top, making up perhaps one percent of the population were the *honestiores*, the "noble ones". They included the Emperor and his family at the tip top, followed by the Senators, the Equestrians, and the Decurions.

Together, these groups controlled the vast majority of Rome's wealth and power. They relied on the labor of their slaves who numbered roughly twenty million, or about one-third of the entire population. The rest of the populace, usually referred to as plebeians, worked hard to scrape by as farmers, bakers, builders, craft workers, and in other assorted occupations. They were the largest group, so that "the noble ones" took pains, especially in rough economic times, to make sure that the plebeians didn't starve or become too restless, lest they turn into

an unruly mob of rebellious commoners. The “bread and circuses” that were famously provided by Caesar Augustus were designed for exactly that purpose.

Rome’s class divisions received daily reinforcement in numerous ways- for instance, through clothing. Slaves were not allowed to wear togas. They could only wear tunics. Plebeians were allowed to wear togas, but with no stripes on them. The *honestiores* were the only ones who could wear stripes which signified that they were of the upper crust.

Food distribution at the public festivals, of which there were many, also reinforced class distinctions. The Equestrians were always served first followed by the Decurions. Both groups always received the best food with the fare of lesser quality then being given to the plebeians. If anything was left after they had finished, it was given to the slaves.

Given all of this, you can see how difficult it would be to ever forget where you stood on the Roman social ladder. The empire had multiple ways of reminding you, repeatedly.

But then came this new community that proclaimed, “Jesus is Lord.” The early church said, “Jesus is Lord, but *not* one who lords it over people like the Roman nobles do. He came “*not* to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for all” (Mark 10:45).

So, try to picture this. You’re a slave. You go into a house where the church has gathered. An Equestrian, who now is committed to the way of Jesus, comes to you, kneels, and begins to serve you. You can’t help it. You start to cry.

You weep because you’re a slave who’s never been served in your whole life. But now here’s an Equestrian who’s serving you the best food! You look into his eyes and he’s crying, too. He’s weeping because he’s never experienced such an extraordinary bond of mutual humanity. Jesus has turned his people loose and this is what happened.

In the ancient world, was it better to be born a boy or a girl? Historian Robin Lane Fox writes: “Exposure of unwanted female infants (i.e., abandoning them outdoors until they died) was legal, morally accepted, and widely practiced by all social classes in the Greco-Roman world.”

Historian Naphtali Lewis reports this specific letter from the days of the empire written by a Roman husband to his pregnant wife: “Know that I am still in Alexandria. I beg you to take good care of our baby son. If you are delivered of another child before I come home- if it’s a boy, keep it. If it’s a girl, discard it. You have sent me word, ‘Don’t forget me.’ Buy how could I forget you? I beg you not to worry.”

This man cares for his wife. He tells her, “How could I forget you?” I beg you not to worry.” At the same time, he also says, “If you give birth to a girl, throw her away.”

But there is this new community that proclaims, “Jesus is Lord.” It says that “Jesus, our Lord, taught women when other rabbis would not. He included women in his beloved community. He took his people’s greatest commandment fully to heart: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself,’ (Mark 12:29-30). Our Lord included *everyone* as our neighbor.”

All of which meant that in the early church, baby girls were welcomed and cared for with the same devotion as baby boys. Jesus turned his people loose and this is what happened.

Under Caesar Augustus, widows were forced to re-marry. If they didn’t, they had to pay a fine for outliving their husbands. As widows, they were considered nothing more than a drag on the imperial economy. But in Jesus’ new community, care for widows became one of the hallmarks of genuine Christian faith and practice. The welfare of women was considered just as important as the welfare of men.

St. Paul explained why in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11. There, he says, "(I)n the Lord, woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; (and) all things come from God" (verses 11-12). In his book, *The Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, contemporary scholar, Thomas Cahill, says that those words of St. Paul are the very first in all of world literature to state explicitly that women are of equal worth to men. Jesus turned his people loose and that is what happened.

One more example: twice in early church history- once around 65 A.D. and the other around 251 A.D- the Roman Empire was hammered by massive epidemics. Historians believe that these may have been of smallpox, but, in any case, they wiped out between a quarter and a third of the entire urban population.

Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria during the second epidemic, reported that it aroused so much fear among the people that, "At the first onset of the disease, they pushed sufferers away and fled even from their dearest ones, throwing them into the roads before they were dead, and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease."

But again, there was this new community that proclaimed "Jesus is Lord". Again they were different. Jesus had openly cared for the sick. He had touched lepers when no one else would. He had healed people even though he often got into trouble for it. Faithfully following him, members of the early church therefore took in and cared for those who were sick and dying from the epidemics, even at the cost of their own lives.

Historians suggest that the heroic response of the church to those massive health disasters played a decisive role in spreading the Christian way throughout the empire. Jesus turned his people loose and that is what happened.

His strategy for us now, the people of First Congregational United Church of Christ and for every Christian church, remains the same. He turns us loose, as Psalm 23 says, "in paths of righteousness for his name's sake". Cut loose in righteousness, we, like the early Christians, become good news for everyone- for women and men, for little girls and little boys, for black, brown, white, yellow, or red folk from anywhere, for the religious and the irreligious, the political and the nonpolitical, the straight and the queer, for atheists, agnostics, pagans, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, liberals, moderates, conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, Independents- it does not matter. Turned loose by Jesus in paths of righteousness, we become good news for all of God's children, for all those whom God loves.

And yet, I have to admit that in our time it seems like that word "righteousness" has lost much of its luster. Rarely, if ever, does a person come up to another now and say, "You're so righteous" and mean it as a compliment. We hear "righteous" now and instead are inclined to think "*self-righteous*" or "holier than thou".

But that is *not* what the Bible means by it. Preacher Tim Keller is right on the mark when he says that for Christians the "righteous" that the Bible speaks of are those people who "willingly disadvantage themselves to serve the advantage of the whole community." Our model for this, of course, as for the early church, is Jesus. Again, in the words of St. Paul, "(Jesus) though he was rich, yet for (our) sakes . . . became poor so that (we) through his poverty might become rich" (II Corinthians 8:9).

Jesus gave us his own unforgettable images of this call to righteousness. In his Sermon on the Mount, he said to his followers, "You are the salt of the earth . . . (and) the light of the world. A

city built on a hill cannot be hid . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13, 14, & 16).

The early church did that, and so can we. Letting the light of Christ shine in and through us, we can be those about whom others say, “You know, we might not believe like they do, and we may not share the same faith that they have, but we shudder to think what things would be like if they weren’t with us. They provide so much loving kindness, generosity, encouragement, patience, and forgiveness to everyone, including their enemies. We would be so much *worse* off with-out them.” That’s the kind of “righteous” Jesus turns us loose to be.

About a hundred years ago, an old revival preacher named Billy Sunday gained a large following. You’ve probably heard of him. He used to say that the best thing that could happen to you was to go to one of his revivals, get saved, walk out into the street, get run over by a Mack truck, and go straight to heaven.

But Brother Billy had lost track of what Jesus truly turns us loose to be. As his followers, we don’t sign up for a “Get Saved and Die Quick” plan. We are not those who want to escape or get “raptured” out of this world while everyone and everything else goes to hell in a hand basket.

No, we’re turned loose to be like the best of our early church ancestors. With them, we’re called to be light to the world and salt for the earth. With them, we’re turned loose in every minute that God gives us in this life to live faithful to the prayer that Jesus has taught us and to the mission that binds us as the people of this congregation. We’re turned loose to change the world to God’s glory by living the teachings of Jesus our Christ. We’re turned loose to strive in everything that we are and that we do to welcome God’s reign of love upon this earth as it is in heaven. Amen!