

What We Learn From The Pagans Acts 2:42-47 Saint Marks UMC, Charleston WV.
4th SUNDAY OF EASTER/Mother's Day/ *Festival of the Christian Home* (May 4) 2014

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

According to published research of the opinions of young adults not in the pews – not just apathetic people, but people who strongly DISLIKE the church -- the regular people of the American Church Culture are perceived by them as being HYPOCRITICAL, JUDGMENTAL, RIGID, and UNLOVING. (*unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*, by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons)

Please hear me carefully. I DID NOT say that the folks of Saint Marks ARE HYPOCRITICAL, JUDGMENTAL, RIGID, and UNLOVING.

But we cannot be content to pat ourselves on the back and say Saint Marks is the downtown church that feels like home; that Saint Marks is a church where ALL God's children are recognized as beloved of God and precious and beautiful to behold.

The research is clear about how the followers of Jesus are today perceived by the folks, particularly the young ones, outside our fellowship. Many people won't even give the folks of Saint Marks a chance, because they assume that they fit into this stereotypical view of the Christian Church.

Compare this view of *unChristians* today with how historian Tertullian described ***what the pagans said about the early Christian church*** back in the second century. This is the view that non-Christians had of the new (then perceived) "Jewish sect" more than 100 years before Charlamagne made Christianity THE religion of the Roman Empire.

They saw how they acted – like today's scripture lesson described it – **giving from their abundance, and distributing according to people's needs** – and they said: **WOW! LOOK HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER!**

You know, I had that scripture fresh in my mind, when last week I was preparing for Mary Basham's funeral.

In Mary's written record of how the family worked, and how so many members of the extended family would come to the Basham boarding house and make themselves at home when they needed food, or a place to live, she put it this way: (and please look at the historical account from Acts while you listen to this historical account from an early 20th century Charleston family)

“[T]here was never a thought of ‘I’m giving this’ and ‘he’s giving that.’ We were a unit pulling together, trying to survive, but there wasn’t even any thought of that. We were just living our lives. ...”

Do you catch the comparison: **HOW MUCH THEY LOVED ONE ANOTHER.**

I've been thinking that *in some ways* – certainly not in *all* ways – the Church would indeed do better to be a less concerned with **doctrinal purity** and **moralistic uniformity** and more focused on **acting like FAMILY.**

I suppose that on this Sunday ... Mother's Day ... of recent vintage called "Festival of the Christian Home" ... it's culturally popular to think in these terms. But after today is gone, and we slip back into the routines of everyday, I think there is then as well great wisdom in being a less concerned about **doctrinal purity** and **moralistic uniformity** and more focused on **acting like FAMILY.**

One of the notions of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that rarely gets discussed (and one of the very welcome qualities of the book *The Shack*) is the notion that the TRINITY teaches us that God's very nature is communal, is like a family: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live together in harmony. And, as humans made in God's image, that's how God intends us to be, as well.

God prefers a **group of sinners living together lovingly and compassionately** to a **singular person living alone and dwelling on how much better s/he is that all those other sinners.**

The poet Robert Frost once wrote a story in verse – 175 lines long (it will take about 5 minutes to read it aloud) – entitled *The Death of the Hired Man*. If you've not read it, it would do you well to do so. It begins like this:

**Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
 Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
 She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
 To meet him in the doorway with the news
 And put him on his guard. 'Silas is back.'
 She pushed him outward with her through the door
 And shut it after her. 'Be kind,' she said.
 She took the market things from Warren's arms
 And set them on the porch, then drew him down
 To sit beside her on the wooden steps.**

**'When was I ever anything but kind to him?
 But I'll not have the fellow back,' he said.
 'I told him so last haying, didn't I?
 If he left then, I said, that ended it. ...**

The next 163 lines are mostly the discussion between Mary and Warren about what to do with Silas, how he'd been in the past, and why he won't go to the home of his "bank director brother." Mary told Warren that Silas had come home to die. Warren said that their home is not Silas' home. And then Mary replies with the line for which this poem is probably most famous:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

Finally, Warren arises from their discussion on the steps to go see Silas. Two lines finish the poem:

***"Warren?" She questioned.
 "Dead' was all he answered."***

And I heard Mary Basham's voice say:

“[T]here was never a thought of ‘I’m giving this’ and ‘he’s giving that.’ We were a unit pulling together, trying to survive, but there wasn’t even any thought of that. We were just living our lives. ...”

And I heard Tertullian’s pen scratch across the paper:

The pagans observe: “See how they love one another.”

And I heard the scripture lesson say:

⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

The past two Sundays of Easter, we have focused on VISION – how Christians see the world differently ... how they see Jesus ... how they see Jesus in others.

Today ... today, we see the proof within the pudding. When Christians are ... “known by their love,” the VISION OF THEM SEEN BY THOSE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH is something special, and ... (in the words of the scripture today):

“they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ 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.

A Downtown Church that Feels Like Home NOT ONLY ***“is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in;”*** it is also the kind of place that **makes folks on the outside know it**. That kind of Church gives the folks on the outside a **NEW VISION** of what the Body of Christ really is. That kind of Church **dispels the commonly SEEN VISION** that the Church today is **HYPOCRITICAL, JUDGMENTAL, RIGID, and UNLOVING.**

My sisters and brothers, we must:

- **Walk the walk, not just talk the talk**
- [we must] **Openly show, and encourage people to see, how much we love one another. (Talk about THAT at your job place, and in your social gatherings, not about how you disagree with someone in the Church. Don't make unloving expressions about someone who sees life differently than you do. People ARE listening. Every time you talk that way, you DISHONOR CHRIST! THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK.)**
- [we must] **Not allow our disagreements make us disagreeable. Christians really can be unified without unanimous in opinion, when we love one another ... just like families can do it**
- **For the love of Christ, we must change the VISION that causes so many people to HATE the Church, and want nothing to do with the Church, i.e. HYPOCRITICAL, JUDGMENTAL, RIGID, and UNLOVING. We are a bunch of sinners, TOO. We just know that God loves us anyway.**
- **Like the early Church ... we can ONLY do this intentionally ... by devoting ourselves to the Apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to breaking bread together, and to prayer.**
- **We must be known by our LOVE. Just like our first hymn said.**

Let the pagans see, and tell, the truth about us: **“See how they love one another.”** In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.