

A New Community: “Glad And Generous Hearts”

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.” (Acts 2:46 ESV).

“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Romans 15:5-7 ESV)

DAY BY DAY

“Day by Day.” Any married couple can tell you this lesson learned the hard way: there is no substitute for quality time together. And while quantity does not equal quality, increasing the quantity provides more opportunity for the quality. And so their prayers together, fellowship together, life together...was daily. They were just following their Master. Luke takes special note of this.¹

Because in his gospel account, Jesus taught daily in the Temple (Lk 19:47; 22:53). He taught us to pray for our daily bread (Lk 11:3) [or, as some manuscripts read, to pray for our bread daily]. He told us that discipleship would be a constant sacrifice, so we should take up our cross daily (Lk 9:23). It’s no wonder, then, that in Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts, the church fed the poor daily (Acts 6:1), and the number of believers grew daily (Acts 2:47; 16:5). In fact, in a world that clamors for our attention, it is good and right to make the case for our gatherings every week. But the early Christian pattern may have been even more frequent: I mean, how can you keep newlyweds apart? When the writer of Hebrews says not to forsake assembling together, he then says we should do it “all the more” or “more frequently” (Heb 10:25). How

¹ See Craig Keener, *Acts: A Commentary*, Vol 1.

frequently should we be in each other's lives? Well, listen to Hebrews 3:13: "Exhort one another EVERY day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." After all, these early Christians were getting together day by day—in the Temple courts and from house to house. Before the end of the first century, a letter began circulating among the churches known as the *Didache*, or "the teachings of the 12 Apostles." It's not a Bible letter. But it may be even earlier than some Bible books. And listen to this line from that work:

My child...you shall seek out day by day the faces of the saints, in order that you may rest upon their words. You shall not long for division but shall bring those who contend to peace.²

It's the second generation that you have to cajole into getting together. It's those in their decades of living together that need to be reminded of the value of quality time. Do you know who doesn't need that lesson? The newly-weds.

NEWLY WEDS³

Do you remember your honeymoon? Starry-eyed, you can see no wrong. And, can do no wrong. Always "on," we are the best version of ourselves. We see a need and take care of it long before even asked. If they do something that can be interpreted several ways, you see it in only the best possible light. If one messes up, the other is quick—I mean quick to forgive. If one means well, but missteps, the other sees nothing but the good intention: nothing more, nothing less. What causes this total transformation? What fuels this level of selfless surrender? It's called love. A passion deeper than what we think or what we want. This love is all-consuming and it changes us from the inside out. Because I am not just me, and you are not just you; now, together, we are part of a brand new thing so grand that the whole world is born anew. We know, when we say "I Do," that the way may be rough; but for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, we choose to walk the way together. And all the things that are understood around the world as essential ingredients in any success story—wealth, fame, power—do not hold a candle to our love.

"And even though we ain't got money," we sing, "I'm so in love with you honey."

And our being together changes both of us. Maybe you've heard it said that there is no greater influence in your life, no determining factor of who you will be or what you will

² *Didache* 4.2. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm>

³ I am indebted to Alison L. Boden, "Glad and Generous Hearts," Princeton University Chapel (May 7, 2017). <https://chapel.princeton.edu/news/glad-and-generous-hearts>

become, than the 5 closest people in your life. It's why you choose your friends wisely; it's why you choose your spouse so carefully. Attitudes are contagious. How often have we discovered that, for good or ill, we are empowered to develop our love or deepen our hate depending on the company we keep?

It is not a coincidence that Bible writers from Solomon to Paul compare what it means to be the community of God to what it's like to be in a healthy marriage. For the community to which we belong changes us. And in Acts 2, this community is brand new, and in the honeymoon phase. They call it "The Way," and this community walks the way together arm-in-arm. What's mine is yours, what's yours is mine. Staring into one another's eyes, they learn the meaning of faithfulness. They encourage each other; they give to each other; they teach one another, they empower one another. They challenge each other, and they love one another. And they do this together. Their focus is a singular focus. Oh, they could seek to be admired, or to feel comfortable. But they are on fire with a spirit of love that is far more interested in the other.

Have you ever noticed that it is very hard to hate someone who is praying with you? You should try that sometime. When you find yourself in a bitter argument, stop and say, "can I pray for God to work on my heart, and would you pray for that as well?" Notice that this community devoted themselves to pray together. To study together. To eat with each other and to fellowship together. It bonds people. It leads to love that covers a multitude of sins.

GLAD AND GENEROUS HEARTS

So it should come as no surprise that the next thing they do is that they give to one another. Spontaneously, following the example of their Lord who gave all, they renounced any ownership, saw only stewardship, and laid all their stuff, all their things on the ground, then they agreed together on how best to hand it out to the most needy among them. I've had days in my life when I gave a significant amount away. When you have a job that involves asking people to empty their pockets for a good cause, it's kind of important that they see me empty my pockets for the same cause. I'm sure you've had moments in your life when you emptied your hands, sometimes in great amounts. Maybe a child of yours was in dire straits. Maybe a Kiwanis club meeting you attended was just shy of a goal, and because of your status in the community, every eye turned and pointed at you, and out of a sense of obligation, you got them over the hump.

Giving is good; its valuable; its helpful. But its not always easy, or fun. But this group—this little band of Christians—they laid everything they had down on the ground and then chose to give it all away—and they did all of this "with glad and generous hearts." Does your Bible says that, too?

The word here translated “Glad” in my Bible can also be rendered “joyful” (AMP, CSB, CJB, ERV, GW, HCSB, ICB). Some versions try to bring out the sense of how it makes us feel by translating it as “happy” (CEV, NLV) or even “exuberant” (MSG). Oh yes, their hearts were happy. But the word glad is even deeper than that.⁴ It’s the word used throughout the Psalms to describe celebrating the fact that the Lord of Glory—the maker of the Universe—calls us His children. That he fights our battles for us. That his glory was so bright it was still shining off the face of Moses as he gave us a covenant—just between us and Almighty God! And so, as they headed up to the Temple, they would speak of the joy of the Lord that is their strength, for I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord. Whatever comes to your mind and heart when you think about standing in the presence of the Lord—that awe, that overwhelming feeling of security and thankfulness, that smile from ear to ear, that’s the word in the Psalms (see Ps 9:2; 19:5; 40:16; 45:7; 80:1; 83:1; 99:2; 117:15). We see it right here in Acts 2, as Peter is preaching his Pentecost sermon. He draws from the rich well of David’s psalms to speak of the promise of new life. “For David says: I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced, for my flesh will dwell in hope...You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence” (Acts 2:25-28).

Glad hearts, set on fire by the promise of life by the Covenant-making King who called us to be his children forever. Glad hearts.

And then we have this other word. The ESV says “generous hearts.” That’s a good guess. You see, the word Luke uses only appears one time in the entire Bible (New Testament or Old). Some versions say “simplicity of heart” such as a “humble attitude” (HCSB). Simple might capture the idea better.⁵ When a newly wed looks into her lover’s eyes, she is looking at an audience of one. Throughout the New Testament, God pleads with his people not to be double-minded, pulled in two directions and never focused on the One whom our souls love. God challenges us to avoid any grudging envy, wishing we had something or someone else. No—we are called to one, sole, singular focus. So how can simplicity or singularity also be translated “generous”? Oh, remember that newlywed couple. Singular focus breeds generosity. Love compels giving, without a momentary thought of what I get out of the deal. So its tied to joy. We see this worked out in giving passages in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 8:2, Paul says, “in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” Our Father sees us—us—as

⁴ See Craig Keener, *Acts: A Commentary*, Vol 1.

⁵ BDAG 155: “simplicity.”

his children. And treats each of us as if we were his only one. So James says “if anyone needs wisdom, they should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score” (James 1:5 CEB).

And when you put these two words together—glad and simple, joyful and generous—you get an idea spoken about throughout the New Testament. A people who “happily and freely” (CEV) do everything with each other and for each other “with simple joy” (Phillips), because they are one. Listen to Luke describe the early church: “All devoted themselves single-mindedly to prayer” (Acts 1:14 CJB). “They raised their voices to God with singleness of heart” (Acts 4:24 CJB). The believers were “united in mind and purpose” (Acts 5:12 CJB). “I wish to hear of you,” says Paul, writing from prison, “that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27). Like a newlywed couple, it means to have one mind, and one heart: the heart of Jesus Christ.

The Ancient Roman orators said that true friendship, ideal families, and even well-run cities have one thing in common: unity of mind and purpose. In fact, if two rival cities, at war with each other, are moved to unite in peace and decide to reconcile, each city would share the prosperity of the other.⁶ Do you see how singular focus, and joyful hearts, lead to spontaneous and lavish generosity?

ATTRACTIVE LIVES

And their generosity wasn’t just in what they gave away; it extended to how they saw the world. Many of you know that one of my favorite preachers—a once-in-a-generation-talent—was Tim Keller, who planted a church in the heart of the Wall Street district in New York City. Beginning with a group that could sit comfortably in his living room, the church grew to welcoming over 5,000 people a week to their services. His books were best sellers. Remarkably, even as a firm believer in the truthfulness of the Bible and in the life-giving power of the Spirit, Tim was invited to speak at Ted Talks and Google conferences, sharing with some of the most secular and worldly technology gurus and Wall Street billionaires, reasons to believe in God and commit to Jesus Christ.

Because of pancreatic cancer, Tim died just one month ago. Letters of praise are still pouring in—and can be read everywhere from the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal to personal blogs of 20-somethings who gave their lives to Jesus because of something they heard him say.

⁶ See Craig Keener, *Acts: A Commentary*, Vol 1.

And in this month's edition of *Christianity Today*—one of my favorite magazines—the editor in Chief Russell Moore reflected on what made him different. I was struck by this paragraph:

“Planting a growing, influential church in New York City, Tim never saw New York as a kind of irredeemable Sodom and Gomorrah against which to rail. He could have done that easily, if not in New York itself, then certainly to raise money and get attention across the country. He could have pictured himself as a besieged evangelical Christian with lurid stories about how the decadent culture of New York was coming eventually to your house if you didn't support his efforts to fight it. He never did that—not even in private conversations. It wasn't just that Tim loved New York...It's also that he never saw his fellow New Yorkers—including those most hostile to the Christian gospel—as irredeemable...He remembered what it was like to be an unbeliever pursued by a loving God.”⁷

What makes thousands of people in the heart of New York City cry out each week for Jesus? What could cause people surrounded by everything the world has to offer to seek out a different way, and to think they can find it in church? Our text says that many, many people were attracted to what they saw going on, and they too became committed followers of the Way. Think about that. It's not every day that people just up and join a group that teaches them to be ready at a moment's notice to give everything away! That community must have been something else! The flames of love emanating from that community must have been unquenchable, so other-worldly, that the power of their faith, their devotion, and their vision was contagious.

⁷ Russell Moore, “From the Editor in Chief: The Legacy of Tim Keller,” *Christianity Today* (July/August 2023), pp. 13-14.