

THE UNCOMMON COMMUNITY

A Sermon on Acts 2:42

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Action of the Spirit #2: "The fellowship." "And they were continuing steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and in the fellowship [*kai tee koinoonia*]." (Acts 2:42) What sort of fellowship was this *koinonia*? What is so uncommon about this kind of community that Christians have to continue steadfastly in it, have to keep at it to keep it going? What happens to their *koinonia* when they don't keep after it? What is the treacherous alternative?

The alternative is sectarianism, the sort of sectarianism to which Peter and the other disciples had all their lives been accustomed, until the day of Pentecost, the sort of sectarianism which had divided their people from the Gentiles, from the *goyim*, from the *am ha aaretz*, by means of the dividing wall of the Law. The opposite of *koinonia* is separatism, exclusiveness. Why do people, good people like you and me, exclude one another? Well, partly because we are good, because we are better than one another. I am better in some ways than you are, and in other ways, many other ways, you are better than I am. Where you are superior and I am inferior you hesitate to compromise your own high standards by fraternizing with lesser folks like me. So you protect your advantage by surrounding yourself with people who are your equals and by avoiding others who might degrade you. I likewise, in other areas where I have some superiority of my own to safeguard, isolate myself from you and any others who might undermine my advantages.

Why do we exclude one another, racially and sexually and generationally &

denominationally & intra-synodically? Not just because we are different one from the other. Not just because some of us are Parthians and others are Medes, some are old and others young, some conservatives and others moderates, some Jews and others Gentiles. No, difference is one thing, division is something else. The really divisive thing which takes ordinary natural differences and hardens them into divisions, into rifts and gaps, is superiority-real or imagined. It is the fact of better-than-thou.

And better-than-thou is a fact. It isn't always a fiction; often it is a fact of life. It is the way of the Law, of Torah. It is the *krima tou theou*, the divine criticism, discriminating between good and bad, better and worse. It is the way of the Law to separate sinners from the righteous, heretics and false teachers from orthodox ones, clods from people of good taste, irresponsible people from responsible ones. The Law is what divides the sheep from the goats, those who are fine and good from those who are common and base. The Law sets the righteous apart from the sinners with whom they have so little in common. It is the law which says: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord." (Ps. 1:1,2) Peter called his Pentecost audience "men of Israel." In this respect aren't we all "men of Israel," sons and daughters of the Law, zealous to "keep yourselves unspotted from the world?" However, if that Word of the Law, even though it is a Word from God, is for us the last word, then we are legalists. And socially we are sectarians, separatists, the enemies of *koinonia*. That too, that Word of judgment upon us is also a Word from God, the same Word of the Law.

It is a fact of the Law, certainly it is a fact of life, that there are others whom we are too good to associate with and still others who are too good to associate with us, at least in certain important respects. For instance, with respect to our different life-styles, perhaps they are too intellectual while we, thank God, are practical and down to earth. Consequently, since we don't want to encourage their phony life-style or subject ours to theirs, we avoid them. Or with respect to our different theologies, perhaps they are not as adept at Law-Gospel distinctions as we, thank God, are; or perhaps they are afraid-as we, thank God, are not-of historical-critical exegesis; or the other way around, perhaps we,

thank God, interpret Scripture more literally and strictly than they do. In any case, since they would not understand us anyway, why should our theology (which of course is God's own) be dragged down to their level? So we get along without them or even get rid of them. Or with respect to our moral differences, perhaps they are conceited enough to think they are superior whereas we, thank God, are too humble to think we are superior. So rather than get involved with them in a contest of boasting, rather than jeopardize our superior humility, we keep ourselves aloof from them.

But that sort of aloofness, whether it is lawful or not, destroys *koinonia*. The Law knows that, too, and it says so. The Law of God is not only the great discriminator. It is also the great leveler, the universal equalizer. It reduces everyone, however righteous and superior, to the same abject level of sinners-the lawful as well as the lawless. The Law reveals how all of us, even the most sophisticated and exceptional, are really quite paltry and common. Notice how this critical leveling comes through in the apostolic preaching on Pentecost. "Men of Israel," says Peter, "this Jesus . . . you crucified & killed by the hands of lawless men." (Acts 2:23; see also 3:13) In this crucifixion, in other words, the lawful ones were not above collaborating with the lawless Gentiles of pagan Rome. Suddenly it appeared how much they all had in common, after all.

Into their common world came Jesus, "the holy One of Israel," yet eating with sinners and drinking with them, consorting with those who were off-limits and under the curse, fraternizing with the enemy, walking among the wicked and standing in the way of sinners and sitting in the seat of scoffers. By his words and even more by his actions he was one-upping the very Law of God, the Law of better-than-thou. And for this apparent sacrilege against the lawful God, for his presuming to supersede the very distinction between godliness and ungodliness, this Jesus would now have to be excluded, permanently and terminally--except.... Except for what? Except that this time the exclusion could not be made to stick. This Jesus, precisely because he was the friend of sinners, was vindicated by God Himself, who raised him from the dead and gave him a name above every name. Which is to say, excluding him and his indiscriminate *koinonia* with sinners amounts to excluding God Himself, whose own last Word is not

exclusiveness but *koinonia*. But isn't it the very opposite, that legalistic exclusiveness, which we all quite naturally have in common? We all share a common aversion to the indiscriminate divine mercy. For it frustrates our separatism. That built-in universal separatism exposes how alike we all are under the skin.

No doubt. Still that is not the most important thing we share in common. If I may make a pun with the help of the Book of Acts, the thing we most have in common is not common at all. Since the coming among us of Jesus, our Lord and Christ, nothing is any longer common in the sense of inferior. Even Peter found that surprising. Only a few chapters later, as he reluctantly accepts the assignment to call on the pagan Cornelius, he is met at the door by his host who goes down on his knees before Peter in a gesture of subordination. But Peter has the good sense--that is, he has the Right Spirit--to lift Cornelius back up, and then he explains to the onlookers: "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or visit anyone of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean." (Acts 10:28) So now a Jew could team up with a Roman, an Israelite with a *goy*, not only in collaboration against Christ but in collaboration with Christ. For what they now have in common is not common at all.

What they have in common is the Right Spirit within them, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, that Spirit who, as God had promised beforehand, would be "poured out on all flesh." All flesh! Henceforth there is no longer any "flesh," any *basar*, which is beyond the reach of that purifying, sweetening Spirit. Now all *basar* is eligible to become *kosher* through to blood of the Lamb and the cauterizing by the Right Spirit. For the Right Spirit is promised even "to those who are far off." (Acts 2:39) My own ancestral, ethnic group is a case in point. They were barbarian tribes, living like clods in the marshlands of northern Germany, sacrificing on the high hill under the greenwood tree, exposing their infants, murderous and warlike. Nevertheless, "far off" as they were, they were not considered beneath the dignity of the Christian monks who trudged across the Alps to teach their children, to help them drain their swamps and clear their forests and, above all, to baptize them into the *koinonia*, the uncommon community of Jesus the

Christ.

To this day their descendants, now seated in this very chapel, continue to enjoy that same Right Spirit in the *koinonia* of Jesus. Indeed, they even "continue steadfastly" in that *koinonia*, they "devote themselves" to it, they keep at it. And well they might. For the treacherous alternative is always near at hand, the lure of that all too common sectarianism. Right within their own synodical fellowship, these very months and weeks and days, they are being tempted to new and uglier separatisms. They are being appealed to by grim predictions of "crossroads," "abysmal chasms," partings of the ways between brothers and brothers. And if they do succeed in resisting that side of the separation, they encounter the temptation all over again on the other side, in their own impulse to retaliate and to shout back "Good riddance" or, perhaps worst of all, in the impulse to draw themselves up aloofly and pronounce "a pox on both your houses." Continue steadfastly, indeed. We have our homework cut out for us. If ever a thing demanded eternal vigilance, it is this gift of God's *koinonia*. so fragile, so terribly vulnerable, so humanly lovable--all the more so when giving it up seems right and lawful.

Crossroads? No. Road of the Cross? Yes. Isn't that the way of the uncommon community: taking up Christ's cross and following him and, in one and the same motion, bearing one another's burdens? True. This may well include rebuking the separatists who would divide us, rebuking them and even neutralizing them, but never, for God's sake, excluding them--not so long as the name of Christ is still named among us, as it still most assuredly is. Crossroads? No. Road of the Cross? Yes.

Why, even Peter and Paul, who probably differed theologically in ways that none of us in our whole Synod differ, could still share the right hand of fellowship, *koinoonias*, (Galatians 2:9, 10) and could delight in that handshake. Even people like you and me can gather in this chapel, checking our separatisms at the door, and can intercede for somebody's grandmother whom we can't even visualize or can give thanks for some newborn baby we haven't ever met. Here in this uncommon community a professor can sidle up to a student on whom he otherwise has to stand in judgment and can whisper to

him "Peace, brother." In this *koinonia* opponents and mutual critics can and do drink from the same cup of blessing and gratefully acknowledge that that is exactly what they are doing. Crossroads? No. Road of the Cross? Yes. That's the Right Spirit! O God, renew that Right Spirit within us all.

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