

Easter Community

By
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

April 30, 2023
Bluegrass Mass

A sermon accompanied by the world beloved: a Bluegrass Mass by Carol Barnett, performed by Monroe Crossing and the BMPC Sanctuary Choir.

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. ²Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. ³Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

The Acts of the Apostles 2:42- 47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

This almost sounds like the end of a fairy tale! Three thousand newly baptized believers, from a wide diversity of countries and backgrounds in one place - filled with awe. They eat together, share their things in common, and while they are praising God, they have the goodwill of all the people around them! This little snapshot of the early church, just weeks after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, seems like a dream, divorced from reality. No squabbling about how much money goes to mission and how much to save for the building? No committee arguing down the list of doctrines and rules that will say: this is what we believe, and how we will be organized, and if you agree - come in; if not, then there's another little fellowship down the road which may be a better fit for you. No sideline conversations after Peter's Pentecost sermon, about whether to call Peter to be their pastor or should they look for another? If this is what the first church, the first Easter community really looked like, then it's not like any church I have ever known or served.

Before he retired from teaching homiletics, Tom long pondered this text with a class of students about to graduate from seminary. They studied this passage of scripture, made note of what was remembered about these first Easter people; their radical freedom from worldly possessions, sharing their goods in common; the wild-fire membership growth of the early church; their peace and harmony despite their extraordinary diversity.

Many of these seminary students were accepting calls to small churches that might see three baptisms a year, not three thousand. They were headed to congregations that no longer boasted a vibrant Christian education program; churches with limited financial resources, so how to share in mission and keep the building open was a real and worthy debate. The students' negative comparisons were inevitable to this idealized description in Acts with the reality of the churches they would soon serve, and a hint of discouragement rippled across the room.

Then one student said: "This text reminds me of the little mimeographed history book that one of the old saints in my home church wrote. She recorded the most loyal and faithful congregation in the world. Every minister was wonderful; the whole town gathered to hear his moving sermons, and there was never a troubled moment. Really? Every minister? The whole town? No trouble... ever? Then the class realized what they were reading in Acts. Local history by Luke, the author of Acts. One might be tempted to say that a local church historian who loved her congregation simply looked back through rose-colored glasses, but it's different than that. It's more than that.

Tom long writes: "Local church historians are usually people of deep faith, love and also theological hope. That is to say, local church history tends to be a description

of the church's past in terms of its best hope for the future. The local historian describes a church's past not just in terms of the cold, hard facts, but in terms of where the church trusts that its ministry and its Lord are taking it." Then Tom Long summarizes his point: if Luke is a scientific, purely fact-based historian, then the only thing that can be said is that the church has gone downhill since Pentecost. If he's a nostalgic romantic, then he has simply exaggerated the church's history needlessly, giving us little realistic comfort in a hard world. If, however, he is a local church historian, He is also a hopeful theologian, who has looked at the life of the church through the lens of the spirit's promise of where the church will surely be." ¹

To which – I would add - is a way of saying, there is always more to the life of the church than that which meets the eye. The church is an Easter community. We are bearers of resurrection promises. Over long years, people come and go; ministries that call for deep engagement in one generation die out, and new callings rise up. The colors and complexities of who we are, how we discern God's leading us, what binds us together and sends us forth is an ever-changing movement of the spirit.

Today, perhaps there is no better illustration of the church's changing movements over time than a glimpse into the story and history of bluegrass. Because, like the church, bluegrass music is an art form that gathers in spirit, evolving and changing as it moves forward to meet the future. Bluegrass has deep roots that take us back to the old Celtic traditions of Scotland and Ireland. It traces a path of migration and immigration to a new land where diverse peoples came together; they shared the gospel; they shared old musical instruments and created new ones.

In Pennsylvania, for example, the Scots and Irish who immigrated with their pipes and fiddles gathered with people of German descent, where zithers and lap harps, influenced the creation of new stringed instruments like the dulcimer. These folks migrated across the Allegheny to the Appalachians, and headed south where they encountered the strains of African influences coming up through the traditions of southern gospel, the blues and jazz. The banjo, of course, has both African and native American origins in the drum. These diverse communities shared a longing for what had been, doing what all immigrants have to do, leaving a homeland behind for economic reasons and survival, and working together for a more hopeful future.

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Dream Church, preached for the Inauguration of Ted Wardlaw as the President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2002; and "A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings through the Pentecost Narrative," *Journal for Preachers*.

You see, the origins of bluegrass music is a close parallel to what the people of God have always been, nomadic, homesick for what they have left behind, and yet, the wilderness before them luring them on, and who – by coming together – create community that sings and sustains and grows in new ways.

Fiona Richie of National Public radio’s show, “The Thistle and Shamrock,” co-authored with Doug Orr of North Carolina, the history of this music in a book entitled *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia*. Moving through four hundred years of musical history, they write that the word they came back to over and over again was *connection*. That word, *connection*, they say holds the promise of tangled textures below the surface, of stories told, ballads sung, faith shared, discoveries made, of the diverse people who kept gathering in community around an emerging sound. Along the Pennsylvania wagon trail that began here going west and south down the valleys of the Appalachians, diverse people had to pull together in order to survive a harsh, lonely existence in a dangerous, rugged world.

The book recounts the dangers they faced “encouraged neighbors to mix and mingle and pull together to help one another. Gathering for music and dance was the social current flowing among them, connecting them with a sense of community. Food and drink were shared, children played games together... the very act of rehearsing old songs, reinforced their evolving sense of self, and social distinctions became largely meaningless.”²

That sounds something like the early church, doesn’t it? Sounds like the church we want to be. Sharing in common, moving forward together, letting the old social distinctions pass away so that a resurrected body, in line with the purposes of Jesus Christ can emerge. We are not there yet. We are not yet the idealized vision the local historian, Luke, records in Acts. But, we too are wayfaring strangers, coming together, finding new meaning as an Easter community. And so, we gather; we support one another; we share the good news of resurrection; we make music and we sing toward a more hopeful future.

AMEN.

² Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr, *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia*.