

“When the Church Gets It Right and Other Blessings”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Acts 4:32-35
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on April 8, 2018

I used to hear this story as a challenge—the modern church falling so short of the bar set by the early church. We would never dream of sharing literally everything in common like they did. What does that say about us and the idolatry of our individualism? How might the radical community of the early church call us to deeper discipleship?

But this year, I read the story very differently. I did not read it as a challenge or an indictment of where we are failing to live as true community with each other. This year I read it as a story of encouragement about what we get right.

It’s not like the early church was all butterflies and roses. You may remember they dealt with quite a bit of conflict. Paul and Barnabas, for example, just could not seem to reconcile their differences. Also, it was *so* hard for the early church to figure out whether or not those Gentiles needed to be circumcised or whether they could get a pass. Furthermore, something really bizarre and disturbing happens with Ananias and Saphirra not too long after this happy passage. Today’s story represents one of those miraculous times when, despite all that plagued them, the church blessedly got something right so that there was no needy person among them.

This, I think, is the REAL early church—not some idyllic community where everyone shared gracefully all the time and no one ever quarreled. Just like today’s church, the early church struggled to learn what it really meant to follow in Christ’s footsteps and sometimes they didn’t quite get it right and sometimes they got it flat wrong. But *sometimes* they caught a glimpse of what was possible when Christ truly was their center, and what they witnessed in those moments was sheer grace and beloved community.

In my years of providing pastoral care to God’s people, three distinct and memorable times in my life the roles have flipped and the church has pastored me. The first time I was still just a seminary student when my family experienced a tragedy. My younger sister’s boyfriend and our dear family friend, Andrew Brooks, sustained a serious head injury that left him in a coma for two weeks before he passed away the day after Thanksgiving 2007. Those two weeks in the hospital waiting room were like nothing I had ever experienced. We practically lived there—Andrew’s family and friends—sometimes staying through the night depending on the latest news about Andrew’s condition, sleeping on the ground between waiting room chairs in a room whose lights remained on at all hours and could not be shut off. People flocked to the hospital bringing food, hugs, prayers. Andrew’s church was small, but God’s people came from all over. I remember one night the hallway being lined with what felt like a hundred people—all there for Andrew. I remember never thinking about a meal—mealtime would arrive and somehow, so would the food. I remember singing hymns with the whole waiting room when we received a good progress report. I remember also singing hymns around his bedside when the hemorrhaging in his brain was so severe we knew there was no longer any hope. I remember the awful pain on my sister’s face, and I remember holding her as she cried.

We referred to the experience afterwards as “The Waiting Room,” and we didn’t mean the room or the location. We meant the profound experience of community forged by tragedy, the intimacy of a shared trauma and loss, and the comfort of each other’s company. I remember thinking, “Oh, so this is church.”

The second time this happened to me, I was already a pastor, tasked with caring for the people in my congregation in San Antonio. I had only been at it for a year when suddenly I myself was in crisis as my marriage disintegrated in public view. I didn’t what to do or how to pastor, so the people pastored me. Two different congregants gave me keys to their house, told me I could come in the middle of the night should I ever feel unsafe. I did, in fact, have to come in the middle of the night—humiliated and embarrassed—but they offered me a hospitality that set me at ease and made it okay to need help, okay to be human.

I know it is not just pastors who need to be reminded it is okay to need help. Lots of us prefer to be the caretaker—there’s less vulnerability in it, after all. Less humbling. Helping is good for the ego. *Being helped* is a different story. Being helped is good for a different part of you—a wounded, child-like part that mostly you don’t want anyone to see.

So this isn’t a sermon about how you need to do more and help more people, how you ought to give up your possessions to serve the needy. This is a sermon to remind you: sometimes you are the needy one, and that’s okay. There is no such thing as a church of all givers. There is no community all of caretakers. Every person in every real community will someday be in need of care, and today that someone might be you.

It was me just last week. If I’m honest, it’s still me. On Good Friday I had to give away the baby I’d hoped to adopt. She was, to me, the most beautiful baby on all the earth. The cutest, the dearest, the best. She was mine, and I loved her. I still love her with all my heart. I think, if you had held her, you would understand. Then again, maybe you wouldn’t. Maybe to you she would have been just another baby and not, as she was to me, God’s greatest little gift.

The day I went to court—the day I found out Leila would be moved to live with biological family—Kristi SoRelle and my friend Heather came with me, which was a Godsend because it didn’t occur to me to ask anyone to come. Others offered to come too—my mom, Kay Avant, Jennifer Warren—but I didn’t want to bring a crowd, so they cared for me in other ways. Kristi and Heather stayed all afternoon because the hearing took all afternoon. They held me and patted me while I cried. They stayed and stayed all the way to the very end. They walked me to my car. “What day will she be moved?” they asked.

“The lawyer said probably Friday,” I answered, and then it hit me. Good Friday. I was losing my baby on Good Friday. Sweet Mother Mary, have mercy.

And then something else occurred to me for the first time all day—this was about to be Holy Week. I was supposed to come back to work. I’m a pastor. I have a certain responsibility to “do” Easter. I felt some panic rising.

Kristi told me, no, I didn't need to work. I needed to go home and be with Leila. Within hours of leaving court, the chair of deacons emailed me to say the same thing as Kristi. Sharlande wrote to say she agreed, and she was in a good place to get everything taken care of for Holy Week. Then Patty Field came by. She had made a quilt for Leila with her name on it and wanted it to go with her when she was moved. Patty told me not to worry about Easter. "Jesus is already risen," she told me. "Sunday's just an arbitrary date picked by some old men somewhere." I finally concluded that the Resurrection would survive without me, that it was okay to be human, and it was okay to need help.

Of course, it wasn't just this last week but the whole month I'd been church-ed. I haven't had to cook my own food since the end of February—true story. When we thought Leila was here to stay and when we learned she was leaving—all along the way I had a church. It wasn't just Lake Shore either. It was bigger than that. It was Mary Alice Birdwhistle, checking on me regularly. It was my congregation in San Antonio who first sent baby gifts, and then later, their condolences. It was the NICU nurses who made a forever impression on my life. It was my mom cleaning my house, taking night shifts with Leila, giving me upon Leila's departure a ring with Leila's birthstone in it because birthstone rings are a long-standing tradition in our family. It was my dad driving down in the middle of tax season to meet his granddaughter and not wanting to leave when it was time for him to go back to work. It was my friend Sharyl making me a photo book of Leila pictures. It was my mom's acquaintance who texted her to say that her Bible study group decided they will commit to praying for Leila for the next 18 years. I was being held and carried by the church universal, and so was Leila.

It turns out I didn't need the people of the church to give up all their possessions or share everything in common in order to experience true community. But I did need to open my heart and let people in to my vulnerable moments.

I'm not saying we're off the hook with this passage—that we don't have to examine our sharing practices and our wealth is safe from the intrusion of the Gospel—but I am saying that sometimes, even in today's world, the church gets it right. Even in our greedy, consumerist culture, sometimes the church is remarkably generous to you.

And so today, this Sunday of Eastertide, I want to dwell not in the challenge of what we have yet to achieve as a community or as a church. There is plenty of time for those talks later. Today I want to give thanks for what we have and what we've been given. Because for all the struggles and shortcomings that are ours to claim, we sometimes catch a glimpse of that sheer grace that is also and always ours for the taking. Thanks be to God for the church. May you be open, not only to give, but also to receive. Alleluia. Amen.