

“New Community”
Acts 4:32-35

What are you going to do in honor of Earth Day this year? What have you done since last year? How do you practice your love for God in nature? These are important questions for people of faith. The earth is not just a place where we live. It is God’s creation. God’s Spirit is in it. Respecting our environment is not just a good thing to do. It is a faith obligation for all of us. Yet today, I would like to invite you to look at an important aspect of caring for God’s creation that is deeper than just recycling and reducing our consumption. It is about the value and importance of sharing our resources by living in communities that know generosity. A major factor in our current environmental crisis, or one of its root causes, is greed. Today is Earth Sunday and as we reflect on the ways we can care for the gift of God’s creation, we have to deal with the challenge of greed and overconsumption. If everyone in the world were to have the typical US lifestyle, we would need four planets to meet our usage. While we make up only 5% of the earth’s population, we consume 30% of the earth’s resources. In his book, *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis presents a grim picture of our world. Davis defines a slum as an urban area “characterized by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure.” He reports that the United Nations estimates that one third of the world’s urban population lives within such slum conditions, that’s 1 of every 3 persons. That is over a billion people who do not have access to clean water, sanitation, and stable housing in the midst of the world’s largest cities! (Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso, 2006.) We live in a world where it seems that many practice the Toddler’s Rules of Possession: 1. If I like it, it’s mine. 2. If it’s in my hand, it’s mine. 3. If I can take it from you, it’s mine. 4. If I had it a little while ago, it’s mine. 5. If it’s mine, it must NEVER appear to be yours in any way. 6. If I’m doing or building something, all the pieces are mine. 7. If it looks just like mine, it is mine. 8. If I saw it first, it’s mine. 9. If you are playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine. 10. If it’s broken, it’s yours.

So, how do we respond as people of faith to the challenges of our world today without using such models of greed? The early church as described in Acts 4 practiced their faith in a way that can inspire us today. The early followers of Christ were so focused on the love of God that their lives were so transformed for the whole world to see their amazing change. Motivated by the Holy Spirit, they generously shared what property they possessed. This was not an early form of communism because there is historical evidence that points to the continued ownership of homes and businesses by individual members. The sale and distribution of surplus assets is most likely what is described in both Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37. Common ownership was not a community “rule”. Members sold and gave as they willed. Barnabas is presented as a notable example of generosity rather than the norm. This story is about how a community that is focused on the grace and love of God lives together. This was not a monastic vow of poverty. It was more of a byproduct of the early Christians’ relationship with the Spirit. When the people experienced God’s love, they were transformed to share it with others. Their hearts were opened to the needs of others among them. The Spirit of God creates not just new practices in our lives. The Spirit of God creates a whole new people out of us.

The church over the centuries has not always lived according to this Spirit of God’s grace. Conflict, division, abuse, greed, self-interest, and even violence have been part of the church’s history. But when we as the people of God are able to focus on our relationship with God and grow in that love and grace, we are able to bring tremendous transformation to our world towards generosity and love. This is not just some idealistic dream for a Utopian community that exists only in our imagination. This is the energy and soul that is needed in our world today. Our

country is desperate for a healthy model of community. In her book *Finding Our Way*, writer and consultant Margaret Wheatley notes that, "America has embraced values that cannot create sustainable society and world. We organize too many of our activities around beliefs that are inherently life destroying. We believe that growth can be endless, that competition creates healthy relationships, that consumption needs have no limits, that meaning is found in things, that aggression brings peace. Societies that use these values end up, as do all predators in nature, dead."

So as we face the challenges of our world of poverty and environmental degradation, we don't come as hopeless people. We don't come with a focus on solving a problem. We don't come with well-prepared answers to every environmental problem or social crisis. We come with the experience of a community of faith that knows and lives in a Spirit of love and generosity. The early church's relationship with God freed them to share resources with each other. Luke's depiction of the Jerusalem believers identifies a signature characteristic of their movement—in a word, generosity. Their social generosity expressed itself in community, and their financial generosity expressed itself in compassion. Following the example of Jesus, the first Christians broke down social barriers and disregarded religious taboos that distinguished between the ritually clean and the unclean, the worthy and the unworthy, the respectable and the unrespectable. They were "one in heart and mind," writes Luke. They subverted normal social hierarchies of wealth, ethnicity, religion, and gender in favor of a radical egalitarianism before God and with each other: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). About a century after Luke wrote, the early Christians had a well-known and well-deserved reputation for social generosity that built bridges of community rather than walls of separation. Tertullian (155–220 CE), for example, wrote, "Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy...See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other."

I am thankful today to know that the experience of the early church has also been the experience of our church here in Batavia, NY. I am amazed at the generosity that God has blessed you with. I am most thankful that this kind of generosity comes from deep faith and love for God which leads us to love all of God's creation even those people and places that we don't know. One clear example of the generosity of this congregation is the scholarship money that has already been sent to support Irma in her high school studies in Guatemala. This is a young woman that we don't even know and may never meet. But because of the Spirit of God's love, people here gave from their resources so that she can get her high school education. I know that such offerings especially in this difficult and uncertain economic time show your deep trust in God's care and provision. Another great example of the generosity and care of this community of faith is the quiet service of our deacons. They extend the love and care of this congregation in such specific ways to people in need in our church, in our community and in our world. I am so thankful for their generosity of spirit when they serve the elderly in the nursing home every Saturday during Lent by providing them with a worship experience they wouldn't have otherwise. I am thankful for their outreach to families in need around Christmas. I am thankful for their ministry of hospitality as they usher here every Sunday, 52 Sundays a year. I am thankful for their spirit of giving as they have for years sponsored children in need in other countries.

These are just a few highlights of countless acts of love and compassion that are shared through this community. The power of God's love that is shared in and through this church has transformed and continues to transform all of us from lives of self-focus to lives of great love. This congregation knows really well what Annie Dillard talked about in her book *The Writing Life*

as she reflected on the art of writing, “One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it all, right away, every time...Do not hoard what seems good for a later time in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. Something more will arise later, something better. These things fill from behind, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.”

This was certainly the case for St. Francis. St. Francis of Assisi was born in the 12th Century, the son of a wealthy merchant family in Italy. In his youth, he was known for his extravagant and consumptive lifestyle. But as he entered his 20's he began to hear callings from God that would change his life. The callings came as he witnessed true poverty and disease and when, in a time of prayer, he heard a voice say, “Go, Francis, and repair my house, which as you see is falling into ruin.” Francis took this message very literally at first and gave up all he had (including some of his father's possessions) to repair local churches that lay in ruins. He wed himself to “Lady Poverty” in order to remain focused on his ministry to God's house here on earth – to not be distracted by his former acquisitive pursuits. He soon realized that God's house, was actually God's household — the “whole inhabited earth” (*oikoumene*) as described in New Testament. (As a side note, we use this Greek root word *oikos* “house,” or “eco,” to form words like ecology, economics, and ecumenical). Francis saw that this household consisted not only of dilapidated church buildings, but it also included the poor, the creatures of the earth, the afflicted, everyone and everything. God's household included all of creation, and the most vulnerable parts of creation especially revealed, to Francis, the vulnerable and beautiful face of Christ. Francis truly owned nothing, but in emptying himself, he realized that he shared a home, God's *oikos*, with the moon, sun, stars, water, fire, flowers, children, elders, birds, and even death. Again, as Job believed, this home rested in the hollow of God's hand. And to all who shared this home, Francis called brother and sister – not stranger, but family – and he was known for compromising his own comforts to protect and provide for his family members.

The example of St. Francis and the example of this community of faith in sharing resources and care and many others like us are the powers that God has planted in our world to continue the work of transformation and healing that Jesus was part of. God is also challenging us to continue in a spirit of generosity and sharing that extends beyond the doors of this church. I know that a group of us in this church has heard the call to start a church community garden, God's Little Acre. They met this morning to get organized. Their hope is to grow food and share with those in need in our community. They are also hoping to move us closer to more sustainable ways of eating and growing food. This is a great challenge for us as it will take us out of our comfort zone. I hope that you will join the efforts of this project in any way you can. I also pray that you will look in your own life and in our community for more ways that you can promote sharing of resources.

Today we are celebrating and focusing on Earth Sunday, the gift of God's creation. Knowing that our environmental problems in large part are caused by greed, we are challenged to live lives of generosity and sharing. May the Spirit of Christ and the generosity of this congregation continue to guide and inspire us to share our resources so that our whole world may be changed from greed to care, from fear to faith and from loneliness to love.