

## Resurrection Economy

The writers of the curriculum we're using this summer summarize today's story in this way: *The early church showed commitment and unity as they shared a common life. After the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, an ever-increasing group of people listened to the apostles' preaching and ate and prayed together. People with possessions sold what they had and gave the money to the apostles, who gave it to those in need. Everyone in the community had enough. Many who saw this joined the community of Jesus' followers.*<sup>1</sup>

That sounds wonderful! That sounds ideal! But I imagine – actually, I know – the reality of day-to-day living in the early church didn't go as smoothly as it sounds. We find clues to the rest of the story in the first few chapters of Acts.

Chapter one begins with Jesus' promise to the disciples that they won't be left alone after he leaves them. The Holy Spirit will empower them to be his witnesses. With that promise, Jesus leaves them. Followers of Jesus, men and women, gather in Jerusalem for prayer and fellowship.

Chapter two contains the familiar story of Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of the Christian church. On this day, Peter steps forward as a spokesman for the group, explaining to the crowd how both this event and Jesus' resurrection fulfilled what the prophet Joel and King David had predicted many years earlier. In response, 3000 people are baptized and join this group of Christ followers.

These Christians gather together regularly for prayer, worship, instruction, and fellowship. They commit themselves to each other with the goal that everyone in their midst has their physical needs met as well as their spiritual ones.

The third chapter of Acts contains a familiar story. Peter and John are on their way to the temple to pray. They encounter a man sitting at one of the entrances begging for money. Instead of giving him the money he requests, Peter tells the man to get up and walk. Instantly the man's feet and ankles grow strong. He jumps and walks and accompanies Peter and John into the temple where he shouts praises to God.

Of course, all this commotion attracts attention and many questions. Peter explains the healing repeating themes of his Pentecost speech. He talks about God's saving work, rooted in the story of the Jewish patriarchs and culminating in Jesus. In fact, he says, God's work of salvation is continuing right now through Jesus, the Messiah.

These bold words get Peter and John into trouble with the religious leaders. We read in chapter four that they are arrested and brought before the council. Peter again delivers a speech, this time acting as his own defense attorney. The council is amazed by his boldness and release Peter and John from custody, ordering them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

But Peter and John reply that they cannot possibly restrain themselves from speaking about what they have seen and heard with their own eyes and ears. When they tell their story

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<sup>1</sup> The summary and parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 4 of "Seeking Justice Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#).

to other followers of Christ, the whole group prays for this same kind of boldness. Once again we read about the believers sharing what they have so no one in their midst is in need. Barnabas is presented as the ideal of their Spirit-filled community. He sells his field and gives all the proceeds to the apostles. It's actions like this that make it possible for the community to say there are no needy people among them.

But it isn't that simple. These people are not perfect. Normal human dynamics are at work within the group – some dishonesty, some jealousy, some prejudice, some injustice. In Acts chapter five, we read about Ananias and Sapphira, who find this new way of being more challenging to enact. They sell their property but give only a portion of the proceeds and then lie about it. Repercussions follow. Barnabas is held up as the ideal, Ananias and Sapphira, the cautionary tale.

Reading on in Acts five, we hear about more miraculous healings. And more trouble for Peter and the others as they disobey the council's order to stop talking about Jesus.

The apostles are arrested, miraculously escape prison, and return to their teaching. Peter delivers another passionate speech, saying "If we have to choose between obedience to God and obedience to any human authority, then we must obey God."

A respected member of the council reminds the group of other movements that had caught fire and then died out. He advises the council to let the men go. If this is just another movement arising from human enthusiasm, it will die out soon enough. But then again, if God is in this, you won't be able to stop it—unless, of course, you're ready to fight against God!

Chapter six begins with the group of believers working together to find a resolution to a conflict within the group regarding the distribution of food. The sharing and caring described in previous chapters of Acts don't go as smoothly as it might sound. Always being "of one heart and mind" isn't humanly possible.

There's a charge of discrimination. Greek-speaking disciples accuse the Aramaic-speaking disciples because their widows are being overlooked in the daily food service. The apostles are overwhelmed with the task of organizing the distribution. This work is taking away from the time and energy they want to devote to prayer, preaching, and evangelizing.

One of the seven men chosen to remedy the situation is named Stephen. Like Peter and John, Stephen is arrested for what he says and does in public. Eventually his boldness and refusal to stop preaching costs him his life.

Too often when I've read the verses in Acts four about the Christian community sharing everything in common, I've focused too much on the idea of communal living and how difficult that is to maintain over a long period of time. Friends of mine have been part of intentional communities. All of those communities progressed from: (1) multiple households living in community sharing their possessions and money in common, to (2) multiple households living in community with some being part of the common purse and others not, to (3) neighbors who worship and fellowship together but don't hold their money in common.

Although it might be intriguing to consider some of us being intentional neighbors, I don't think any of us are inclined to begin full-fledged communal living. I'm not going to debate whether such communal sharing is desirable or practical.

But we can learn important lessons from the first Christians, a Spirit-led community. They had an economic system that differed from the one around them, one in which there was give and take, and everyone had enough. The community experienced new life through Jesus Christ in a resurrection economy, one built on the foundation of death and resurrection. In fact, their sharing grew directly out of their understanding of the resurrection.

In this early Christian community, death—found in exploitation, persecution, hatred, violence, and starvation—is overcome in Christ and transformed through resurrection to new life. The apostles see signs of death in their midst. Folks are hungry; they lack basic necessities. There is favoritism and discrimination within the community. It's difficult to find the right balance between addressing physical needs and spiritual ones.

But there are also signs of new life. Some have more than they need and are willing to give out of their abundance. New volunteers step forward to share the burden placed on the leaders of the group. Systems are developed to ensure equitable distribution of resources.

Joy and wonder at Jesus' resurrection do not simply lead to praise but to transformed living. Sharing of goods is the resurrection response to need among them. And the result is God's grace poured out upon them.

What does this resurrection economy look like in our context? How does resurrection economy differ from the economy operating in the world around us? As Anabaptist Mennonite Christians, Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our life, and reconciliation is the center of our work. These core values motivate us to open our eyes to the signs of death in our midst – exploitation, persecution, hatred, violence, and starvation. These values compel us to join in the work of transforming signs of death into signs of life – equity, support, kindness, love, peace, and sufficiency.

Where are you witnessing or experiencing death? Where are you witnessing or experiencing life? What does it mean for us as part of the church to live as a resurrected body – the body of Christ – both inside and outside of the church walls?

We are generous with each other – helping with tasks we can't do by ourselves. We support organizations in the community that work to alleviate homelessness, hunger, neglect, and abuse. We contribute time and money to various organizations that rebuild houses, assist refugees, dig wells, teach children and adults, provide medical treatment, and support people as they start small businesses. We do all these plus other activities, but there is more we could do to recognize systems that oppress, admit to our participation in them, and work to tear them down, bringing new life to all, so that everyone has enough of what they need.

God was at work in the early Christian church. God is at work in the world today. Our task is to operate in God's resurrection economy where everyone has enough. May the Spirit show us the way to resurrection in our own community so that we might fully live in God's economy of grace and abundance. May we hold on to resurrection hope as we wait and work for new life to emerge. Amen.