

Full of Life: Lifelong discipleship
Acts 2:42-47

Welcome to this wonderful season called Eastertide. Over the next 7 Sundays up through the day of Pentecost, we'll be coming alive. Each Sunday, we'll explore one of the 7 marks of vitality from our Vital Congregations Initiative. Vitality means being alive.

In the widest sense, that's what Easter is. Easter is coming alive. Easter is our sharing with Christ in the resurrection life. The love that resurrects is with you and in you, not just in the life that is to come, but now. You are invited to dwell in this love, relish it, luxuriate in the good news of resurrection. You are also, to borrow a wonderful phrase from Wendell Berry in his mischievously seditious poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*, to "*practice resurrection.*"

We have received the love that resurrects. We cannot settle for lesser loves. Berry says:

Every day [you] do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Practice resurrection.

As I sat this week thinking about what it means for us in this community to claim this fullness of life, this image of practicing resurrection kept reverberating. Do a thought experiment with me. Imagine, for a second, you are among those disciples in the days and weeks after the Risen Christ appeared to the women and then to you. Amazing. Confounding. Cool. But what in the world did it mean to *live the resurrection*? What do you do? You have to keep on living. What does breakfast look like in the resurrection? What does raising kids look like? What does work look like? Do you just go back to normal... except a little more sparkly?

There is a wonderful picture of this very moment in the book of Acts. It's not long after Jesus is raised but he's gone. The disciples have just been visited by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We watch them as they are first forming a community that is practicing resurrection. Here's what Acts says that looked like:

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

What did they do? What did practicing resurrection look like? Teaching. Fellowship—gathering together and breaking bread. Prayers. Sharing all things in common. This is a magical moment. To me, it's a linchpin moment in our whole Christian tradition. Because God raised Jesus. Yes. But how did these folks, who had seen something as sublime and yet un-believable as resurrection—how did they get other people to buy it? I come back from vacation and I'm like, "I'm gonna live differently now; I'm going to live with the magic of the Grand Canyon in me all the time," and within a few days I'm grumpy because there's a grand canyon of laundry on the bed to be folded. But these disciples, by the leading of the Spirit, figured out how to practice resurrection. Their way of life was so luminous and compelling and, yes, *full of life* that people who saw them said, "I want some of *that*." I'll have what she's having.

What they figured out was how to be a community of *formation*.

Do you know what I mean by "formation." Any of you think about that word? It's so powerful. Formation. It's how we become ourselves. We are not "made." We don't come off a conveyor belt. We are "formed."

We are in a constant process of formation. From our birth, family forms us. Our parents—their presence, their absence, their caring, their flaws—form us. Siblings form us, if we have them—the push/pull of sibling love and rivalry. Neighborhoods and geography form us: what and who we see when we walk out the door each day. Economics form us—whether we have enough or too much or too little and how we secure the basics of life. Culture forms us: the movies and books and tv shows, the ideas that circulate around us. School forms us—what do we learn, with whom, and what and whom is left out? Faith forms us, too—the stories and the people who frame our understanding of the big questions: who am I? what am I here for? What's the point of all this?

The powers and processes of formation are at work all around you all the time. Are you aware of what's forming you now? What's forming your kids? To what extent have you chosen what will form you? What powers or processes are trying to mal-form you?

Formation may sound abstract, but it's not. Your formation determines the shape of your humanity—what kind of person you are. So much of this formation boils down to what you are formed to love.

I don't love St. Augustine. But one of his most beautiful enduring ideas is that you and I become what we love. That's how God made us to love—it's what we're born to do. We're to love God, love our neighbors, and love ourselves. But it doesn't always work that way. Sin (we know a little about that) convinces us to love things that we should not—and prevents us from loving things that we should. Our desire is distorted. When our desire becomes distorted, our formation goes off track.

Christian philosopher James KA Smith wrote a wonderful book about this a few years back called "Desiring the Kingdom." In discussing the formation of desire, Smith uses the example of

a shopping mall. Anyone been to one of those? What is a mall? It's full of sights and sounds and smells that all excite us: the shoes in Foot Locker, the look at J. Crew, the smell of Cinnabon. None of those things are necessary. Yet, in the mall, this tactile, embodied world of beautiful things, our love is aflame. Capitalism sizzles when it manufactures and distorts our desire.

Now a bunch of clever folks have figured out a way to manipulate our desire without us ever getting off our butt and go to the mall. We carry a little machine in our pockets that tracks every place we visit, every article we read, every web page and social media post. It's all about shaping our desire. About showing us what to love. Is it for the good? Is it helping you love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself?

Listen, it's not my job to make you feel guilty about the mall or your phone. What I want you to pay attention to is what and who are forming you and your loves? What is your community of formation? What systems and structures are you putting around you that will teach you and encourage you in the practice of resurrection?

So much is at stake in the answer to that question. I hope and pray that this church is a community of formation for you.

We will be... if we agree to stay close to this old, old formula of Beloved Community from Acts.

They dedicated themselves to the apostle's teaching, Acts says. They were a learning community. When pick up Scriptures and read them together and share our insights. When we engage theology from St. Augustine to James Cone. When we sit with Julian of Norwich and the mystics and hold silence with them. When we drag our kids to Sunday school because knowing the story of Jesus matters just as much as math and English. When our middle school students have the chance to ask every single one of their impertinent questions and have those questions taken seriously. When we learn about critical race theory and the abolition movement and how the spirit of God is at work in each and our learning directs us toward action. That is dedication to the apostle's teaching, and it forms our hearts to love the truth.

We've gotta' break bread if we want to be formed in love. It's time to get back to potlucks, people. It's time to brush away the cobwebs that have grown around our relationships and sit down at table with each other. I can't tell you how much joy it gave me to sit at the Topple's house on Maundy Thursday and see 3 generations of NDPC folks laughing and talking and being fed by God and each other. Our understanding of breaking bread—shared by those folks in Acts—is that when we break bread, we share in Communion with the Resurrected Christ. Every time come to God's table, and we see how wildly inclusive it is, Breaking bread informs everything from our politics to family life. At the table, our hearts are formed to love and welcome everyone.

We have to be able to meet each others' needs. Beloved Community forms us by re-wiring our brains to consider God's economics.. Here, we are asked to consider the needs of all of God's children—all of our neighbors. Here, we stop dwelling on what we want and start asking what

do I have to share? Who needs a meal? Who needs child care? Who needs a month's rent? Who needs a shoulder to cry on? This impulse doesn't end at the doors of the church. Generosity moves outward in concentric circles. Who needs a visit in the hospital or the prison? Who needs a second chance? Who needs healthcare? Who needs a tax cut and who does not? Here, our hearts are formed to give until no one has a need.

And finally, we're gonna pray. Prayer takes hundreds of forms. There's no right or wrong way to do it. But if I've learned anything about prayer, it's how we invite God to shape our desire. We think about prayer as piling up words. And we do bring to God everything that's on our hearts and in our minds. But the deeper part of prayer—the part of prayer that forms us is the listening. It's listening to God speak God's desire for us to us. Prayer is letting our love be formed by God's.

There was a moment two thousand years ago, when a group of people sat in a room and wondered, what does it mean to practice resurrection? What would it look like if we were to be full of life? They created and committed themselves to be a community of formation.

It worked then. It still works. Thanks be to God. Amen.