

*Carry-on Baggage Only*  
*We Need Each Other*  
Acts 2:43-47

Our quote for this day--“Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads”—I found on the Internet weeks ago, as we were beginning to plan for this celebration today. It seemed like a perfect way to think about what we are doing here—formally connecting two congregations of people who have been doing parallel, and sometimes intersecting, ministries, right next door to each other, for a long time. And Herman Melville was the person who said it first. How cool is that, that the author of *Moby Dick*—a book that everybody knows—wrote down such a lovely and generous thought?!

So, we used that quote. It led us to our title for this whole day: *Weaving together our common future*. We typed the quote—with attribution to the author, of course—on the invitations to this celebration. We put it on the banners that are hanging out on the street right now. Those banners have been out there all week.

A few days ago I went back to the Internet to retrieve that quote again, and you know where I found it? On a web page entitled “the finest thing Herman Melville never said”. It turns out that these lovely words were part of a sermon, preached in 1855, by an Anglican priest named *Henry Melvill*. Oops.

I tell you this as an object lesson: not everything you see on the Internet is true.

It’s also a great reminder to me that sometimes—maybe always—we need to dig deeper than what appears on the surface, if we want to know the truth of things.

The description of the early Christian church that we just read from the Book of Acts is one of those first impressions. It is such a compelling picture of what the Church can be. There’s an almost reckless beauty to it: Christians giving away everything they have, combining their possessions so that no one will be hungry or homeless; simple meals, shared together gladly and with spontaneous generosity; a community of friendship and mutual support so winsome that outsiders are clamoring to get in; more and more people coming together every day, in awe at all the good things God is doing among them, things everyone could see.

Wow. I don’t know a church like that, but I’d like to be part of it.

It can be daunting, if we think this description of the early Church is how every church is supposed to look, every day. Because for most of us, this is not how we have experienced the church. The church doesn’t always *feel* quite that generous. There are people who the Church has cut out or left behind or excluded. Some of them are people we’re talking about a lot these days: people whose God-given sexual orientation or gender identity or longing for a life partner the Church has seen fit to question. Some are people who have already weathered long battles to be seen and accepted: people of color, women. Some are people who are still waiting to be

noticed and invited in fully: immigrants who bring a different culture and a different voice to the Church's conversation. The poor, who we so often do ministry *to*, instead of inviting them to be our partners in transforming the world.

We know for ourselves the power of the Church—to bring grace and life and love. Over the Church's life, that power has sometimes been abused, waved around like a sword that wounds people in its path. The truth is, we have not always lived that beautiful unity that people talked about when they described the first Church. And we will fail again—every single one of us. No matter how good our intentions, every once in a while, someone will enter our church and they will be messy in a way that we can't quite understand or cope with. We'll come face to face with someone that we just cannot bring ourselves to love. From time to time, we will feel ourselves excluded from community; and we will be part of a church that unintentionally—and sometimes half-intentionally—excludes people. This is the truth.

But it is not the only truth. Because the good news of our faith is that we don't need to be perfect before God can move among us. God is still working even when we are stalled out, too narrow-minded or tired or out-of-ideas to make the Church all that it can be. Even when other people fail us, even when we fail other people, the Spirit is still at work—silently, subtly. Unstoppably.

That was true in the first Church, and it is true now. If you keep reading the rest of the Book of Acts, you see that all kinds of things went wrong then too. Right there in the Bible, there are stories of embezzlement, and church conflict, racial exclusion, failures of leadership. And those are just the things that got written down.

And yet...

Despite some pretty disappointing failures of the early Church and in every church since then, the Spirit of God has stubbornly continued to stay and to move in the world. There is still Good News: God still promises that the blind shall see and the lame shall walk. Despite all evidence to the contrary, we are still being sent out to announce that *this* is the year of the Lord's favor.

It turns out that the main character in the book of Acts wasn't Peter the great preacher, or Paul the radical missionary, or the leaders of that fastest-growing church in history. The main character in the Church's story, the one who redeemed what could have been just another case study of a group of well-intentioned folks who kept shooting themselves in the foot, is the Spirit of God. The Spirit who is as alive now as it was then, the Spirit who is fully capable of sweeping through our lives and our church even when we're not sure about what to do next, or how to clean up the mess we have already made.

What we are doing here today is not dressing up in some hero outfits that we're not sure will fit. We are just saying *Yes*. *Yes* to God's invitation to us to bring Good News to this neighborhood—which is a little bigger than the one we first thought we were assigned to. *Yes* to letting the Spirit have some space to move among us, and maybe even to change us. *Yes* to the risk of working things out together, exposing to each other our messiness and our uncertainty and our not always being in charge.

What we are doing here today is committing ourselves to being the Church together—Los Altos and Mountain View. Letting the Spirit of God lead us into deeper water, where we will have no choice but to hold on—to God and to each other.