Impossible
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Text
Acts 2:42-47

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.

Prayer
Sermon
It’s impossible, this story. Let’s just say that up front. One single moment convinced
thousands of people to change everything, overnight. They changed how they ate, they
changed who they spent time with, they changed how they handled their resources,
they changed how they communicated with each other, and day by day people were
saved.
It’s just impossible to imagine.
Indeed, the story of the early Church, post-Pentecost, is even impossible for Biblical
scholars to imagine. Matt Skinner in his book on Acts says, “I’m going to ask you not to
read Acts like you would read a modern history book…[Acts] is as entertaining and
provocative as it is informational….not meticulously objective, detached reporting but
writing that made you feel like you were there...Acts is interested in molding the
perceptions we live with concerning God and the world.” 1

1 Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit, Kindle edition

2 Skinner also points out that three chapters later, we can see the idealistic early church in conflict over some of these same things - resources, food. In other words, even scholars like to wave away this story of early believers who changed their whole lives in a snap. Because, it’s impossible. But for these next few minutes, imagine that it was not impossible, that the early church really was that way. I invite you to suspend disbelief, practice deliberate naivete. Imagine the impossible. Because, as scripture tells us, nothing is impossible with God. (Luke 1:37)

The early church was an egalitarian form of community. Hospitality was among its highest priorities. Joining the church reoriented people’s lives. Outsiders could look at the church and know them by their fruits, by their generosity, devotions, their glad and generous hearts. They were by no means the only community living this way - but the contrast with the Greco-Roman norm was profound. There are communities like this, today. The new monastic movement has intentional communities in urban areas, living together, holding all in common and helping anyone in need, praying and studying and breaking bread with glad and generous hearts.
There are old monastics like this, too, monks and nuns living in community. There are churches in Lowell and Cambridge and Brighton feeding and housing folks vulnerable to CoVid19. And as I was reminded this week by a podcast for LGBTQ+ Christians, there are other examples of this kind of intentional communal living. Rev. Brian Murphy says, “When I was first figuring out how being Christian fit into being out and queer, I heard this text, and thought, oh, that’s the queer community. I didn’t think of the church I was part of…queer people for generations have been taking care of each other. Queer folks - Christian and non - might have more in common with the Jesus movement than people who loudly proclaim their Christianity today.” (Brian G. Murphy, paraphrased from the Queer Theology Podcast for May 10, 2020)

It’s impossible, this moment we’re in. Let’s just say that up front, it’s impossible to do what we’ve had to do. One single pandemic moment convinced millions of people to change everything, overnight. We changed how we ate, we changed who we spend time with, we changed how we handle our resources, we change how we communicate 3with each other, and day by day people have been saved by the changes we’ve made,
impossible though they may be.

It’s impossible to worship online.
It’s impossible to stay at home so long.
It’s impossible to teach children remotely.
It’s impossible to treat patients through telemedicine.
It’s impossible.

Here we are.
It’s painful, to be sure. The grief of the mounting death toll is absolutely staggering. 2The disruption of 14% unemployment in the US is shocking. To save even one life, most of us would have endured a stay at home gladly - and now, despite many more deaths predicted, “economies are being reopened.” We are sitting with a profound grief and disruption. And we are on the cusp of a new reality that we have only begun to imagine.
Whether we are staying at home or eager to get going, A lot of us are thinking, what’s next. What does our world look like two or three years from now? Will the world be permanently different? Will our orientation stay shifted? Will our solidarity with workers we now understand to be essential last? How will we protect the most vulnerable people? Will our commitment to science last? Will we find a way to keep carbon emissions down?

2 The WHO TCOVID-19 Situation Report for May 7 reports 3.67 million confirmed cases (83,456) and 254,045 deaths (6,539 new). - Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, May 8

4 Human systems tend to want to return to equilibrium and normalcy, but they don’t have to. We don’t have to return to the parts of normal that are unjust and unkind. In the early decades of the common era, a group of people witnessed a profound tragedy and endured grief and transformation and then did the impossible. “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.” Historians tell us, “The bubonic plague...led to the Renaissance. The Great Depression gave birth to the social safety net…” 3 It’s impossible to imagine what comes next, but we have some choice in the matter. We can rebuild in a way that is just and compassionate. As a fictional character once said, “We have done the impossible and that makes us mighty.” 4 Having done that which was impossible to imagine, we can imagine doing the impossible again. On a local level, I wonder how Pilgrim’s mission and ministry will be transformed in the next five years. It will certainly not go untouched by CoVid19. It will be our common choice to ask how God calls us to a ministry of compassion and justice, how we will continue to be

“A welcoming home to all spiritual seekers
Making a difference in our world,
By fusing our Christian faith with everyday life and
Serving God by serving others.”

So often contemporary Christians think, we could not be like the first century church, it would be impossible.

Well, now we live in a radically changed world that was impossible to imagine three months ago. We cannot undo what has changed, but now we have choices about the future we build together. Maybe the first century church’s radical generosity and hospitality can be in our future as well as our origin story. That same somewhat skeptical Biblical scholar says this: “Acts urges me to dream bigger and expect more.” (Matt Skinner)

What I’m saying is, it’s not impossible to imagine.
Amen.

3 ([https://www.sightline.org/2020/05/08/the-plague-brought-the-renaissance-...](https://www.sightline.org/2020/05/08/the-plague-brought-the-renaissance-what-could-covid-19-bring/))
4 Reference to the TV Show Firefly.