

*All who believed were together and had all things in common. And they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need (Acts 4:32f).*

It should not be surprising that critics of acquisitiveness and advocates of socialism and communism have repeatedly pointed to the example of the early church. *From each according to his ability, to each according to his need* originates not with Karl Marx but with St Luke, the author of the *Acts of the Apostles*.

As the story unfolds in Acts evidence concerning possessions is diverse. The “Hellenists,” apparently Jewish Christians who spoke Greek, complained that their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Luke Timothy Johnson observes that every welfare system has difficulties balancing need and resources.

As the Book of Acts tells the story, the right of private property coexisted with the practice of holding all things in common. Selling one’s goods and giving the proceeds to the common fund was not compulsory; it was a response to the prompting of the Spirit.

Jesus’ declaration that *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God* (Luke 18:25) challenges us to prayerfully and thoughtfully discern whether, in relation to our possessions, we are heeding the prompting of the spirit of capitalism or the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

We have long cherished the notion that all people are created equal. But in the real world our lives are not balanced with equal opportunities and resources. Inequality is consequential. Societies with the greatest wealth gap have the lowest sense of wellbeing; societies with the smallest wealth gap have the greatest sense of wellbeing.

According to Robert M. Saplosky, a professor of biological science, neurology and neurological sciences, societies with wide gaps between rich and poor create ongoing social and psychological stresses. Stress grinds down the body in a host of unhealthy ways, affecting our brains, our immune systems and our DNA. Around the world, health and social problems grow as income disparities widen within societies.

And it is not just the poor who are stressed. With increasing inequality, the rich typically expend more resources insulating themselves from the world underneath the bridges. They spend more of their own money on gated communities, security, private schools, bottled water and expensive organic food. And they give lots of money to politicians who help them maintain their status. It is stressful to construct thick walls to keep everything stressful out.

The Psalm (133) describes a pilgrimage to a religious festival. The festival transformed the pilgrims into a family that for a holy time ate and lived together, a time when life was good and pleasant. Augustine claimed that this psalm’s vision of life together gave birth

to the monasteries, where each gives according to ability and receives according to need.

According to the author of First John, the fruit of living together in unity is joy: *we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete/full* (1 John 1:3f).

This fellowship bridges the undeniable differences between God and humanity as well as between one human being and another. Joy is the distinguishing characteristic of this fellowship. The abundance of God's grace is experienced in the fullness of joy. Perhaps, most critically, out of the joy known in this fellowship arises resistance against despair.

Thomas, in despair, absented himself from the fellowship of the disciples. He missed out on meeting Jesus and on the promised peace and joy, the commissioning of the community, and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Then, when he is present with them on the following Sunday, he meets Jesus, receives peace, has his doubts graciously met, and comes to faith. The message is clear, says David Ford: to know the joy of the Lord, *be fully part of the fragile, fallible community of disciples/learners.*

Thomas' testimony to the resurrection, *My Lord and my God*, is not possible apart from participation in that fragile, fallible community. The emperor Domitian first claimed the titles *Our Lord and our God*, so for the first readers of the gospel, the cry of Thomas was also a radical challenge to the most powerful person in the world. Jesus, not Caesar, Jesus not any wannabe Caesar, is the rightful bearer of these titles.

*With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all* (Acts 4:33). Before a word was spoken, the most powerful testimony to the resurrection was the community of disciples who were *of one heart and soul . . . who held everything in common* (Acts 4:32).

If the resurrection is the claim that there is something more to life than despair, joy is the experience of this something more. The old English word "respair" refers to hope born in the midst of despair. Faithful participation in the fragile, fallible community of disciples is how we come to know the joy of resurrection faith and experience the birth of hope in the midst of despair.