

Diffuse or In Common

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In 1968, psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latane conducted an experiment about people's response to emergencies. They gathered a group of participants for a study, and had them complete some task, which the participants believed to be the study, but which was in fact beside the point.

At some point during the study, an actor would call for help from an adjacent room and collapsed to the ground pretending to be unconscious.

In cases where a participant believed they were the only one to witness the collapse, 85% of them responded by quickly acting to call for help.

But, subjects who believed that another person had heard the call, only responded to help 62% of the time

And finally, subjects who believed that four or more others heard the call, only responded to help 32% of the time.

Which meant that the more people who heard a person call for help, the less likely that person was to receive the help they needed.

Darley and Latane named this finding, "the diffusion of responsibility."

It describes a—perhaps understandable—but distressing human tendency. The tend to think that other people will resolve crisis.

A diffusion of responsibility.

Today's reading from the book of Acts gives us a picture of the earliest Christian community, the followers of Jesus who gathered after his death and resurrection and began asking the question of: "what now?"

How do we organize our lives together? What are we supposed to do? How do we know? Who is in charge?

But right from the start, we get this description of that community.

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common."

They held everything in common.

If there was anyone in need, they drew from what they had together to be sure that everyone's needs were met.

This strikes me as just the opposite of what Darley and Latane observed. Rather than a group taking less responsibility together, they took on more. Rather than letting responsibility become diffuse, they held it in common.

At best, one of the things that faith does for us is it lifts us out of our myopic and self-centered tendencies and inspires us to take a wider view.

At its best, faith takes our instinctual need to feed ourselves and turns it outward so that we will feed strangers.

At its best, faith takes our in born drive to protect our own children, and makes us zealous defenders of the wellbeing of other people's children.

Faith connects us to the truth that we are all connected to one another.

And so for these early disciples, faith turned them away from the private ownership of their things, toward a collective in which each gave away control over what was theirs, so that together they would have enough for all.

You and I live in a culture that is so dependent on the idea of private ownership that it is difficult for us to fathom entering into such a relationship with others. Sure we may cooperate and collaborate with *some* of what we have. But *all* of it?

I have always heard these words as a stinging rebuke of my self-interestedness. I have always heard it as a challenge to the idea that I own things myself. And it is those things.

But this text struck me a different way this week, as I was working on this sermon on Earth Day. As I was preparing to speak with you this morning, or rather I should say, while I was procrastinating a bit and poking around the internet, I stumbled on a photo I have seen many times before, of the earth, our planet, from the surface of the moon.

And I saw that image of our planet, floating in the void, and suddenly these words hit me a new way.

"They held all things in common"

In addition to being an admonition for us to live more generously and cooperatively with one another. It is also a statement of fact.

Bottom line, all we have depends on this planet beneath our feet. We each need to take things from it. And if we do so irresponsibly, we will hurt others.

We hold this home of ours in common.

What I do effects the air you breathe.

What one nation on one shore does, effects the sea level on the other shore.

What one company does, effects the temperature of the planet we all share.

We hold this in common.

Whether we like it or not. Whether we accept it or not, does not change the truth that you and I and all of us, will be partners in either the healing, or the continued harming of our only home.

I think that most of us understand this, and know it to be true, and most of us also likely know what needs to change, and yet I find myself most days standing there, like one of the subjects in that study, uncertain what to do next, and half-trusting, half-hoping that someone else has got this situation under control.

In 2014, the Okjokull Glacier in Iceland melted completely. The site where it once stood is now marked with a plaque that I feel like encapsulates our situation:

It reads:

“A letter to the future. Okjokull is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as glacier. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done.

Only you know if we did it.” It is dated August 2014, CO2 415 ppm.

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I want to go back to Darley and Latane’s lab. Because they also ran a variation on their experiment. This time, they set it up so that all the participants could see each other. So rather than assuming that the person in the next room heard the person asking for help, they could see one another, and see what they did.

And in those cases, the group never failed to render aid.

There may have been a little confusion for a few moments, some missteps, some awkward looking at one another, but very quickly that group recognized that they held this moment in common, and they met the challenge.

Community makes it much harder for responsibility to become diffuse.

And I think this will be one of the most important parts of how we can address the climate crisis. By talking to each other about what we see and about what we are doing.

By showing off our compost piles, by swapping vegetarian recipes, by asking our neighbors with solar panels to tell us how they got it done, by talking to our friends about how our climate values impact how we vote, or where we spend our money.

For too long the climate crisis has just been something that each of us can fret about privately while doing very little to actually respond meaningfully.

But we hold this in common. And I think we need to take a cue from the early church and all bring what we've got to one another with enthusiasm and love so that we can meet the needs of this moment.

Later in the service, we are going to kick this off by sharing a video telling the story of what some other UCC churches are doing in response to the climate crisis, and we will have an invitation from one of our members on something you can do this week.

If we all get stuck feeling like what we do won't make a difference, then we will not make a difference.

But if we hold this in common, if we find ways to encourage and inspire each other to meet this moment, then we *can* make a difference, in fact we *will*.