

Spring Institute for Lived Theology

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Session #2: Professor Jürgen Moltmann

“There is enough for everyone: The Spirit of life and social consciousness”

Well good morning. This morning I shall not start with autobiographical stories but with the Bible, with scripture. It's on social consciousness of the Spirit of life and social hope, and I find it best to start with an exegesis of the first Pentecost story. I will read it now from Acts, and then give an interpretation, and then I will raise some questions, one to the role of the congregation and second about freedom and equality in modern society.

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with rejoicing. Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that he possessed were his own, but they had everything in common.

And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many were possessors of lands and houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need (Acts 4:31 – 35).

There is enough for everyone! That is the incredible message of this first Pentecost story. We are not being told of some story about 'the golden age' of the first Christians long ago. This is the announcement to us today about real and possible ways of living in the superfluity the creative spirit. It is a message through which we ourselves can arrive at a new experience: the experience of the community of the Spirit.

There is enough for everyone: but ten percent of the people in my country are living beneath subsistence level. That is the poverty existing in the affluent society of West Germany. How do these things fit together?

There is enough for everyone: but more than 500 million people in the world are hungry and 77 nations are on the wealthiest countries list for development aid. How does that make sense?

There is enough for everyone: but millions of men and women are unable to find work. Mineral resources are getting scarcer and scarcer. Sources of energy are drying up. Prices are rising. Debts are increasing. Want is spreading in all areas of life. What a contradiction!

How can there be 'enough for everyone' when we know that from the very beginning men and women have lived with want, with empty stomachs and thirsty throats, with anxiety in their hearts and fear at their backs? If people have always had to live like this in the past, and will undoubtedly have to go on living like this in the future? There has never been enough, there is still not enough, and there never will be enough. Surely that has to be our indignant answer. But are we right? Were the first Christians really just talking nonsense? What is the truth?

Now the Pentecost story was talking about an experience of God, not of a social program. It is the experience of the Spirit who descends on men and women, permeates them through and through, soul and body, and brings them to a new community and fellowship with one another. In this experience people discover that they are filled with new energies they had never imagined to exist, and find the courage for a new style of living. That is why the Spirit is called 'creative Spirit', 'life-giving Spirit', 'the Spirit of the Resurrection', in fact the 'Holy Spirit'.

It is a remarkable thing that whenever people in the New Testament talk about the experience of God in the creative Spirit they become intoxicated and fall into superlatives. They talk about 'the abundance' of the Spirit, the 'overflowing, exuberance' of the Spirit, and the boundless 'riches of life', etcetera. 'In every way you are enriched so you are not lacking in any gift', Paul told the little group of Christians among the workers in Corinth. People later called the Christian community in Jerusalem "the poor", but in our text we are told that there was not a needy person

among them. Everybody has enough, more than enough; there's no want anymore, not in any way. And this is the unanimous experience of life in the Spirit, the life-giving Spirit.

Is this realistic, or just a kind of religious ecstasy? Is it a possibility we can actually experience ourselves? Something we can really put into practice? Or is this nothing more than an expression of a religious longing?

We find three factors in our story for the fullness of life and the overcoming of every want:

First: 'And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.' This is the first thing, for this is the beginning of everything else. It is the resurrection of the crucified Christ from the dead that opens up the fullness of life, of eternally living life. Death's power has been taken away. The menaces of death have already ceased to be effective. Immortal life and life's indestructible joys are already present, here and now. Everyone can enjoy eternal life and blessedness; everyone can have both; for nothing... (muffled) through grace. The risen Christ gives divine life to everybody who enters into the unity of his people and believers.

Now, we see the contrast. To be in want means to be shut out from the pleasures of life. To be in want means to not have enough to eat and drink. To be in want means to be sick and lonely. In the ultimate resort, to be in want means to lose life itself. The greatest want of all, the absolute deprivation, is death. All the other wants we experience and suffer from in life are connected with death. They are all something death steals from life. Because we know we have to die, we cannot get enough of living. It's very simple. But if Christ is risen, this means the spread of hope for the life that is immortal, for a life no death can kill, for a life in which there is always enough, more than enough, not just for those of us who are still alive, but for the dead too.

The second point or factor for the experience of the first Christian community is 'now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul'. This is the second factor and it takes us a step further. Men and women, quite unknown to one another, became believers and

these people are at once 'of one heart and soul'. Very strange. This is what the experience of the Spirit of fellowship means. The Spirit of fellowship is the God among us, or as Bishop Taylor in England said, the 'go-between God'. In him therefore the divisions between people and our enmity towards one another are overcome. The oppression of people by other people stops. The humiliation of people by other people comes to an end. The estrangement of one person from another is swept away. And all of a sudden masters and servants become brothers; men and women become friends; privileges and discriminations disappear from human society. And we become 'of one heart and soul'.

Wherever this happens we experience God, God among us, the God who is the community and fellowship of the Holy Spirit. How is this possible? Well, the secret, I think, is very simple: Whenever God, the fountain and source of life and all goodly power, ceases to be a God far away in heaven and becomes present among us, then there is no longer any want. But where there is no longer any want there is no longer any struggle for power either; no more rivalry; no more competition; and where there is no struggle for power and competition and no rivalry, the age-old fears of one another we have built up simply fall away and so do our desperately bottled up aggressions. We step out into free life. Our fears and our aggressions simply become ludicrous because there is enough for everyone; God himself is there. He lives among us and invites us through his spirit of fellowship to become of one heart and soul.

And the third factor: 'No one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.' This is the third point and everything else comes down to this. In the resurrection hope and the experience of the God of community and fellowship, no one needs to cling to his possessions any longer. Anyone who has found the assurance of eternal life no longer needs the ambiguous security of possessions. So all possessions are there to be used by people who need them. This is why 'they had everything in common', and it is why there was 'not a needy person among them'. They brought everything they had to the apostles and gave 'to each as any had need'.

So this first Pentecost congregation had enough to satisfy life's elemental needs; more than enough. The community of Christ always has enough to satisfy life's elemental needs; more

than enough. Later the emperor Julian the Apostate said about the community of Christians in Rome, ‘well these Christians do not merely feed their own poor, they feed the poor of the whole city as well.’ None of these Christian people were rich and yet they lived in superfluity.

Now, there are some smart people who are critical about this story. They say: ‘Oh well, yes, of course – that was primitive Christian communism. But it didn’t work out in the long run. Human beings are just wicked by nature. They need property because they are egoists. So let’s stick to healthy egoism!’ This is a very spirit-lacking criticism, because we’ve always had in history Christian communities like this. In the Catholic order, for example; in Mennonite communities; and the Bruderhof communities. We’ve always had examples that this worked. And this has nothing to do with communism as a social program; this has everything to do with the experience of God among us, the Holy Spirit.

It is of course true when we look around in our world, we see that exactly the opposite principle dominates our lives, our thinking, our economy and our politics. In all these sectors of life the slogan is ‘never enough!’ Our economy is based on wants. We assume that there are wants everywhere, wants which can only be met by work and more work, by stepping up our production, and by more and more mass products. For everyone who runs an economy knows that he has to meet increasing demands with a scarcity of goods – I think we have all experienced this in every household – and he knows too that the race between growing demands and never-quite-adequate supply is a race we can never win.

Of course there are natural, basic wants which have to be satisfied if people want to live, and if they are to live in decent and humane conditions. But our economy has left these basic needs far behind. It is not these natural requirements that dominate our lives and provide the driving power for our economy; it is demands that have been artificially stimulated and heightened. So these additional desires are in principle limitless, of course. They can be stepped up beyond any possible fulfillment. Why? In our modern society human beings have apparently been turned into voracious monsters. They are tormented by an unquenchable thirst for life. They are possessed by an insatiable hunger for power. The more they have, the more they want, so their appetite is endless and can never be appeased.

Why have people in our modern world become so distorted? I think because both consciously and unconsciously they are dominated by the fear of death. For a person's greed for life is really his fear of death; and their fear of death finds expression in an unbridled hunger for power. 'You only live once!' we are told. 'You might miss out on something!' The hunger for pleasure, for possessions, for power; the thirst for recognition through success and admiration – this is the sin of modern men and women. This is their godlessness and their god-forsakenness. Because the person who loses God makes a god out himself. And in this way a human being becomes a proud and unhappy mini-god.

'There is never enough for everyone. So reach out now and help yourself!' This is what death tells us – death which will swallow us up after we have swallowed everything else. Our modern economy based on want, our modern ideology of growth and the compulsion to expand and to globalize are pacts with death. They are deadly games with human anxiety. They are bets placed on the craving for life, and they are sucking people dry.

There is never enough for everybody so that is why we have competition in our schools for the best marks, in our universities for courses that promise the most lucrative careers, in our working lives for secure jobs and rising income. There is never enough for everyone: this motto shatters every human community and rouses one nation against another, one class against another, and in the end everybody against everybody else, and everyone against his or her own self. It is a slogan of fear which makes people lonely and leads them into a world which is in principle hostile. 'Every man for himself!' people say. If you don't push, if you go to the back of the queue, that's your own fault. Everyone is his own best friend. And so we have a world that really is without heart and without soul.

Now if we want to find true life and escape the universal death of the world – if we want to gain the true riches of life, and to escape from poverty and want – then we must turn around and begin at the point where the severest loss of all begins: with God. Godlessness leads to the feeling of God-forsakenness. God-forsakenness lets the fear of death and the devouring lust for life well up in us; and then there is 'never enough'. But if God is not far off, if God is near, if God is present

among us in the Spirit, then we find a new, indescribable joy in living. We are in safe keeping; we are at home; we are trusted and can trust ourselves and other people. Our profoundest want, the want of God, has been remedied. Our yearning for happiness has been fulfilled. We are blissful and content.

And God is present, in the Spirit, among us. We have to understand this to mean that God is present in our lives as the living God. Our limited, vulnerable and mortal lives are sustained and penetrated through and through by God's life, which is unlimited, glorious and eternal. So in our pure existence, we sense God's existence. In our suffering we feel the pain of God. In our happiness we meet the ascent of God's bliss. God is present in his Spirit: 'In him we live and move and have our being'. Everyone who experiences and realizes this discovers how calm and relaxed they become, because they cease to be afraid.

When the fear of death leaves us, the destructive craving for life leaves us, too. We can then restrict our desires and demands to our natural requirements. The dreams of power and happiness become ridiculous, so that we use only what we really need, and no longer go along with the lunacy of extravagance and waste. For this we do not even need solemn appeals for saving and moderation; for life itself is glorious, and here joy in existence can be had for nothing.

This means that the best thing we can do is to build up communities of mutual trust, and strengthen our sense for the common life we share for one another and for one another. The ideology of society that 'there is never enough for everyone' makes people lonely. It isolates people and robs them of relationships. But the opposite of poverty is not property. The opposite of both poverty and property is community. Because in community we become rich: rich in friends, in neighbors, in colleagues, in comrades, in brothers and sisters. Together, in a community, we can help ourselves in most of our difficulties. For after all, there are enough people and enough ideas, capabilities and energies to be had. They are only lying fallow, or are stunted and suppressed. So let us discover our wealth; let us discover our solidarity; let us build up communities; let us take our lives into our own hands, and at long last out of the hands of the people who want to dominate and exploit us.

All really helpful projects or campaigns have grown up out of spontaneous grass-roots communities, not from above, at least not in my country. Neighborly help, help for the poor and the sick, help for handicapped children – the community of Christians can become the source of imaginative social service and continually new initiatives for life and living. They have not always been the source, unfortunately, but it can be provided that it is a Pentecost community. In the great bureaucratic organizations of society, the state and the churches of my country, there is always want. But in the voluntary coming together of men and women at the grass-roots level, life's true wealth is experienced. Once all the nations have attained the liberty to provide for themselves before they produce for the world market, there will be enough for everyone to be satisfied.

There is enough for everybody when the justice of God is added to the fullness of life, to the abundance of life's powers, and to the adequacy of the means of living. It is this divine justice that ensures that everyone receives 'as each has any need' – no less, and no more.

The fullness of the divine life which we experience in the Spirit and the God among us in living communities makes us in another way hungry, insatiably hungry. And in a different way it makes us thirsty, unquenchably thirsty. So 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.' This is the sector where our tasks for the future are to be found: in the spread of social justice and righteousness in our nations, among the poor and the rich people of the world. The poor are crying out for justice, not only for prosperity; and we ourselves are perishing from injustice, even if we are leading a pleasant life. The hunger for justice is holy hunger; the thirst for justice is sacred thirst. It is the hunger and thirst of the Holy Spirit itself. May that Spirit fill us through and through.

So I think there are two fields I think we should discuss now. One is the role of the Christian community, and you know more about this...For me it's quite a natural development: if a Christian community comes together in a worshipping community first, it will also become a praying community. If it is a praying community then it's always the next step to become a diaconic community, taking care of the children, the handicapped, the sick in the congregation,

and around in the neighborhood. And if then you come to those who are in need – to the homeless, unemployed, depressed, and sick people – you must turn around to society and say it must take care of these people. So the diaconic community becomes as the next step a prophetic community in society. This is a very simple experience. When I was a pastor in my younger years I also served in a hospital and when I found a person who was sick I asked ‘is your family coming and visiting you’. And one person said ‘no, nobody’s coming’, and I went to the family and told them they must visit your sick member, otherwise you are committing injustice and forgetting about love. So the one point is to take care of the sick person. The other is to turn around to the family and say ‘you must take care of that person’. And that’s the prophetic side of the diaconic service we do in the Christian community.

But you know more about it and I would like to listen... Another question is of open questions in our modern society because we are members of our modern society and influenced by the spirit of the modern society. For me one of the main questions, at least in Europe, is how do we reconcile or relate freedom and equality in a modern society. The U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, says ‘all men are created equal.’ The French Revolution said ‘freedom, equality and fraternity.’ The Human Rights Declaration says ‘all men and women are free and equal.’ So how do we relate freedom and equality in a modern society? The experiment of equality without freedom was done in the socialist societies of east Europe and Soviet Russia and China; equality without society didn’t work. It’s a failure of state socialism in the east; there was equality but without freedom and this was inhuman and did not meet the reality of human desire. In the west now we have freedom but without equality. Does this work in the long run? Can there be a democracy of freedom without equality? If we have freedom for the rich and the poor, for the strong and the weak, for present and coming generations, this will put use, injustice, oppression and misery of the poor and the weak and the coming generations, because the rich, the strong, and the present generations are stronger. So we need to find more equality.

What troubles me most is the question of security: Is security a commodity which only the rich can afford? We are entering into a situation in our society where there are more private security agents working in the streets than police, and they work only for the security of those who can

afford this. Is this good for democracy or is this bad for democracy? Don't we need to strengthen the common equality of human beings in a modern society? How can we reconcile personal freedom and social equality? I think this is one of the main questions we are facing in the future? And this then also takes the role of the state into question, of politics, since your presidents Ronald Reagan...etc., their politics have de-regulated the economy and politics is now, at least in my country, regulated by economy, by the big corporations...(muffled). So must we not work for a certain independence of politics over against the corporations so that the state and politics is no longer regulated by economic affairs?

Well these are questions which came to me after I read again this story of Acts 4: 'there is enough for everyone'. I think this is still a great and wonderful promise: 'and there was not a needy person among them'. I wish that we could say this of our congregations and our communities: there really is not a need person among us. That would be great. Ok, this is my input. Thank you.