

“One Heart and Soul”

Salado UMC—8 April 2018

2nd Sunday of Easter

Preaching Text: Acts 4:32-35—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

**“The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings;
the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries”**

(Winston Churchill).

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Hear the day’s lesson which we might title: Believers Share Possessions.

[32] 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. [33] With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. [34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. [35] They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:32-35).

For the next few weeks, we are going to look at the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The author who wrote Luke also wrote Acts. Luke/Acts address a person named “Theophilus.” Some scholars believe he was Luke’s patron—a person who provided for Luke so Luke could write “an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1-3)¹. Others, however, see in “Theophilus” a more general “lover of God,” thus a wider audience. This means that Luke writes to people who love God and accordingly writes to us! Perhaps we can hold both ideas in mind at once!

Near the beginning of chapter 3 Luke narrates Peter and John’s healing of an afflicted beggar. Next, Peter preaches in response to the people’s utter astonishment. Peter tells the crowd that it was not by his or John’s power that they healed the man. Rather Peter tells them “by faith in his [Jesus’] name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you” (Acts 3:16).

The healing annoyed the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees because Peter and John taught the people and proclaimed in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. Thus, the authorities arrested both Peter and John. They spent the night in jail. As often in Acts, when the authorities arrest an apostle, this situation simply provides an opportunity for believers to witness to Jesus in a public or court forum. And so, Peter preaches a sermon before the council.

Seeing the boldness of both Peter and John and realizing that they were “uneducated and ordinary men,” those assembled in the council were amazed—just like the crowd assembled to see the healing of

¹ Here are the opening verses of both Luke and Acts for comparison: [1:1] Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, [2] just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, [3] I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, Luke 1:1-3; and [1:1] In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning [2] until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen (Acts 1:1-2).

the afflicted beggar. To conclude, they let them go with a stern warning “to speak no more to anyone in this name” (Acts 4:17).

After release, the apostles and friends do an eccentric thing: they worship God and sing God’s praises. Perhaps even more remarkable is the content of their prayer. They do not ask for protection or relief from the persecution of the religious authorities. Rather, they pray that God might “grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29). Bishop Will Willimon writes, regarding this boldness:

If I, like Peter and John, had had a close and potentially disastrous brush with the authorities, my prayer would be for divine protection rather than boldness! Yet, the only thing the community asked of God is the power “to speak thy word with all boldness” (4:29). It is God’s business to heal and to work signs and wonders in the name of Jesus (4:30). It is the community’s business to speak the word with boldness in the midst of the mighty acts of God.²

Now, these that prayed began to shake. Luke wants readers to see this as a sign of answered prayer. Our text next illustrates what a Christian community looks like when it is at peace with God and itself. Hear again our lesson:

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. [33] With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. [34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. [35] They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:32-35).

What does this text suggest to us, those of us who live 2000 years beyond the events recounted by Luke? I want to lift up three things for us to consider this morning.

1. These believers are of “one heart and soul.”
2. Those who witness in God’s spirit do so with great power.
3. God grants great grace to those who care more for each other than possessions.

What Luke provides for us in this story of the church at peace with God and itself is a matching environment of perfection like Eden. We first saw this perfect domain in Genesis 1-2. When people live according to God’s dictates and as God’s people and not simply as individuals, then they will live in perfection. The word “binds,” in the Greek, is *sundesmos/syndesmosis* and also the word Greeks used for ligaments. Physicians/Doctors even today use this same word for ligaments. This is a marvelous insight, particularly seen with Paul calling the church the Body of Christ (see: Romans 7:4; 8:10; 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 12:12, 17, 27; 5:10; 2 Corinthians 12:2). Love makes up the ligaments in the Body of Christ! Now, if you know anything at all about the human body, you know how important ligaments are:

- *ligaments hold the body together;
- *ligaments enable the body parts to work;
- *ligaments give the body its ability to move and function;

² William H. Willimon, *Acts* (Interpretation Series), John Knox Press, 1988, p. 50.

*ligaments give power, direction, unity, coordination, and grace.

If you strain, tear, or injure a ligament, the body can't work right. Let me paraphrase Paul: "Above everything else, put on love because love 'ligaments' (*syndesmosis*) everywhere together in perfect harmony"³ [or NRSV: Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14)].

When I was a child, sometimes my father dropped me off at church several hours before confirmation class. While I waited, I roamed the church. Often, I studied the paintings (more precisely—prints) scattered throughout our church's Sunday school rooms. Of course, Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ" drew my attention. This print sold more than 500 million copies. A replica print, "The Gleaners," by Jean François Millet, was my favorite. Our Sunday school teacher told us that this picture was of Ruth harvesting barley and taught us about "gleaning." Later I learned that the painting was likely not of Ruth as Millet was a 19th-century realism painter and only painted contemporary scenes. Still, the painting conveyed the biblical concept of gleaning.

The biblical practice of "gleaning" was a social net that provided for the poor. Those who harvested crops did not harvest everything. Rather, they left some "leftovers" in a wide ribbon around the field's edge. In fact, this practice was so central to the Hebrews that they wrote it into the law. Several examples come from Deuteronomy 24:21: "When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow." This procedure did two things. First it provided for those who did not own land, or enough land, to feed families. Second, this system offered dignity to those who gleaned. Beyond dispute, gleaning was charity. Yet it allowed the beneficiaries a prospect to work for their gift of food. In the Acts' church, this equivalent attitude of generosity made for an ideal church. When we share what God has first given us, then we have a situation in which . . . "there was not a needy person among them." Amen.

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³ James Moore, *Healing Where it Hurts*, Abingdon Press, 1993, pp. 25-26.