

Acts 4:31-37

³¹ After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. *(A reminder that it's GOD's power that's behind everything that's happening here.)*

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. ³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

INTRODUCTION

This is a **snapshot of the community God created us to be a part of**. We weren't meant to go it alone.

And God's created each of us with a thirst for community.

- You might be a student, trying to find that community at school...a peer group you can belong to...
- You might be trying to shape your family into this kind of community, where each member knows and cares for the others...
- You might be experiencing a taste of this community in a good friendship, or a romantic relationship, or even your sports team or military unit...
- On the other hand, some of you might be discouraged by how little of this kind of community you've experienced—even in churches. Maybe you've hoped to find something like this but then seen it crumble, and now you're jaded...wondering if it's even possible.

We **weren't meant to go it alone**, and each of us probably wants a community where we can belong. In Acts 4, we get a **snapshot of the community** we were created to be a part of—and that all these other "communities" (friendships, sports teams, families) point us towards.

But if this sermon were just about "BE a good community! Take care of each other! BE united!" it would **miss the point**. **Neither you nor I can create the community we're longing for**—either outside or inside the Church. We try each in our own ways: As a

pastor, I know how easy it is to **try to pressure others into MY idea** of what the church should look like. But that's taking over JESUS' role.

Right in the middle of our passage this morning, it talks about **“the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” and “God’s GRACE”**. **THAT’s the heart of Christian community**—not yours or my vision of what an ideal community should look like. **The risen Jesus is the author of true community.**

It’s possible to fall in love with “community” without loving Jesus. But in the end, those “communities” just collapse, because the Christian community is simply a reflection of God’s own character. Lasting community is only found in His kingdom.

Whenever someone becomes a member at New Hope, they’re given a rock with Jesus’ words: **“I will build my church.”** It’s JESUS’ church, we belong to HIM, and HE will build His church. We’re simply called to join in what He’s doing.

THEME: The Church—every single Christian—belongs to Jesus. So it’s not ours to control, AND Jesus has bound us together on a shared mission.

Sometimes we try to take over His role as Lord of the Church (trying to build it ourselves); sometimes we simply ignore His claim on us as the one King of the Church, and don’t yield to Him or invest in one another. But we are not our own; we belong to Jesus—and that means we are bound to one another as members of the Christian community.

THE AUTHOR OF COMMUNITY: THE RISEN JESUS

I want to start with verse 33 in this passage, because this is the center of the community. This is what binds Christians together so they can be “one in heart and mind”.

³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all...

The resurrected Jesus is the center of Christian community. He is alive...He’s dealt with your sins once for all in His death, pours out His grace to you, and He alone is Lord, gathering you into His church.

It’s so easy, though, to forget that each of us—and the Christian community—belong to JESUS and is energized by God’s GRACE. **Sometimes we try to CONTROL the church** as if it belongs to US...and basically usurp Jesus’ role.

“The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him [or her] a very definite idea of what Christian life together [should look like]. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. [To experience genuine Christian fellowship, we] must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves....He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter...He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together....[But] God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ.... (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26-30, taken from <http://www.hiswayministries.org/fddisillusion.htm>, <http://www.downshoredrift.com/downshoredrift/2007/07/bonhoeffer-on-w.html>)

The Christian community is messy: It's a body of forgiven people, who still wrong each other and still get on each others' nerves (sometimes like porcupines—who poke one another when they get close!), but who are also being transformed by God's grace...we're each others' brothers and sisters—blood relatives through Jesus' sacrifice.

But sometimes, **we forget that we're bound to one another by Jesus' sacrifice** for us. We act as if we're autonomous and **try to go it alone—like a soccer player** in the middle of the field on her iPhone while the game is going on right around her. If you're a Christian, you ARE a member of the Church, and that means you are bound to other Christians—especially those in your congregation.

Christian community is rooted in the living Jesus, and the grace of God.

Now go back to verse 32:

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind.

What does it look like to be “one in heart and mind”? Images:

1. Band of Brothers (photo)
2. Helping Injured Fellow Soldier (photo)
3. Soccer Defensive Wall (photo)
4. Victory Celebration (photo)
5. Medical Team (photo)

Each of these “communities” are bound together by something greater than just that they liked to hang out together.

And it's the same for the church: **Being "one in heart and mind" does NOT mean that these Christians had the same interests**, the careers, personalities, life stages, or even that they liked each other all the time. They're bound together by the risen Lord of the Church—Jesus. He's purchased them and us with His blood, and we're members of His community.

But that's not all. He's our **Lord, which means that He's our absolute commander**—with more authority than any coach or commanding officer. He loves us, and unites us in a **MISSION** to the world.

These **"communities" in the military**, athletics, and healthcare are united in a **SHARED MISSION**. Fighting, competing, saving lives alongside one another binds them together—one in heart and mind.

And **what greater mission is there than Jesus has given His Church? "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses....to the ends of the earth."** Sharing God's love, and fighting against demonic powers that are opposing Jesus and seeking to destroy us and those around us.

Christians are wired to fight...to strive for God's kingdom. "...the church has many generals and that generals exist by battling. Thus, if they are not battling Satan for the expansion of the kingdom, they will end up battling themselves..." (Fernando, 191) **We don't just exist for ourselves; we have a mission: to make more and fully devoted followers of Jesus—as a hospital, not just a fortress.** Extending God's grace to those who need Jesus just as desperately as we do!

And as we realize Jesus has given us a shared mission, it changes our relationships with fellow Christians. We realize that the Church is Jesus' body...and if one part of the body is lacking, all members can suffer harm. If your eyes can't see, you are more likely to fall and cut up your hands. The body is meant to work together.

And that leads to a whole different understanding of ownership, because all we have and are belongs to JESUS—not ourselves...and in service of the mission He's given us. **"No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had."**

HOW DOES THIS PLAY OUT IN THIS PASSAGE

And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all (*In Greek, the sentence goes from "With great power" to "and great grace was in them all."*) ³⁴ **that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales** ³⁵ **and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was**

distributed to anyone who had need. ³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. (*Seems to be same Barnabas who was Paul’s companion throughout Acts. Here Barnabas is a “foil” for Ananias and Saphira.*)

Knowing how Jesus has laid down His life for us, we have the immense privilege of laying down our possessions and time for one another.

Everything belongs to God, to Jesus...and we are STEWARDS...managers of what God has entrusted to us.

But notice that **this passage isn’t about a forced redistribution of wealth**, and it doesn’t say that the Christians sold everything they had. They gave freely, because God had changed their hearts.

“Giving does not become a major sacrifice when we realize that God owns our possessions....in **Buenos Aires**, many members [who heard Jesus’ call to follow Him] brought the titles to their homes...to give to the church. The leaders did not know what to do with this money. After six months of praying...they called the people and told them...they decided to return [everything]. **‘The Lord showed us that he doesn’t want your empty houses,’ they said. ‘He wants a house with you inside taking care of it.** He wants...everything ready—for him. He also wants your car, with you as the driver....Just remember, though, that it all still belongs to him.’...now...‘When visitors come...we don’t say, ‘Who can take these brothers into your house.’ We...command because the house is already given to the Lord. And the people thank the Lord that he lets them live in his house.’” (Fern. 193, quoting Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple*)

So those who had gave to the church benevolence fund to meet the needs of others in the church. That also means there is an **awareness of people’s NEEDS**. But we won’t know the needs of those around us—even if they’re sitting just a few seats over from us on Sundays—**unless we take the time to get to KNOW them**. And then we begin to recognize both surface needs, and deeper needs. That may be financial, or may be something else: maybe babysitting, writing them an encouraging note, or taking the time to listen and pray with them.

And **sometimes it’s harder to receive** (to let others know about our needs) than to give...so in the Christian community, **we have to let others know US** before they’ll be able to LOVE us well. **That might involve reaching out to me or your Care Group leader** (every regular attendee has a member of the leadership team who has committed to pray for you regularly. Just let me know if you don’t know who your Care Group leader is.)

The reality is that sometimes we don't WANT to be invested deeply in the Christian community...It's messy! And as Tim Keller points out, one of our greatest fears is to be known and NOT LOVED...so to guard against this, we don't let others truly know us. When we feel this fear, we need to come back to the gospel: that we are fully known by Jesus, and fully loved by Him. That confidence can free to let others know us, and to know and love them.

And I see this happening at New Hope in many ways...(PERSONAL EXAMPLE)

That **doesn't mean we will all give or receive in the same ways.** We give as we are able...some more financially, some more with time, some more with skills. It will change based on our stage in life and how God's equipped us, and that's ok. We can be creative: There's not one specific mold for the Christian community.

PRACTICALLY

This **can play out in many different ways at New Hope.** If you are wondering how you can help other members of the congregation, perhaps talk to a member of the leadership team. You could give to the benevolence fund in general, or ask to be alerted if there's a specific need—and then you can decide how you might like to help meet those needs. Feel free to talk with me if there's another area you'd like to serve, and I can connect you with the right people.

Jesus has bound us together as one community, with one mission. So we have the privilege of extending God's grace to each other, as He's enabled us.

In order for New Hope to look more like this, **we need to first be surrendering our lives, time, and possessions to Jesus.** HE is the Lord of the church, and we won't find community apart from Him.

As we follow Him, we **can begin to get to know each other better**—or won't know true needs. Do you know others' names? Occupations? Hopes? Struggles? And are you letting yourSELF be known? God knows what He's doing when He gathers us into the church—with different backgrounds, interests, personalities, and resources.

GOSPEL PROCLAMATION AND INVITATION AND SENDING

We **each have a thirst for community.** Ultimately, that is only satisfied in Jesus, within the Christian community that is defined by His grace. Apart from Him, we may find a semblance of community, but it will ultimately fall short. **Apart from Him, we aren't known and loved—and we end up alone.**

But God has laid all of our loneliness on Jesus...all of our selfishness on Jesus...all of our attempts to find community apart from Him on Jesus. And for anyone who trusts in Christ, God binds you to Himself and to His people. And even though Christian community is often messy because of our own sin and the brokenness in the world, HE will build His Church, His bride, for whom He died and rose again.

As we close in prayer, I'll begin, and then we'll have **two minutes of silent prayer.** FIRST, we're called to surrender to Jesus...that's where community begins. And then, in silent prayer, I'd invite you to pray for one or two of those sitting beside, behind, or in front of you. And if you don't know what's going on in their lives, ask God for the opportunity to get to know them better. These ARE your brothers, your sisters, joined with you in community—by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.