



They Were of One Heart and Soul

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan
The Second Sunday of Easter~April 8, 2018*

Acts 4:32-35

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. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Psalm 133

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is, *
for brethren to dwell together in unity! | and went down to the skirts of his clothing. |
| 2 It is like the precious oil upon the head,
that ran down unto the beard, *
even unto Aaron's beard, | 3 Like as the dew of Hermon, *
which fell upon the hill of Zion. |
| | 4 For there the LORD promised his blessing, *
and life for evermore. |

I John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—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. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

I John 1:1-2:2

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in

this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

*Oh, how good and pleasant it is,
when brethren live together in unity!*

Did you hear this wonderful verse from our Psalm today?

*O, how good and pleasant it is,
when brethren live together in unity!*

When is the last time you really felt part of something? The last time you had the overwhelming sense of deeply connecting with a group of people? The sense of sharing a cause, a purpose, a vision, a mission? The sense of being rooted in something much, much greater than yourself?

Unity, whenever and wherever it happens, is deeply moving and transcendent.

And some of you might be lucky enough to experience unity regularly in your workplace or in your family. But others among us will have to dig back quite a bit further to retrieve a solid memory of unity. Maybe you played in the school band. Or on a sports team. Maybe you were part of a really good youth group at your church. Maybe you wrote for the college newspaper. Or acted in plays. Or built a home with Habitat for Humanity.

Access to many of the activities that tend to foster a deep sense of unity, becomes rarer, however, as we grow older. We end up with so many obligations to juggle. Work and family need our attention at every turn. And so we often feel that we can't devote much time to anything that is less-than-essential for our survival. Plus, we're often really tired. Just plain old tired.

And yet, in spite of their impracticality, the yearning for the kinds of deep connections that develop by doing these kinds of activities doesn't just go away. More: the desire to devote ourselves to a meaningful project and for a community to share our dedication to that project is something for which many of us still hold out hope, even if only in the deepest recesses of our consciousness. Certainly, as life gets more complex, having such a community, such a project seems less and less feasible, less and less tenable.

Dreaming about a better way to be human and to build community begins to seem too brazenly idealistic. Not adequately rooted in the stark realities of getting by in contemporary America.

And yet, some piece of us also knows that having a project and having a community, would actually enliven every other part of our lives. That being part of something bigger than ourselves would make everything else feel more important, more meaningful, more real.

In my heart, I have always believed that the church could and should be such a project. That church could be a community of people who dream boldly about the Kingdom of God and scheme together about how to nurture the dawning of the Kingdom in time and space. The church, as I have always conceived of it, should be the best possible context for gathering and developing and mobilizing people who hunger and thirst for righteousness. People who believe that a better world is possible and believe that they can be part of building it. People who dare to live in a different way because they have a strong collective of holy dreamers and schemers backing them up.

You see, it's just too hard to decide to live differently all on our own. It's really only possible together, with the support of a community of conviction and practice.

And that's what I think the church is, at its best: a community of practice. In yoga and meditation circles, people often talk about "having a practice." But in Christianity, we so often talk about being "believers." Being a believer, however, always asks us to go deeper and to become a practitioner.

A practitioner of the Way of Jesus. Because, as we see in our passage from Acts today, hearing and believing

testimony of the Resurrection led the earliest believers into a distinctive and transformative set of practices...into a new way of life.

“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. 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. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

The practice of Resurrection faith, it seems therefore, is the practice of sharing everything. Of sharing everything. And this is interesting, because it doesn't necessarily seem inevitable. It could have been that the primary practice of Resurrection faith was to sit together in deep contemplation, prayer, and meditation. It could have been that the primary practice of Resurrection faith was to build a protest movement against the Empire. It could have been that the primary practice of Resurrection faith was to feast lavishly and celebrate the joy of our embodiment.

But none of these became the main practice of the early believers. What happened instead was the development of a radical way of sharing. A kind of sharing that is so easy to dismiss because it seems so very impractical. Because it seems straight out of a hippie commune, rather than out of the church as we've come to know it. Because it defies the most basic of our values: the value of accumulating resources for the purpose of achieving security. This kind of accumulation is so obviously good to us that we tend to dismiss the Biblical witness as quaint, pre-modern, and therefore less-than-applicable to our complex lives in contemporary American society.

Let me suggest, then, that we take money and property out of the equation, at least for a moment. Because they're so incredibly anxiety producing. And because we have a really hard time hearing that God might have a claim over more than just our hearts. So let me suggest that before going down the treacherous path of Christian economics, we instead look together at what preceded the incredible sharing that we see in today's passage from Acts.

The text says:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.

One heart and one soul.

Before we can even imagine living in a new way, it seems, we must be connected with one another in a brand new way.

The experience of deep unity necessarily precedes the sharing of all things.

So perhaps sharing often feels so very difficult, so very unnatural to us, because we tend not to feel very unified, very connected with others.

Of course, we say we want deeper connections. But a lot of us are, deep down, pretty frightened by the idea of community.

Scared of really being ourselves in public. Scared of how much others might expect of us, if we consent to connection. Scared of how much we really want and need from others, if we're completely honest with ourselves.

And it's especially scary to try to do community at church. This place where we tend to presume that connection will be relatively natural and easy. Where we're supposed to automatically be spiritual brothers and sisters.

So what, especially in this context, does community require?

I've been thinking a lot lately about the act of writing sermons for the gathered people of God at St. Peter's Church.

I often tell stories from my own experience. I try to be appropriately vulnerable. I try to share something real. Because I want to be part of a community where others are vulnerable and real, too. I share stories from my life because I hope they might help you to imagine sharing new stories from your lives.

Sharing our stories matters because connection is at the very heart of our faith. And genuine connection requires authenticity...requires us to risk sharing our truth.

Sometimes, in the receiving line after church, after I've shared something personal in a sermon, people will say to me: "I really enjoyed your story."

And what I always want to say back...but usually don't, is this: I'm glad you enjoyed it, but did it do something to you? What did it touch in you? How did it resonate with your own life experience? Tell me your story...so that we can be of one heart and soul.

But we don't often share this way at church, do we? We don't necessarily come here to share our lives, to share our stories. Sharing often feels far too risky and much too unseemly. It's too important to keep up appearances. So we settle, by and large, for an aesthetic experience. For the beauty of the building, the music, the words. We come for a little refreshment, rather than expecting transformation, in and through relationship.

But refreshment alone is not the fullness of the Resurrected life. The Resurrected life isn't about enjoying a spiritual performance. The Resurrected life is about becoming an actor in the drama. Playing a part in the birthing of new life, of a new people. Connecting with one another in spite of all the reasons to stay separate.

At my previous church in California, we went through a serious process of identity formation together, since we were a brand new community. Early in that process, I asked the community four questions, questions posed by Peter Block in his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*.

The questions are these:

How valuable of a community do you plan for this to be?

How much risk are you willing to take?

How participative do you plan for this to be?

To what extent are you investing in the wellbeing of the whole?

Now these don't necessarily feel like very churchy questions. But, in fact, I think they're consummately churchy. Because church, at its deepest, is a project. We are fed each week with the Body of Christ so that we can begin to live together as One Body...so that we can begin to coordinate our limbs and our faculties in order to do

something utterly new and transformative in the world, together.

I asked my community these four important questions about ownership, and then I asked them a question about possibility. A question they wrestled with for many months. The question:

What can we create together
that we cannot create alone?

What can we create together
that we cannot create alone?

You see, for me, this question is the beginning of everything.

Because this question necessitates the sharing of our hopes and our yearnings. It invites us to share our imagination and ingenuity, our creativity, our giftedness.

This question invites us to become whole persons, with one another, for the sake of the Gospel. To reveal ourselves to one another with the hope and trust that we have something to share and something to receive.

And that in and through this act of sharing and receiving, something greater than ourselves might become possible. That together, we might be able to dream God's dream.

What can we create together
that we cannot create alone?

Let us be dreamers and schemers, together.

Amen.