

**Acts 4:32** Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. **33** And with great power the apostles were giving 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 were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold **35** and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

## UNITY IN DIVERSITY

April 7, 2024

There is the story told about a church business meeting where the issue of buying a new chandelier was being discussed. One person stood up and said, "I am against it for three reasons. One, nobody can spell it. Two, nobody in the church can play it. Three, what we really need in the lobby is better lighting."

If any of you have been on a committee either in the church or any other organization, this funny story might not sound quite so funny. You have probably been in that kind of discussion! Unity does not come easily even on smallish issues where everyone is really in agreement, if everyone is not speaking the same language. Even when we all speak English, not everyone sees and or hears things the same way. So how can we experience unity in all of our diversity?

We are presently in very divisive times. This is another presidential election year. The economy is problematic. Racial tensions are high. People have strong feelings about things like abortion, same sex marriage, gender identity, climate change, border security, the wars in Israel and Ukraine, gun laws, legalization of marijuana, and lots of other more local and personal issues. If we were to take a poll here in this place, on this day, it is unlikely that any two people would have the same position on all of these issues. Each person has their own opinions and each of us may strongly believe that our opinion is the RIGHT one.

So, the opening line of today's scripture reading sounds pretty absurd! "All the believers were one in heart and mind." Who were these people? How could they possibly be in the same heart and mind?

By way of explanation, in this passage, Luke wrote about the church as it was growing shortly following the resurrection of Jesus. After Jesus was taken back up into heaven the apostles were teaching and healing in His name. The group of followers was expanding in number rapidly.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the followers. There were people there from the Roman Empire, from Asia and Africa, from big cities and small towns. People who were there spoke a great variety of languages – while reading that passage, I counted at least 17 different languages mentioned by name. There were Jews and non-Jews, rich and poor, people with different traditions, some who were property owners and some who were not.

It is not realistic to think that all these diverse people in such a large and growing group suddenly changed their entire way of thinking. The original Greek words used by Luke in this passage were "*kardia*" which means heart and "*psyche*" which translates to soul or spirit, rather than mind. Because of this distinction, I think it is fair to say that these people kept their own traditions, preferences and traditions. But following the resurrection of Jesus, these believers, who were filled with the Holy Spirit, had a deep change in their hearts and souls which is what unified them.

Last week we celebrated Easter. That is the culmination of a 40 day season of Lent where we reflect on the events leading up to Jesus' death on the cross. The joy of Easter, that the risen Christ is alive, however is not the end of the story. Indeed, Easter is just the beginning of the story, Today's scripture shows us that the resurrection and

the gift of the Holy Spirit led to the creation of a radical community characterized by sacrificial giving. Without Easter, we do not get to this story.

Following that first statement about how all these believers were unified in their hearts and souls, we read that “with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” The apostles were teaching the lessons Jesus had given to them. That grace which came from the teaching and hearing led to an unexpected outpouring of generosity.

At first we might read this and picture that all the people were simply selling everything they owned and putting everything into joint ownership. Remember the communes of the 1960s and 70’s? There are still a few around. But that is not what the early believers’ community was like.

People owned their own property. But we also read that there was not a needy person among them, because when a need arose, the property owners would sell something and give the proceeds to the apostles to distribute as needed. This was done from time to time as necessary. It was not a mandatory contribution, but rather a voluntary sharing of everything they owned. These believers were not driven by political power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not unique to this passage. Throughout the book of Acts, there are plenty of references to the Holy Spirit motivating and empowering those early believers.

These people saw their belongings as not their own, but as belonging to God. Rather than owning the property, they were more like stewards of the property, which was meant for the good of all. For this reason, there were no needy among them. This was all made possible by the Risen Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is God’s plan coming into being. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that God blessed the world with His Son, and the gifts of forgiveness of sins and redemption, in order to make known to us the “mystery of His will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed (that is he intended) in Christ, to be put into effect with the times reach their fulfillment – to bring into unity all things in heaven and earth under Christ.”

But here we are, some 2000 years later, and in a world filled with divisions, the church has become divided as well. Reading today's scripture and thinking about what the church could be and should be should make us sad, angry and passionate to become that unified body of believers that existed way back when.

We cannot expect that the world will believe in the saving power of Christ if the people of the church cannot come together in unity to tell the world that God loves all, despite our differences – or maybe even because of our differences. The way we must find unity among our diversity is to unite around the Living Christ. In this reading, when we see the center of the passage refer to the apostles continuing to testify about the resurrection, we hear that by that, the grace of God was upon them.

They made the Risen Christ the most important thing. By doing this, everything else became less of an issue. The different ideas, traditions, and obsession with possessions become secondary. When Jesus is the most important thing is when that unity in Him will happen. When we focus our hearts and souls on Him, then grace will dominate our lives.

In order to be in unity with others, even others who are so different than we are, we first need to look at everyone through the eyes of Jesus, remembering how he looked at all of us. We are all accepted in his grace. If we become true Christians (remember Pastor Vicki telling us that means "little Christs"?) we will look at others with that same grace and only then can we attract the world to Jesus.

The only way we can put aside the deep divisions between us is through the power of the Holy Spirit. We certainly can't do it on our own. It was the power of the Holy Spirit that allowed the apostles to preach. It was the power of the Holy Spirit that allowed those people to set aside all their differences and overcome their sins of separation and unify under Jesus.

Before the events of today's scripture, the early Christians, particularly Peter and John, had been put into jail because of teaching about the resurrection and healing in Jesus' name. When they were released, they immediately gathered with the believers to pray for strength to persevere because they knew that there would be more persecution to

come. After they prayed, the place they were gathered was shaken and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They then continued to speak the Word of God boldly.

That is when the text says that they were all of one heart and mind. This is possible today, only when we make the risen Lord Jesus the focus and allow the Holy Spirit to fill us with grace. Only then will we experience full unity in our faith.

Let us pray.

God of all, we pray as one, that we may be one, just as the Lord Jesus prayed we may be one in Him. Your son Jesus compels us to be reconciled to one another. May our spirits be joined to Your Holy Spirit, that we may witness to the visible unity of your Church. May we all recognize that we are truly one with You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and grow together in peace. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.