



Everything Was Held In Common
Sermon by Deacon Heather Feltman
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There is no better proof that Jesus is who he says he is than the before-and-after pictures we have of the disciples. Before Pentecost, they are scared and timid at any sign of trouble. Afterwards, they are fearless leaders! They heal the sick, cast out demons and go to jail gleefully where they sing until the walls come crumbling down.

Luke, who is the author of Acts, is wanting to make sure that you and I get the message that the God who created the world and raised Jesus from the dead is still active in this world, bringing healing to the sick, hope to those in despair, and life where death prevails.

You see just like today, those who made up the church in its infancy came from a variety of backgrounds. There were rich and poor, there were Jews and Greeks, there were the powerful and commoners and there were those from urban centers and small towns.

With this kind of diversity, their individual backgrounds and experiences could have easily led the early church to have fragmented and disintegrated into numerous factions.

And, truth be told, if you read the New Testament carefully, you see that this danger was a consistent threat lurking behind the corner just as it continues to be for the church today.

But the wonderful thing was the ongoing power and presence of the Holy Spirit among them –almost like a second outpouring of the Spirit similar to that first Pentecost – which allowed these early believers to focus on what they held in common rather than on what could divide them.

The wonderful result was that in spite of their unique backgrounds, political affiliation, social status, wants, or needs, an amazing fellowship evolved, and a profound sense of community developed as none of them had ever experienced before.

To enter the world described for us in Acts, means that it is necessary for you and me to accept the assumption that God is still working through God's Spirit in the lives of people to restore a broken world – to bring healing and reconciliation where we thought there is no way in #####! there could be any!

Luke puts his finger on a couple of common pursuits at the center of these believer's lives that contributed to the sense of community that developed for them. These can be guiding truths for us, that help center our lives, and strengthen our togetherness as a faith community.

I want to suggest that one of these pursuits should be the lifelong realization of the need for Christian community. In the midst of this journey through life – lived out in a world that is filled with competing ideas, information, and experiences, we need a community of the faithful with whom we willingly choose to experience life with.

You see, the real purpose of being in community is not to retreat to someplace with other like-minded people, rather it is to give ourselves over to the working of the Holy Spirit.

What finer way to learn about the reconciling power of Christ than to test it in a body of infinite variety! That great mystery of God that binds us all together whether we know it, feel it, or even like it!

Christian community allows us to come together to praise God, break bread, pray and fellowship together. And the sacred beauty of this is we do all of these things with folks who we may never want to have over for Sunday dinner! Verse 32 says that these early Jesus followers were of ‘one heart and soul’ –that is to say that they were unified in the pursuit of the same thing which was the goal of being more like Jesus –to live out what God wanted them to do in the world! Just like us, they lived in a world where lots and lots of people were not interested in being more like Jesus.

And, just like us, they lived in a period where there were lots of competing ideas for their time, their priorities, and their allegiance. In this regard the world really has never changed.

In coming together as a faith community, they provided for each other support and encouragement as they did their best to understand further who this Jesus was and as they sought to implement Jesus’ teachings into their lives.

Without question, there are times in our lives when circumstances prevent us from being physically present with God’s people –we all can think of times when that has occurred in our lives. All of us have just experienced one of those times with living through a global pandemic – we learned together how the gift of technology allowed us to be connected with each other in a new and different way. Phone calls, texts, emails, and mailed letters were life giving for some! Though, I will confess to you that there were times when I got a bit burnt out with experiencing too many Zoom connections within one day!

But, from the time we were splashed with baptismal water and were sealed with the cross of Christ forever, our need for Christian community never ever goes away. We need each other just as we need to be able to take in that next breath of air!

Another pursuit that is equally important is that within community we tend to each other's hurts and needs. Again, verse 32 says that the early church was "of one heart and soul" and that "everything they owned was held in common." Now, let me say here that lots of people struggle with this particular text because they don't like what they think is being implied – is Luke advocating for some type of utopian society? I have heard folks say this passage sounds socialist in nature! They think something is being insinuated about joint ownership of property and possessions. And that this is a really bad idea...if you give everything away, then what?

And if you happen to read into the next chapter, chapter 5 – you will learn that things are not all smooth sailing for this early Christian community even within this portrait of communal sharing—things don't end well for a couple of followers who decide not to be honest about their wealth---they decided to hold some of it back after it was dedicated to God, their deceit is found out, and they end up experiencing a rather gruesome demise!

Well, what are we supposed to take away from that part of the story? I think what Luke wants us to know is that God doesn't have any issue with wealth or wealthy people (many wealthy folks actually came to be a part of the early church) – what God has a problem with is hypocrisy and insincerity.

I think we often miss the spirit of what Luke is trying to share with us in these verses. Now, I don't claim to know all the nuances of how this idea was lived out

in the early church, but I do think that the point Luke is trying to make in our verses for today is about their collective desire to care for each other in the midst of various struggles, difficulties, and the hard places that we all at times experience in life. This pursuit of care for each other remains a hallmark of our Christian life together.

We need each other – to pray for each other – when maybe we are in a place where we don't have the strength to pray ourselves.

We need each other – for those times when we are just so laden with grief or despair, or the happenings of our lives could be the next top ten hit country song – we need to be able to gather around Christ's table and receive God's love and grace –giving us sustenance by breaking bread together.

We need each other -- to cry together, laugh together, love together – and yes, at times fight and argue together – we cry with one another when tragedy and illness invade our lives, we pray for each other or provide a listening ear when we sense we are losing our way, we help each other when moments arise that we are not capable of navigating on our own.

Sharing isn't only an opportunity to care, it also brings about a wonderful taste of God's kingdom here on earth. Something that as Easter people we know all about.

In December of 2004 a severe earthquake centered in the Indian Ocean off northwest Sumatra triggered a great Indian Ocean tsunami that devastated much of Asia and killed tens of thousands of people...I flew to Medan, Indonesia...the gift of hospitality and grace shared in the midst of such devastation is still with me today...folks who had so little after experiencing such devastation, shared what they had with each other out of Christian love and care for one another.

What church has not been wracked by illness, disease, and loss? Here at Bethlehem, we have had our fair share – within the past several years we have lost several of the pillars of our community. Beloved saints. We have many of our siblings in Christ navigating illness and varying types of loss –loss of self, loss of companionship, loss of independence, loss of home, loss of a lively hood.

Whenever anyone cries, laughs, lives or dies in this web of God’s creation we are all affected by it whether we know it or not. When one suffers, we all suffer, and when one is honored, all the rest of us rejoice. We hope together, pray together, and celebrate together – unafraid to wade into each other’s lives in transforming ways.

Just as those early disciples, Luke tells us that “with great power they gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” –we too, with great power give testimony that we are a church of resurrection hope and believe in a God who transcends birth, life and death.

We count on each other’s courage when ours fails. We talk about what to do, and why, and how we feel about it. We hold each other up and calm each other down.

We welcome others into our fold, pressing our limits, widening our embrace – opening our hearts. We learn that actions of grace and compassionate love eclipse rhetoric.

We learn that human beings are both stronger and wiser than we ever could have imagined. We learn that love lasts beyond our physical bodies.

We learn about shining our light out from within and beyond. That is what we are about as a church, part of the community of Christ.

Dear siblings in Christ, opening our hearts is not a pious platitude. It is a perilous journey for sure. It requires a deepening, and a strengthening, as well as a widening of ourselves.

Our reward, however, is nothing less than the unconditional love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And you and I are changed forever. And as I look out among us I see a holy glow of God's shining light breaking through from each of you!

It is not by accident that Luke shares these stories about the early church with us. Luke is telling us that Jesus was more than just a great teacher. Jesus doesn't just talk a good game; Jesus delivers as well –and through the power of the Holy Spirit we see that everything is possible! Everything!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.