

Aldersgate United Methodist Church
4/25/2021
Pastor Sue McNicol

Fourth Sunday of Easter - Scripture Reading: Acts 4:32-35 (NRSV)

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.

Aldersgate UMC - April 25, 2021 - One Heart and Soul – Sue McNicol

This reading from the Book of Acts tells us how discipleship and Christian community is unfolding in an early Christian community in Jerusalem approximately 50 years after the death of Jesus. Luke describes attributes of the ideal way for Christians to live in community as followers of Christ. He writes *“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 question that comes to mind for me is... was this hard to do? Was it difficult for these early Christians to share their wealth and possessions freely with one another? Is Luke describing monastic communities where it is understood that all the members vow to live in community and share all they have with one another or is Luke speaking to the masses, all members of society, as a whole? It's difficult to know exactly what the message is and for whom it is intended.

Let's see what other details we can find to help this scripture reading unfold for us this morning. The writing of the Book of Acts is generally attributed to Luke (or some other part-time associate of Paul) and is commonly seen as the second volume of Luke's gospel. The first chapter wraps up the earthly life of Jesus, explains how Jesus told his followers to remain in Jerusalem for the promise of God (to be baptized in the Holy Spirit in the days to come), and describes Jesus' ascension into heaven. Acts 2 begins with the day of Pentecost and goes on with Peter's sermon describing how in wind and flame the church is born. As Christians we believe God enters into relationship with humans (the Word made flesh in

Jesus) and receiving the power of God's Spirit is a universal opportunity – for all believers in any time, whether that's 2000 years ago or today. What we see unfolding in today's reading is a universal mandate to go into the world as the body of Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, continue the work of Jesus. The apostles were spreading the gospel message that experiencing God directly was possible – and the love and care of others was central to this message.

I imagine hearing such a proclamation may have been easier for the audience in today's reading simply because the time of Christ's life was still "tangible" – by that I mean, the events that had happened were within the lifespan of the people hearing the announcement, or at most only a generation removed. The apostles, these personal messengers of Christ were alive during his ministry and are now being called upon to carry out his work through the ministry of the community (the church). They experienced in their lifetime the events of Christ's death and resurrection and call for people to be the hands and feet of Christ on earth. They knew what it meant to feel deeply, and their recollection of events would have been intensely personal. They were friends with Christ and heard similar words come from his own lips. It's easy to recall a message or apply a teaching to real life when you lived with the one who instructed you firsthand. It has a HUGE impact on you. Here is a simple example of what profound recall of impactful events might feel like in our day-to-day lives. Have you ever had the experience of driving our open Montana highways only to have a wild animal leap out of the ditch in front of your vehicle, instilling a moment of panic as you try to avoid a collision? And after such an experience, do you find yourself hyper-vigilant while driving for a period of time? Do you remember the experience as if it just happened yesterday for weeks to come? Does it change how you see your surroundings? Feelings of intense recollection and deep emotion response was likely experienced by those living at the time of our scripture reading. And I'm not referring to the simplistic example I just described, but in a profoundly life-changing way. They knew Jesus in the flesh and heard his ministry message, so perhaps it was easier for them to follow this instruction, to embrace communal sharing of property and material goods with all those around them. Likewise, the apostles were held in high esteem and would have been considered the most trustworthy to manage the stewardship of their communal resources. So maybe, just maybe, it was not a big deal to sell your land and place the proceeds in a communal offering plate.

But what happens when centuries of progress and change and distance occur, removing us from the intimacy of our scripture message? Similarly, what happens when we go months or years without a highway critter jumping in front of our vehicle? We become a bit more complacent, more comfortable drifting into peaceful glances at scenery. The same may be true for our interpretation of Luke's message. Are we *really* called to be *of one heart and soul*? After all, in many respects we are vastly different people than the earlier followers of Christ. We have kids to send to college, and car loans to pay off – they did not have college tuitions to plan for, or cars to finance to get to and from work. We have medical expenses to cover and upkeep to our homes to consider. Truth be told, then didn't have near the medical resources we do *or* the associated high cost of that care to consider, and homes were simpler back then. We could go on and on with this game of contrast and comparison to make the message a bit more comfortable for us to swallow. However, I suggest we shed any feelings of judgement or inadequacy we might have when we apply this instruction of sharing possessions to our time. Instead, let's take inventory of our intentions and see how they might apply to this message of communal hearts and souls.

I took inventory of just a few interactions and blessings in my life and came up with some examples of today's scripture in action. Sharing what we have with others takes many forms. When I need assistance repairing a piece of equipment, I turn to my friend Gary. He's a mechanical whiz and often can fix the lawn mower or repair an appliance, in exchange for a beer and conversation on the patio. Then there's dear sweet Dorothy, now in her nineties. She is the most amazing storyteller and orator I know. For decades Dorothy has volunteered her time reading books for the Montana Talking Book Library, making books accessible to all. During the winter months my employer needs a place to store a work truck, so our extra garage becomes its temporary home. And when friends are passing through town, the spare bedroom is always offered up, and meals abound at our house. How many of you have given to a youth fundraiser or food drive project this year, supported a small business struggling through difficult times, assisted with an Aldersgate in Action mission project or picked up groceries for someone in need? Have you baked a meal for a neighbor, volunteered or served on a community board? Do you recycle, do you teach or care for young ones, do you give to causes promoting peace and justice? Sharing what we have includes much more than land and possessions. It includes our attention, our talent, and our love. It's about giving without expectation and being honest when we ourselves

are in need. Being of one heart and one soul means looking inward, and finding commonality among us, turning “ME into WE” and trusting God’s grace is at the center of sharing.

Today’s message is centuries old, and times have indeed changed. But the Christian heart remains unchanged. When Paul and the other apostles spread the gospel message, the message was clear, *the Kingdom of God is near...* experiencing God directly was possible. It IS possible. Christianity holds that the believer is, in a mystical way, the continued incarnation of Christ in the world. We celebrate this in our baptism and in the ritual of Holy Communion. And we live out this truth in our actions and interactions with fellow travelers every day. Today’s message reminds us Christianity that’s merely practiced is not Christianity. Rather, Christianity has been, and will always be, a faith that is *lived*. Luke is reminding us; Christ’s ministry calls us to release *private ownership* of our privilege and position.

May we strive to make this real in our time with all the varied ways we place our gifts in the communal offering, an offering available to all.

Share God’s spirit in your good works today!