

Second Sunday of Easter
The Reverend John H. Brock

Sunday, April 19, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran
Church

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133
1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Grace to you, and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

It was the end of the world as they knew it, and they were doing fine.

That is, I imagine the way those first believers were feeling. It is the end of their world, in as much as their leader had been arrested, tried, convicted, sentenced, and crucified, all within a matter of fifteen to twenty hours. They are feeling fine because that very same leader rose from the dead. This was something that usually did not, nor does not, happen. Generally, when some one is dead, they tend to stay Dead. Not so with Jesus. So, this was a little on the earth shattering kind of news; and very helpful for starting a new movement.

The joy that those believers there in the first church were feeling, was not always so with the church, however, as we heard that in the gospel lesson with the fear and disbelief as expressed by Thomas. But as we heard in the first lesson, that passed. The Spirit has come; the believers have come together to form something new, something that had not been seen in their time.

Our first lesson was rather short and so you might not have caught it all. So let's review it real quickly:

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. (Acts 4:32-35)

There's a lot in these four verses. But we see even more happening when we put those verses into context; especially violent happenings.

- earlier in chapter four: Peter and John get arrested (4:3).
- chapter five: all of the apostles are jailed, flogged and given a preaching restraining order (5:40).
- the end of chapter seven: Stephen is stoned to death (7:58).
- beginning of chapter eight: The church is persecuted and driven out of Jerusalem (8:1).
- chapter nine: A death bounty gets put on Paul's head (9:23).
- and in chapter 12: James is beheaded (12:2).

These are all things that are happening to the church. Within the church itself, in the verses following our lesson, we learn, first, of a guy named Joseph, from Cyprus, whom the disciples rename Barnabas. He “sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.” (Act 4:37 NRS)

These are amazing actions of Community, Compassion, and Commitment. We don't know how long this lasted, though, for a couple of reasons. We know, first, because of what happens to the couple right at the beginning of chapter 5, the story of Ananias, and his wife Sapphira, (But since we're all good Lutherans here, and know our scripture stories, I won't go into detail at the moment - Oh, wait, that's right - we're good Lutherans, so we don't know that story. I'll get back to it in just a minute). Before we get to chapter 5, let's look at the implications of the end of chapter 4.

Verse 32: 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.

“The whole group” – that means all the believers. Everyone. Every single Christian believer was part of this original group. And they could be, because there weren't a whole lot of them at the time. They probably knew each other by name, and probably continued to know one another by name, long after this was no longer the case. We speculate that, because in verse 35 the author goes out of the way to point out who this guy Joseph, of Cyprus, renamed Barnabas, is. He was probably well-known to that early community. But there they are. All together. In one place.

Verse 33: ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

So, even though back in chapter 2 of Acts the Spirit comes down and everyone gets the little tongues of fire on their head; they all start speaking in different languages that they didn't go to school to learn. As a matter of fact, people think they are drunk because nobody can understand them. They've all gotten this great benefit, but apparently here they are still, at the end of chapter 4, in Jerusalem. They haven't gone to any of the countries of whose language they can now speak. But, at least, though, the reason that they haven't gone anywhere is clear. They are there – they have remained in Jerusalem – to teach and direct the new believers. That's a good thing to do, so we'll let just let it slide for the moment.

Verse 34: 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.

In other words, they took care of one another – “there was not a needy person among them.” They looked after each other. Everyone had their needs met for the good of the whole.

Now, there might be some of you out there saying, “Wait just a minute - they put everything together in one pot, where everybody puts in and you take out what you need. Doesn't that sounds an awful lot like socialism? Maybe it has the stink of communism on it.” Well, let me

take a moment to assure you that the early church was not part of any evil socialistic plot, or of godless communism. Because they were believers, it wasn't godless. God was very much a part of what they were doing. But by the same token, it wasn't capitalism, either.

You know capitalism – that's the system where we make funds for ourselves. Now, if we look in our Bibles – which as Lutherans we are wont not to do – there at the beginning of chapter 5, we get Ananias and Sapphira who are land owners and part of the early church. Ananias and Sapphira, together, decide that they are going to sell one of their fields, and give only part of the proceeds to the disciples. They are going to keep back some strictly for themselves. But, the thing is that they are going to tell the disciples, the apostles, that what they are giving is, indeed, the price for selling the field, so that they can look good to the apostles. So, they can appear good to the other believers. They conspire to lie to the apostles. They conspire to lie to God. I don't know if you've ever caught up on this, but lying does not sit well in the heart of the God. The apostles are none too happy about this either, and regardless, both Ananias, and his wife Sapphira, separately from one another, drop over dead from their own lies. They didn't die because they didn't turn it all over to God. They died because they lied about it. They lied about their wealth.

So let's take a moment and talk about wealth. Because I think that these verses very much speak a scriptural understanding of wealth, which is: wealth is finite. There's only so much to go around. In order for me to be wealthy, that means somebody else isn't going to have so much. Now, admittedly, from a Biblical point of view, the amount of wealth is rather large. Still, there is only a set amount. Yet, what is far more familiar to those of us as 21st century North Americans is that wealth is infinite; there's enough for everybody. Everyone can be wealthy. Someone is poor only if they choose to be; only if they don't apply those ideas. The idea that we choose to be poor, or that everyone can be wealthy. Those are not Biblical concepts. Those are mis-interpretations of scripture. Scripturally - Biblically - there is only so much to go around. So those with a lot are keeping it from those without. So the idea of sharing what you have is a radical concept for its time. And even today.

Putting everything together and all taking only what they need, well, we know that really can't work. It didn't work so readily for them. We know that because as we read the letters of Paul, he is constantly taking up an offering for the widows and orphans back in Jerusalem. And if all the believers truly were sharing everything that they had, then there wouldn't be the need to be ask for this special offering for the widows and orphans.

Those three "C" words that I mentioned a moment ago: Community; Compassion; Commitment. The early church lived in community. They knew each other. They knew each other by sight, they knew each other by name. We are a congregation of over 2600 members (that's two thousand, six hundred baptized members). How well do we know each another? We worship an average of 815 people each week with our five times of worship. We have three on Sunday, Thursday night worship, and did you know we had a Saturday night worship, too? We have five times of worship and we are averaging around 815 for those times of worship. We don't have a facility currently large enough to house all of us, especially with those five services we have at least four different styles of worship. This is a great room, this is a wonderful room. We can only

fit 500 people in here. On a Sunday morning we generally average somewhere between 750 to 780 people on a Sunday morning. We can't all fit in this room.

Now, you might know the people with whom you are sitting immediately, and maybe you know the folks in the pews in front of you and the pews immediately behind you. But for those of us who sit on the floor, do you know who sits up in the balcony? Do you know who's sitting maybe ten rows in front of your or eight rows behind? Do you know who's on the other side of the aisle? Twenty-six hundred members. How good is our community?

Compassion. We do care about one another. I know this for a fact. I have seen the love and concern as we have reached to one another on a Sunday morning, on a Thursday night, on a Saturday afternoon. We care about one another. I was also told, by someone I know and trust, that we had a couple who visited us not that long ago, and other than the greeters and the ushers, no one spoke to them. Is that an expression of Christ's compassion? Is that an expression of how we view ourselves? We do care about our members, and Pastor Hardy and Pastor Easton and I strive to meet with and help all of our members. We struggle with how to help those we do not know, those who just walk in our doors. Some, admittedly, are just looking for a handout. Some are honestly in need. How do we tell the difference? I think the manner in which we tell the difference is through their commitment. Through their commitment to us, through our commitment as well.

Am I asking all of us to sell everything we have and put it all together in one big pot where we could reach in and take out our needs? Well, the answer there is . . . I really don't know. I do comprehend that that's the Biblical model. I also know that I am very much attached to my "things." I can't imagine going through life without a specific place to live that I could call my own. I don't even want to think about life without my own computer, or cell phone, or car. This passage at the end of the fourth chapter of Acts always gives me a lot of hope when I read it. And it always makes me uncomfortable.

It was the end of the world for those first century believers. Everything for them was changing and they were putting their faith first. So I have to ask myself: Can I live that way? Can I live putting my faith first? Do I live by putting my faith first? Am I capable of living that way, of doing the same as those first century believers?

Are we?

Amen.

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