

One Heart and One Soul

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.

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I.

Aging, I have come to discover, is both a privilege and a beautiful thing. Not everyone gets to do it and, I would argue, even fewer do it well. Too often we see the aging process as merely a consolation prize rather than a rare and glorious opportunity; not just to live *longer*, but to live *better* and, ideally, to get better at *living* as well.

Now, I don't want to sugarcoat the situation; as Bette Davis once famously remarked, "Getting old is not for sissies." As the years go by, we slow down and start to break down; and that is if we are fortunate. Inevitably, the longer we live the more we have to give up what we once we had, and enjoyed.

While this may be true, it is also true that there are other things to be gained, and more joys to be found as the years pass. The trick is to not let them pass us by, or to let others pass by them. Whatever the challenges of growing older, they are good problems to have and surely beat the alternative.

II.

I believe I have an important revelation to share with you this morning concerning today's scripture reading from Acts 4. The only problem is, I could not figure out a way for us to *get* to it. Straight lines are efficient, but tend to be rather ineffective (and boring) as our brain fills in too many of the blanks it thinks it sees coming. In most areas of life, especially true for sermons, the scenic route, or the twists and turns of the roundabout way, is preferred as our senses are heightened and curiosity aroused.

While we all may intuit the truth of this, we rarely apply such reasoning to our everyday decisions. Faced with a fork in the road between getting us there more quickly and easily versus a route that takes longer or is the harder drive, almost all of us will almost always opt for the highway over the country road, scenery be damned.

III.

What we come to discover as we get older is that the journey *is* the destination and that the scenery matters *very* much; what we see and experience during the process of “getting there” is usually of *much* more value than the result of having merely “arrived.” While some of us may be smart enough to figure this out at the front end of our lives, the great majority of us require a *reason* to find the exit ramp off life’s superhighway.

Frequently, this takes the form of some unforeseen circumstance or dire event; or, to continue the metaphor, an accident. Every once in a while, though, the decision to spurn the turnpike comes from a “passenger” riding with us in the car; one with whom we are car-pooling or ride-sharing. I had such a person in my vehicle 23 years ago, her name was Bessie Barbour. Bessie was a bit of a “grand old dame” of our church; a very proud and proper woman who rarely hesitated to do a little backseat driving when circumstances dictated.

IV.

So it was, one day in 2001, that I found myself visiting Bessie in her apartment at the newly opened Partridge Knoll Independent living facility (PK) and she very politely, but ever so insistently, conveyed to me that from henceforth the (then) new minister at *her* church would be leading a monthly worship service at Partridge Knoll. To which I responding, “Of course, Bessie.”

Now, at that point in my life we had our 6 year old daughter, Nicole, and Linda was 7 months pregnant with Tucker. Moreover, the first year honeymoon was *over* at the church and I was really struggling to get into some kind of rhythm; all the while the process had begun of smoothing over my very many rough edges. Whatever diamond you may think me to be, at present, realize that a great many others had the rough for a very long time. The *last* thing I needed, was what I considered to be another superfluous commitment; one which I (correctly) surmised would be difficult, or impossible, to get out from under.

V.

To which I will say, “Thank you, Bessie!” For more than two decades now, it has been my great pleasure to rejoin, meet, and worship with a whole *host* of fascinating folks, actively enjoying their lives and intentionally building a community of care and compassion for themselves and each other. Most recently, folks like Fran, Janet, Wanda, Donna, Bob, Betty, Shirley, and Vivian, all of whom were in attendance this past Wednesday which marked our 129th service at Partridge Knoll.

I would also give a shout-out to Bob Duda, who has faithfully played piano at the service for all these years stretching back to the Bessie Barbour days; with the exception of a few years when Mary Lou Scott (our former church organist) was a resident, though Bob still attended. I called Bob Friday morning to confirm all this and he was gracious in pointing out the great pleasure he finds in attending owing to the intimacy and interaction.

Exactly. What started out as a burden to me became, at some point, a stunningly illuminating experience.

VI.

I have decided to tell you about this experience that I have had doing the service at PK because, unbeknownst to me, the good folks there have been slowly and patiently revealing a deeper truth which has been right under my nose all these years about all of *you*, this congregation. While I have had a niggling *sense* it for a very long time now, I could never quite put my finger on it. However, during the PK service last week the good folks there helped me to understand the situation that I have been in here at our church for a quarter of a century now and it hit me like a *ton* of brick: the beauty, might and majesty of living together in a community of faith with one heart and one soul.

I have long understood we have a good thing going here on the Park; something as rare as it is wonderful. Today’s scripture reading from Acts chapter 4, helps to explain why.

VII.

As I shared at the PK service this week, my grandmother, Adele, *hated* this particular passage because, to her, it sounded an awful lot like *Communism*. Without question, my grandmother has been the single biggest influence on

my own faith and spiritual formation. It was she who helped me to understand the power and profundity of a simple and earnest faith; ever generous and welcoming, always loving and accepting.

She was, though, a product of her time. Having lived through the depression, she canned and put-up food every Autumn, and *always* had 100 lbs of potatoes on-hand down in the fruit cellar. Having endured WWII, and the ensuing Cold War, she was fervently opposed to anything Red; be it of the Russian, Chinese or Cuban ilk. Hence her dislike for today's passage which she believed *smacked* of Marxism. About which, I must admit, she was not wrong.

VIII.

Turns out, though, it is everyone *else* who has been wrong all along. At least in the sense of how we, meaning scholars and preachers, have interpreted this passage as we, too, are a product of *our* times. The trick to understanding this passage is to see it in the context of its *own* time.

Amazingly, the Bible has very little to say about *how* to actually exist together as the body of Christ, as the Church. Oh, sure, Scripture is replete with references as to *whom* the Church belongs, *what* the Church is intended to do, *where* the Church comes to be and is to be, and *when* the Church began and will end. As to *how* all of this actually happens, however, the Bible remains pretty vague; even frustratingly so.

Perhaps this is by necessity or, even, by design; the reality of what it means to be "The" Church or "a" church is simply not something which *can* be explained. Instead, it has to be created, experienced and, then, *re-created*; over and over again. Which is *how* we arrive at one of the great mottos of the Reformed Tradition to which we, as Presbyterians, belong: *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*; or, *The Church Reformed, Always Reforming*.

IX.

Today's text reveals the birth of the Body of Christ as it first emerges into the world. After the formative years of Jesus's earthly ministry of healing, teaching and preaching, and the subsequent revelation of Christ's death and resurrection, the followers of Christ, the Church, settle in to await his return. A return they were *sure* was imminent; as in any day now.

So, while they waited, they got busy spreading the Word, safeguarding themselves from persecution and, most germane to us today, taking care of one another spiritually and, especially, physically. Hence, they came together to feed, clothe and shelter each other; wonderfully so.

X.

Here in this passage we read:

No one claimed private ownership, but everything was held in common. With great power they gave their testimony to the resurrection and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for all was laid at the Apostles' feet, and distributed to each as any had need.

All of which, we must admit, was very bold and incredibly brave. By all accounts, this worked quite well; at least for a time. Times change, though, as we well know, and the Church had to change, or *reform* along with them. As the months stretched into years, as generations came and went, and as the centuries past without Christ's return, the Church kept reforming and we, as the Church, are reforming still.

However, in all that time, there are two things which have *not* changed. First, we still pool our resources to support the work and mission of the Body of Christ. Second, we are still striving to be of one heart and one soul.

XI.

Here, though, is the rub that is my important revelation about this passage. With very rare exception, the one heart and one soul has been expressed through doctrinal decree and orthodoxy, worship that is prescribed and ordered, sacraments properly administered, adherence to rigorous ecclesiastical authority, and a discipleship expressed in a deep piety and a scrupulous morality. Or, as we Presbyterians like to say, "decently and in order." Now, there is absolutely nothing wrong with any of this. In fact, such a "recipe" has proven to be quite successful in preserving the church; at least up until *this* point in history. Which is why, here on the Park, we adhere to each of these precepts and will continue to do so.

That said, this is not *all* we are doing. Times are changing and we must be willing to change (that is to say, reform) or, as many churches have found out

and more will soon discover, we will simply cease to be relevant, effectual, or vibrant.

XII.

What I discovered through these years at Partridge Knoll helped me to see what has been taking place, right under my nose, for a good many years here on the Park. There is no such thing as one heart and one soul to which all must adhere. Instead, each heart and every soul must *become* one, even as the *one* changes over time.

We like to think of the church as fixed and immutable, and that as new people come church they simply must become part of what of the “one” that met them upon their arrival. While this certainly has worked for a great long while, it is not working so well any more. Let us just be honest about that. The solution isn’t to water down, weaken, or ignore orthodoxy and doctrine but, rather, to put it in its proper place. That is, as the cart which follows the horse.

XIII.

This isn’t to say that Christ is not the heart and soul of our church, or that we should not adhere to the essential tenets of our faith. What it means, is that we should not expect people to already have the answers to the questions that have not yet even asked of themselves. Instead, we need to give folks the time, the space, and the support they need not only to ask such questions but to arrive at their conclusions in whatever round about way they require. We also need to afford *ourselves* the opportunity for these new seekers to transform, or reform, the *one* we once were into the *one* we are even now becoming.

In my experience at Partridge Knoll I have witnessed a great fluidity; folks arrive, folks move on, and all the while a solid core remains to provide the continuity of the context. The folks at PK understand this, they get it. A church is much the same, except here the fluidity is more hidden and often much more difficult to come by as orthodoxy resists reformation.

XIV.

Being *one* in heart and soul is both a privilege and a beautiful thing; not everyone gets to do it, and even fewer get to do it well. It can be a rare and glorious opportunity, but only if we allow the *one* we are in Christ to reform and be reformed by each new person who enters it. The dogma and doctrine will follow, as a cart led by the horse. While Christ is our constant, the *body* of Christ must be fluid so as to make room for every person to get better at living well; and they most certainly will, if we will only allow them.

Too often we make the notion of Church a destination, and forget it is mostly about the ride. The spiritual journey *is* the destination, and the scenery we see and experience matters *very* much; the process of “getting there” is of *much* more value than the result of having merely “arrived.” Along the way we must both gird ourselves for the dire event and unforeseen circumstances, while also opening ourselves up to the course corrections those with whom we travel are there to provide.

XV.

This is the beauty, might, and majesty of being part of a church that is living together with intimacy and interaction as a community of faith with enough heart and soul so as to allow the *one* to change and be reformed by the power and profundity of sharing a simple and earnest faith; one which is ever generous and welcoming, always loving and accepting. Which is exactly what I have found right here under my nose at *this* church. And it is under your nose as well, here within these tons of bricks and stone we call the Church on the Park. Amen.