

All Things in Common

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
June 10, 2018
Text: Acts 4:32-35

The text we read from Acts this morning is probably one of the more well-known passages this book which holds a vital yet often overlooked place in the Christian canon of scriptures. Acts, which was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, is a sort of historical account of the earliest days of what became the Christian faith in the aftermath of Jesus' death. It includes stories about both Peter and Paul, the two apostles most responsible for Christianity surviving Jesus' death on the cross. They, along with the ever growing body of followers, proclaimed fervently to any and all who would listen about the Good News of Jesus, especially his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. They taught others what Jesus taught them – that a new way of living in relationship with God and each other was possible because of God's abiding love made real. This reality is the gift of grace, freely given and freely received by anyone and everyone who chooses to accept and be transformed by it. The Book of Acts functions as the hinge connecting the life of Jesus on earth with the lives and learnings of his followers after he had left them.

This morning's text comes toward the beginning of Acts and purports to be a description of the earliest formal gathering of

those who followed Jesus. Based in Jerusalem, this group gathered regularly for prayer and study, taking meals in common and gradually building a common life together. This common life is what we see described in the text we read this morning. “Those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one claimed any private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” Everything they owned was held in common. Wow. That’s something to wrap your head around, especially in the world we live in today where our stuff is very important to us. We take pride in our clothes and in our homes, even what vehicle we drive to and from church on Sundays. We worry about our bank accounts and our retirement funds. Our stomachs tighten when we hear bad news about the stock market even if we don’t own any stock! Stuff, money, material goods matter to us – even if we find it painful to admit it. So how is it that these earliest Christians came to hold all things in common as integral to their faith and life each day?

First of all, it is important to remember that the behavior of the group being described here is an ideal to which the group aspired. We read it and assume they were already there – they were already living this way, with all things in common. And perhaps, to a large extent they were. We know they were very concerned that no one in the group should be in need, that everyone should have enough food and a place to stay and

someone to care about them and it is this focus that led to a life lived with all things in common. However, we know this was not the norm sustained over the long haul. We know this because living with all things in common is not a hallmark of the Christian faith today, at least not in the sense of an actual community with no individual ownership of anything. Some groups have aspired to this in the past and some still do – like the Shakers and even certain monastic communities. But, for the vast majority who claim the name Christian, holding all things in common is not the norm, nor even an expectation of practicing the faith.

So, what is the significance of this notion of “all things in common” for us today? I think the key to understanding its relevance to us is visible in a phrase which comes a little earlier in that same verse: “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” Of one heart and soul. That is still the ideal of every church I have ever been a part of – to be of one heart and soul as we come together as the people of God. That is what I think of when I think of the church. Notice it does not say, “one *mind* and soul.” It says, “one *heart* and soul.” That’s because anyone who knows anything about churches knows that there is no church that is of one mind. Not really. It’s impossible because churches are made up of individual people and individual people always have their own minds, their own thoughts and ideas about how things should be. Everybody has their own ideas about what

the church should do and not do, what worship should be and not be, what missions the church should pursue, etc., etc. etc.

We in the church are not now, not ever, of one mind. But, we are of one heart and one soul because our hearts are the piece of us that comes to know God first. Dear friends, you can't think your way to God. You can't reason your way to God. You can't rationalize your way to God. But you can feel your way to God. You can open your heart, daring to believe that maybe, just maybe, God loves you just as you are because God made you just the way you are. Being a part of a community that celebrates that we are all precious to God is how we know what it is to live in relationship with God and each other. Dear friends, it is not the sharing of stuff that makes us a church, it is being of one heart and soul that makes us church together. This is because we allow ourselves to be touched by Jesus and transformed by the love of God into someone we could never be on our own. Believing that is possible, that it is what we should be striving toward together, is what we hold in common together in the church.

Practically, though, how do we do this? Even if we can accept the notion that what we hold in common is being of one heart and soul even if we are not of one mind, what does that mean? What does it look like? There are different ways of thinking about church, for sure. For some, usually those not a part of the church, but watching from the outside, the church is a

building where folks who believe in God come together to do things. They sing. They pray. They listen to someone talk about the Bible and stuff. They baptize babies and marry and bury people. From this perspective, the church is merely an institution of society, a relic of an earlier time before we “knew” so much by virtue of the advancement of human knowledge. For these people the church is merely a formalized group with a common purpose to meet the needs of the people who form it in some way which is meaningful to them, but not necessarily to people outside its doors. God and Jesus don’t really enter in to this understanding of the church other than as one of those points of commonality that draws people together. This is because believing in God and/or Jesus is just not a part of the way these folks live their lives each day. Literally, they just don’t get it because they can’t think their way to belief and practice of any sort of faith beyond themselves and their own abilities.

For us, those of us in the church, we know the church is so much more than a building or a self-serving group. For us, the church is where we come together to learn what it means to be in relationship with God and each other and how that relationship impacts how we live in the world each day. The church is where we learn who we are and whose we are. This is the way in which the church is like a family – a group of people bonded together more or less accidentally with this common sense of being of one

heart and soul as we strive individually to become the people God needs us to be in any given moment. This also describes what family is – an accidental configuration of diverse persons and personalities brought together by God in one place and time. Families are usually related by biology, of course, but not always as any adoptive family can tell you. What really makes a family is love and that is the same thing that makes a church. But is “family” a helpful metaphor for understanding the church? Let’s ponder that for a moment.

Sometimes the family, like the church, works well as a unit and sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes the dynamics within a family become unhealthy to everyone’s detriment and we know this also happens in a church. This is why some of my colleagues in ministry do not like the metaphor of the family as a descriptor for the church. They worry that all the baggage of dysfunctional family backgrounds of people coming into the church will somehow taint the church itself, as if the church – any church – isn’t dysfunctional enough on its own. The truth is the church at its best and its worst does act like a family. We love each other and we get mad at each other. We laugh together, we cry together, we work together, we play together. We gather for meals together one of which is a sacrament. We celebrate new life together which is the other sacrament. When one of us is down, others circle around to lift us up. When one of us is need, everyone steps up as

best as they can. This is the church at its best just like it is a family at its best. This ability to be of one heart and soul together, in spite of everything that conspires to pull us away from God, Jesus and each other, is the cornerstone of our life together in the church. It is, in fact, the great grace described in this morning's text. "Great grace was upon them all" as they gathered together as God's people in one place, to hear how God was alive and active in each of their lives.

I've always thought of the church as family, I confess. I was brought up that way, in no small measure because my grandfather was one of the founding members of the little Presbyterian church where I grew up. My mother reminded me of this quite often when I was child, usually in connection with a lecture on how important it was for me to behave like a "proper young lady" in this church my grandfather helped to start. This bugged me a lot when I was younger but as I got older, I realized that this little church was really very much my family. They knew what was happening to me and my brothers, and they cared. Greeting cards and notes were routine. Church suppers which were numerous were like family banquets with all the crazy relatives in one place. Most of all I witnessed what happened in this little church when tragedy struck as it always does. A stillborn baby, a young man killed in Vietnam, a broken engagement, a grandmother's tragic death in a car mishap – all these things brought this little church

together in a massive circle of love and support and caring around the people who were hurting. And that made a huge difference to the lives of those in pain, and to everyone else too.

I witnessed the love of God made real through those people in that little church of my childhood and I witness it still today here in this church. We are a family because we are of one heart and mind. We hold in common our belief that with God all things are possible, even that love of a group of people can hold and support a broken heart as it heals. The truth is that the church – our church – is God’s family gathered here in this place and in this time, Sunday morning and all week long. We are God’s family, each of us precious beyond measure to God, each of us entrusted with God’s mission to the world. We work together on this *Missio Dei* by loving God with all that we are and all that we have. We work together to make God’s love real to others by loving those others as we love ourselves. That’s it. That’s all. That’s family. Thank you, Jesus, for this amazing gift of church in our midst. May we always treasure her presence in our lives. Amen.