

Love that comes from the heart

Acts 4:32 – 37

They Had Everything in Common

32Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

I am sure you are familiar with the game Monopoly. The goal of Monopoly is to transfer as many assets as possible from others' holdings into your own. Unfortunately, the game also mirrors the harsh reality of our world, where the aim is likewise to possess as much as we can—and where we do not shy away from taking those assets from others. From childhood, we have been conditioned to want more. And I believe we all know that satisfying feeling when our bank account is full, the fridge and pantry are stocked, and we no longer have to worry about money. But isn't that a fallacy? Isn't the reality quite different—namely, that we do not truly control our money and possessions; rather, money controls us, and we become "monopolized" without even realizing it?

In today's sermon text, we see an example of how people are liberated from this cycle. The reading describes the early Christian church, and I find this description fascinating. It says: "They were of one heart and soul." For us today, the phrase "one heart and soul" carries a romantic connotation; we picture people embracing while gazing at a sky filled with rosy blossoms. Yet, in the biblical context, the heart represents the center of decision-making. It implies a fundamental inner transformation. When the community was described as being of "one heart and soul," it meant that they had been changed at their very core. That is the sense in which the early Christians were united. This does not mean that every Christian in the community suddenly became identical to the others; rather, it means they all drew from the same source of strength and lived for the same goal—and that goal was God. What transformed and liberated them all was the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, God had entered their midst, making His power visible and active. We do not actually find the unity of heart and soul among human beings, but only in God; for unity is an essential attribute of God. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one from eternity to eternity. There is no inequality or difference of opinion within God. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit constantly and unceasingly give undivided love to one another, are there for each other, and pursue the exact same goals. There is no rivalry there, and certainly no game of Monopoly. That is why one can say that God is simultaneously three and one. And when this God—who is so full of love—comes to earth, some of that love becomes visible and active among us humans as well.

Nowhere in the book of Acts or elsewhere in the Bible do I see any indication that the Church commanded people to sell everything they owned. Even when Jesus told the rich young man to sell his possessions, that command had a pedagogical purpose: it clearly showed the rich man that his heart was tethered to his wealth rather than to God. And yet, I find it remarkable that the early Christians in the book of Acts practiced a kind of communism without a formal program. How should we picture this? To begin with, it was remarkable that so many different people came together among the early Christians and shared in Holy Communion. Picture it this way: there was the wealthy clothing merchant, dressed in the finest purple robes, sitting next to the widow who had to figure out how to put the next meal on the table with her few pennies. There sat the wealthy landowner next to the day laborer. Rich and poor together at the Lord's table. That in itself was a miracle—something that never happened in the world of that time. The subsequent steps followed quite naturally. Moved by the love of God, the wealthy merchant could not bear to watch his brothers and sisters go hungry, so he actively supported them. Even plots of land were sold so that the poor would not go hungry. As we see later in Acts, this evolved into a program of charitable service that continues to have an impact to this day.

This new way of life made such a profound impression on the surrounding community in the ancient world that people from all over marveled at it. How is it possible for someone to distribute their possessions and yet

become happier and freer? And how could it be that Christians gave away everything they owned, yet not a single one of them was in need? Everyone had what they required.

This description of the early Church makes me feel both happy and sad. The situation of the early Church makes me happy because, even after more than 2,000 years, I can still sense the power of the Holy Spirit that was present back then. I can understand the joy someone like Joseph, who was so captivated by God that he sold everything he owned because he was becoming richer in God. Yet, this story also makes me sad. It saddens me because I know that our world does not function the way the early Church did. The Bible is honest enough to tell us, right after this impressive account, that there was discord. There were indeed some who secretly held back a portion for themselves (see Ananias and Sapphira). Furthermore, Greek Christians were treated worse than Jewish Christians; racism reared its ugly head within the early Church, disrupting the peace.

Unfortunately, we are not God. We cannot bring the love that resides in Him into the world in the same way He does. Moreover, our world is built on selfishness. Everyone has to fight for their own rights. We cling tightly to the few possessions we have left, ready to fight to the last drop of blood for them. And even when we have everything we need, we reach out for more. In the end, we lose ourselves; we remain prisoners of our own making. There have been repeated attempts to combat this human mindset by forcing a form of communism upon others. As history shows, this invariably led to new problems.

What is clear, however, is that the same God who worked powerfully in the early Church is at work among us today. When God dwells within us, something changes inside us. Through God's Spirit, we realize that our money, our education, our dignity—indeed, everything we possess—are gifts from God. Because these things come from God, I see God and His work in everything I have. My heart and soul belong to God, not to the things He gives me. That is why I am free from everything I am and have here on earth. For a time, I hold my hand over my health, my money, and my possessions; yet, at any moment, I am ready to let go of these things. My eyes are fixed on God, so I feel no fear if I must lose something here on earth.

If it is God who bestows so many gifts upon me, I cannot close my eyes or my heart to my brothers and sisters. Among us, there is no one who needs to worry about their next meal. Yet, our life together in the congregation remains unchanged. If I notice that a brother or sister is hurt or worried—about the path our church is taking, the hymns we sing, or anything else we do—I do not insist on my own rights or my own perspective; instead, I reach out to them. I listen. I seek to understand why they are hurt and try to resolve the issue based on the heart of the Gospel, the Bible, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Even though there were people in the early Church who viewed everything like a game of Monopoly, that must not be the case for us Christians. Even though we are not yet in heaven, we cannot be content with the ways of the world. As long as we are in this world, there will always be different people with different opinions. As long as we are in this world, we will always witness the human struggle to amass as much as possible for oneself. This troubles us; we cannot simply let it stand unchallenged.

As long as God's Word is proclaimed in this world, we are on a journey to carry God's love into the midst of hatred and selfishness. What this looks like for each individual may vary greatly.

One expression of this love is the voluntary contributions we make. Our church exists only because so many people freely give money to support it. Ever since the early Church in Jerusalem, churches have survived through such donations. Without these voluntary contributions, our church would cease to exist. Others help through translation work or practical tasks, such as cleaning the church. And others help those in urgent need. They give up their precious time so that another person might fare better.

When all this happens, the same Spirit is at work that was present in the early Church. There are many tasks and many gifts that God has bestowed upon each of us. Yet they all stem from one source and one power: the God who loved us in Jesus Christ. The God who has drawn so close to us through the Holy Spirit—He is the One who works in and through us. Through Him, even amidst our many imperfect situations, we experience the miracle of God: being "of one heart and one soul." Amen.