

Sermon: April 19, 2009
Scripture: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133;
Title: "Living with One Heart and Mind."

Hymns: #139 Come Thou Almighty King
#387 Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us
#388 O Jesus, I have Promised

Call to Worship

Come, children of God, to sing a new song;
Clap your hands and shout your praise.

**Jesus is our good news,
Our joy, and our salvation**

In steadfast love and faithfulness
God has done marvelous things.

**God raised Jesus from the dead;
Christ is alive and at work among us.**

God calls us into partnership with Christ Jesus
And bids us walk in the light.

**How good and pleasant it is when
brothers and sisters dwell in unity.**

Call to Confession: (for worship leader)

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth of God's word is not in us.
We come to confess our sin, knowing that God is faithful and just to forgive us and
cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Prayer of Confession (print in bulletin)

God of Light, you have called us into partnership, but we have chosen instead to go our
own way. You have given us light and we have preferred to walk in the shadows. You
call us to truth while we cling to our lies. We try to fool others and end up deceiving
ourselves. Come to us in our confusion and sin to forgive us, we pray, and make us
whole. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness (for worship leader)

Jesus is our advocate with God, the expiation for our sins and those of the whole world.
In Christ, God welcomes us to eternal life in which we are partners with God. All who
have been cleansed by the blood of Christ are invited to walk in the light as God is light.
Amen.

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"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." Acts 4:32-35

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be a part of Church were everyone was of the same heart and mind? No bones of contention. No petty bickering and knit picking. No subtle little jealousies that tend to divide people into camps and cliques. A Church were everyone got along and loved each other and agreed together on the reasons for their being together. And, where the pastor could operate on a sea of good will and folks tolerated his mediocrity sermons and did not complain when he led worship longer than 60 minutes. By the way, where did we get the notion that worship should only take 60 minutes?

Well, anyhow, wouldn't you just love to be a part of a congregation where there was this kind of perfect harmony? Is this kind of harmony even possible, given the nature of human relationships and personal egos? And furthermore, is that what this passage is really talking about? Does being of "one heart and

soul” as Luke describes it, really mean that we have no differences?

The first thing we need to do is change the title for this sermon. Everyone get out a pencil or pen and scratch out the word “mind” and write in the word “soul”. Now we are in accord with what Luke wrote. That may not seem like a big change to you, but it really is. In the world in which Luke wrote, the world which Christ experienced, philosophy and theology was all intertwined and influenced by the Greek understanding of body, soul, mind and heart. It was a world in which knowledge was seen as the highest attainment of the human spirit. It was a world that believed that knowledge was King. Knowledge was the route to human perfection and salvation. Actually, salvation isn’t a good word for what the Greek philosophies understood as man’s highest attainment. Salvation has too many religious overtones to it, and the Greek mind saw man’s highest attainment as intellectual perfection. So, it really does matter that Luke notes that the early Christians were of one heart and soul. There is a spiritual dimension in the soul that you do not have in the Greek mindset.

Now the second thing I believe we need to focus on in this passage is the central place which Luke gives to the reality of The Resurrection. Notice how Luke situates this comment about the Resurrection between the two comments concerning worldly wealth and caring for the needy. Think of it in terms of an oreo cookie. Everybody loves the nice crunchy chocolate cookies, but they wouldn’t be nearly so tasty if that sweet cream filling wasn’t between them. Some people, especially kids, like to pull them apart and eat the cream all by itself. Luke imbeds the central part of his thoughts between the two cookies.

And the central point is that the power of the young church, the power which the apostles expressed as they testified and the grace which was evident in them was the result of the Resurrection. And it is only within the context of The Resurrection that we can

understand Luke's first and the second point. The Resurrection empowers us to unity of heart and soul. And, the Resurrection empowers us to the care and support of those who are needy. So, let's take a look at those two elements of the early Church.

The first thing that Luke wants us to know about the Early Church was that it was a model of unity in the midst of diversity. The early Church was a hodge-podge of individuals drawn from a multiplicity of ethnic, social and economic backgrounds. There was nothing about this group that was uniform. Luke tells us that by the day of Pentecost there were about 5000 believers, from every nation of the known world. So what was it that could captivate the heart and soul of these diverse individuals and pull them together as one focused entity? (pause) That's right! The Resurrection. The belief in a God who would bring His Son out of the pit of death and restore life to His lifeless body. And thereby guarantee to all believers this same resurrection. That was something to be unified about. Every believer's heart and soul was focused on this transforming event.

You know, we have so many divisions in the body of Christ today. We divide up over the silliest issues. Even within Presbyterianism we have divisions. The Cumberland Presbyterians broke off over the issue of seminary training for ministers. They were mostly in the mountains and hills of Kentucky and Tennessee and it was hard to get ministers to go from seminary to those rural mountains, so they started ordaining men to preach who had had no seminary. And the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) broke off because they thought the reunited church in 1988 was too liberal and they did not believe that women should be Elders or Ministers.

And of course we have divisions over which translation of the bible you use, and how you go about administering communion and baptism. And then there are those who fight over whether Christ's return will come before or after the Millennium. Some

churches say that the bible does not mention organs or pianos, so they are non-instrumental churches. I believe you could form up a new church every time someone gets the idea that some issue is crucial to salvation. Drive through any major city in the state of Virginia and count the number of “churches” there are on every street corner and in every strip mall. Division seems to be the order of the day. Is mankind’s natural instinct to divide and separate?

But Luke notes that in the early Church “those who believed were of one heart and soul” so much so that they did not claim any personal property. The extent of their unity was applied to everything they owned.

Some have claimed that this was the first commune, the first expression of Communism.

But that is not what the passage is saying at all. It was simply saying that among this vast array of individuals, the faith they all held in common extended to everything they had.

You cannot separate your faith from your possessions. What did Jesus say? “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Luke 12:24) So, it seems to me that the unity we all have in the resurrection of Christ ought to manifest itself in the manner in which we muster our possessions, our treasure, to glorify and support that resurrection in our own lives and in the life of Christ’s Church. Think about that the next time you are asked to sign a pledge form for next year’s budget. You are being asked not to support a budget. You are being asked to mobilize your possessions, your treasurer, your wealth, in support of the Resurrection and the ministry that emanates from that Resurrection.

Perhaps we do our Stewardship Season all wrong. We put together a believable budget based on last year’s budget and last year’s

giving and we ask you to pledge to that budget. Has anyone ever thought that that is backwards. Perhaps what we need to do is to highlight our mission efforts for this year and to project our mission efforts for the next year and then ask our members and friends where they want to fit into those mission efforts, and to what extent do they want to back those missions with their time and their talents and their possessions. Would you give more to a line item in a budget, or to a mission program in Ghana building a worship center for a small village church and drilling a well so that church can have access to fresh drinking water? And what if you had an opportunity to spend two weeks in that village helping with those projects and teaching evening bible stories to the children. You see, the early church was of one heart and soul because they had come to know the Resurrection in their lives and it manifested itself in a ministry of the whole person, which included that person's worldly goods.

Unity amid diversity. We don't have to all look alike, or think alike, or act alike. But our hearts and souls need to be focused on the Resurrection. And that is a unity that transcends all of our differences.

Secondly, Generosity in the midst of poverty. I cannot think of a more timely message for our day. Across the world today we are experiencing a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. The third world countries are becoming less and less able to support their own people. Food production in some nations has fallen so far behind that agronomists believe it would take a half a century (50 years) for production to rise to the point that a country would be able to feed its own. And that would happen only if we began now to institute the programs which would make food a primary emphasis.

Just this past week commentators have noted that the pirates in the Indian Ocean have simply done what they had to do because of the destruction of their own nation's ability to feed and employ its own

people. Perhaps this rise in piracy is a hint of what will happen when the Third world nations hit bottom and disintegrate leaving their people to fend for themselves. Are these pirates children of God? How about their families?

In our own country we see a widening gap between the haves and have-nots. Former President Jimmy Carter has warned us that this gap – he called it a chasm between the rich and the poor – “is the most serious problem we face today.”

Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners and one of America’s prophetic voices, describes the declining economic situation this way: “One in every six American children still falls below the poverty line in America – and one in three children of color... Even worse is the one billion people globally (all God’s children) who are forced to subsist on less than a dollar a day: and the three billion who live on less than two dollars per day and thirty thousand children (who) die every day due to hunger and disease related to utterly preventable causes (like the lack of clean drinking water). Those poverty ‘facts’ shouldn’t be tolerable to anyone across the political spectrum, Wallis states, But... just to decry these facts has not solved the scandal of poverty.”

In the early days of the Church of Jesus Christ, the numbers were different, but the situation was the same. The Church grew up in a world where hunger was a constant condition for over half of the population. And in Jerusalem, if you were among those who followed the forbidden cult of Jesus, you had even a greater chance of dying due to malnutrition. Believers in the Resurrection were inspired to a mission of caring for those who were in need. Even if it meant selling your property to provide for the poor.

Those who came to believe in the Resurrection found themselves transformed into new creatures. Once they could have cared less about the masses who lived in poverty. But in the light of the Resurrection they discovered a new mission for their lives. They

reached out and administered love and grace to all who had a need. Once they were self-centered and self-focused, but under the shadow of the cross and the knowledge of the empty tomb they had discovered a new joy in the serving of those who were hurting. So Luke could write “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and there was not a needy person among them.”

What would the Church of Christ look like today if we allowed the Resurrection to dictate our mission? What would the Churches of Altavista be like if we forgot our differences and celebrated our common faith in the Resurrected Lord? Are we satisfied with what we have already done through Habitat for Humanity and DAWN and The Sheltered Workshop and _____’s House. Or, are there others in our midst who need our Resurrection Faith in their lives.?

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