

Scripture

Acts 4:32-35

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.

Psalm 133

1 How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
2 It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
3 It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Sermon:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

I don't think I'm alone in being frustrated with the snow that we're getting. I don't know about you all, but I'm so tired of being cold. Last weekend seemed hopeful; Noah and I set up the trampoline and I reburied the post that holds our hammocks, but there have been no hammock days, and the trampoline is not fun wearing a winter coat and with your feet damp with two degree water.

I've been cooped up inside for months, and I long to be outdoors again. Winter is a sedentary season, and I think for many of us it can be a difficult season. We spend our time indoors, and often alone – visiting people is more difficult, especially if you have any kind of mobility issues – even casual encounters become rare since we're simply not out and about.

I miss my chats over the back hedge with Glen; I miss walking through the neighbourhood to get ice cream at BJ's; I miss the beach; I miss bike riding – though I did see Gavin on his bike a couple of weeks back. He's a lot more committed than I am.

This time of year I, and likely many of you, feel like I'm in some kind of stasis – like a butterfly peering through its chrysalis, wondering when it will be time to break free. It's as though life is on hold, everything waiting for just one warm, sunny day.

I long to do something; I long to act.

I'm not alone in this feeling – it's pretty much universal – even our church calendar reflects this. As we move from the astounding joy of Easter morning to the outpouring of Spirit and power on Pentecost, there is a period where the disciples are stuck inside – waiting. Unable to do anything.

When Jesus was with them they asked 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' Jesus told them to wait, to do nothing until they had received divine power. And so they did wait, with impatient expectancy, chomping at the bit, until at last they were unleashed.

Once the disciples were released to act, they did just that, and there is a book in our bible that recounts some of what they did. This book is rather appropriately call the book of Acts.

The book of Acts is a book about daring communities of faith. They are daring because these early Christian communities allowed themselves to be led by the spirit, and in so doing they lived in ways that defied and broke the limits imposed upon them by the wider culture. They were believers in action, trying to put into practice the call of God.

They were manifesting the Spirit of God; meaning that they took the spiritual imperative of God and used their hands and feet to make it real. Over the past while we've heard a lot about thoughts and prayers in response to tragedies south of the border – the book of Acts shows us how thoughts and prayers are put into action as communities work together to heal one another, feed one another, love one another, and reach out beyond themselves to welcome in the stranger.

The picture of the early church that the book of Acts gives us is deeply incarnational. What I mean by that is that it emulates Jesus in the best ways possible. Jesus came and put a face on God; he showed us what God looks like through his words and actions, in the way that he treated people – both those who loved him and those who didn't.

The early church was called to do exactly the same thing – to show the world the face of God through their words and actions, and in the way they treated people.

Do you know what our calling as a community of God is? Not surprisingly, our calling is to show the world the face of God through our words and actions, and in the way we treat people. We are the body of Christ in the world, we incarnate the King.

So, knowing this, the book of Acts serves as a guidebook for us, and we'll be in this guidebook for a little while.

There are seven Sundays in the Easter season, and each one has a lesson for us from Acts. Easter Sunday gave us some rousing preaching by Peter, this week we will talk about

generosity. Weeks three and four are about repentance and how we interact with scripture, though I'm not preaching those weeks so I won't predict what you will hear.

Week five of Easter is about the obliteration of barriers, then giving and receiving hospitality, and finally, week seven is about identifying leaders and looking after the health of the community. All of these are lessons on how to live as an incarnational community; how to physically manifest our spiritual calling.

Let's get into this week's reading.

'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.

This is quite an idyllic image of the early church; the lack of private ownership conjures up images of hippie communes in the 60's and 70's. We may also think of Marxist theory in which there are no titans of industry oppressing the common people because everything is communally owned.

Certainly, the thought of no private ownership of anything is pretty much diametrically opposed to our current mode of existence. Most of us can't even properly conceive of such an arrangement because everything is owned by somebody.

I remember taking my older boys on an expedition a few years back. We packed all our stuff into a canoe and a kayak and headed out on the finger lakes from Omeemee. We spent the day paddling, and we had more than a few adventures. Then came time to set up camp.

We found that there was no place to pitch a tent. For miles and miles of shoreline there were shoulder to shoulder cottages. There was no bush, no public areas, no empty spaces of any kind. There was no place to be.

Eventually we ended up wading through a marsh and finding a place to camp near a burned out jeep. Even there, though, we ended up getting a late night visit from the owner of the property and a couple of his friends, which was a little scary.

After that experience I had a new perspective on how the homeless feel. Imagine what it is like to spend all of your time being unwelcome – never being able to sit down and rest without the constant threat of being accosted and shoved out – every square inch of this town is owned by somebody, as is all the surrounding countryside.

We have a hard time of conceiving of any other way of living. Certainly it is true that ownership encourages stewardship – we are much more likely to clean up trash on our own property that

that of someone else – we tend to be more responsible for what we own than what we don't, but our excessive claim to title of necessity excludes everyone else.

I won't propose in this sermon that we all sell everything we own and give it to the church. You don't have to worry about that – today.

I do want to talk about the opening line of our scripture though – that the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul. This is a remarkable statement.

Although we haven't celebrated Pentecost yet, the part of Acts that we read this morning comes after Pentecost. Pentecost, of course, was that day when the Spirit rushed upon those gathered and people began speaking in tongues.

The crowd was bewildered because they heard their own native languages in this community that predominantly spoke Greek and Aramaic. The bible lists 15 different languages being spoken on that day, and speaks of thousands of people coming to faith.

What this means is that this group of people who were living communally represented many languages and cultures, with different ideological attitudes, ethnic backgrounds, and theological points of view. They were not a homogeneous people; they were wildly different, and yet they seemed to be able to live together with one heart and one soul. How is that possible?

Human beings are generally a divided lot – we have a hard time agreeing on things. Wherever two or three are gathered, there will be four or five opinions expressed, and that's even among people who are largely the same.

Yet Luke reports that these believers with different speech and customs all had one heart and one soul. How could that be? Is such a thing even possible under the sun?

I think that the psalm this morning can help us with that. The psalm opens saying how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! Sounds good – what does that look like?

The psalm describes this unity like an anointing;
like the precious oil on the head,
 running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
 running down over the collar of his robes.

This sounds a little messy doesn't it? Picture being Aaron in this scene: oil, flowing from your head, through your beard, and out over the collar of your robes.

Aaron, of course, was the brother of Moses, the first high priest of the Israelites. Quite an important man. And anointing was something done to kings and religious authorities – it was a big deal - serious business.

One might expect such an occasion, the anointing of a high priest, to be a very precise and proper ceremony, and yet we see Aaron being doused with oil: abundantly, liberally, lavishly, and messily. The oil was everywhere, matting his hair and beard, running down his clothing. The author of the psalm says that this is what unity is like.

In an anointing, the oil represents the Spirit of God, and that Spirit is love and joy. When we are anointed, which is what Pentecost was – a mass anointing of the Spirit, we are filled with that love and joy to the degree that nothing else is important.

Your hair is sticky? No matter. It's dripping down your beard on onto your clothes? Who cares? Like David dancing before the ark, nothing else matters when the Spirit takes hold of you.

When we are filled with the knowledge that we are beloved children of God, and so are the other people around us, our differences become immaterial. Joy overpowers difference, and puts things into perspective.

Language, custom, dress – none of these are obstacles to unity. Unity doesn't demand that we are all the same, that would be depressingly boring. Unity is sharing that one heart and one soul – not one appearance or one lifestyle.

This brings us to a unity that is wonderfully messy, diverse, varied, and unpredictable. We don't lose our individuality; we exercise our individuality. Our differences don't divide us, but rather enable us to help one another through our unique gifts.

This is how we can arrive at a community like that described in the Acts reading this morning, but even more so. When we are abundantly anointed, sharing money is no big thing. Perhaps we won't renounce all personal possessions, but we can give freely to those who need.

This isn't limited to our money. We give of our time when we volunteer, when we visit those who need it, when we come to choir practice, decorate the sanctuary, help with Children in Worship, and provide food cards and blessing bags to the people who come to our door.

This is what living with one heart and one soul is all about. It's about priorities. When our one heart and soul come from Jesus, we can be free and gracious with all other things.

I speak to you today in the name of the one spirit, one heart, and one soul of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.