

Sermon  
April 8, 2018  
Based on Acts 4:32-35  
A Community of Friends

Over the next several weeks, from now until Pentecost, we will be bouncing back and forth around the book of Acts. We will be looking at different aspects of what the early church was like. After we look at these different vignettes, we will arrive at Acts 2 and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Also, in a couple weeks, I will be providing for you some materials that you can use to explore your spiritual gifts and to sense what might be a ministry that God is calling you to do. It doesn't have to be some big, elaborate ministry. It will more likely be something small and simple. You can work through this discovery process alone or you can hook up with a few friends and explore together. On Pentecost Sunday, I will invite those who are committing to do some kind of ministry to come forward for a prayer of consecration. So be looking for more info as we move closer to the end of April.

Today we are looking at a general description of what the church was like in those beginning days. We don't have an exact timeline, but it is safe to assume that Luke is describing a church that has only been in existence for a few months. Everything is new. There is a lot of excitement and energy. A lot is happening very quickly.

Now when we hear this description of the church, often we are drawn into how property was held in common, how people would sell their properties and place the proceeds at the apostles' feet who would then distribute the resources to those who had need. As a result there were no needy people in the community. All was held in common and there was enough to meet the needs of all. It comes across to us as some kind of Christian communism. It also sounds very idealistic. We read this and ask ourselves, "How can we pattern our economy after this example?" It clashes with the core principles of capitalism, of private property, of building wealth. Still, here was an economic system where it seems poverty has been eliminated, and that is a good thing. Our economic model has not done a good job of eradicating poverty. It

remains scandalous that in this land of plenty there are still children that go to bed hungry at night. Don't we who have more than enough have a responsibility to provide for those who are in need? Is it not our job to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless? We know that homeless and starving children are victims of the choices of others. No one need go without. But we can't seem to figure out how to distribute resources so that there is enough for everyone. It's very complicated.

There has always been a tension between private ownership and public benefit. How should privately held resources be made available for public benefit, to alleviate poverty or to enhance civic life? One of the main projects that Martin Luther King was working on which got cut short when he was assassinated was what he called a Poor People's Campaign for Jobs and Justice. One of the points he was arguing for was that the federal government should be the employer of last resort and either offer jobs in communities where there were a lack of jobs or to provide direct cash payments to guarantee a minimum income. King believed that if our nation diverted money away from the immoral atrocity of the Vietnam War and instead used that money to invest in the poor of our nation that poverty could be eliminated and America would be much better for it. As you can imagine, this kind of socialist thinking was not a popular view among a lot of people. But at least it was a serious attempt to address the reality of poverty in this land of great abundance.

So as we look at this description of the early church, it is tempting to admire their economic model in which all resources were held in common and available for the use of the community so that everyone had what they needed for a comfortable life. We assume they were not all equally impoverished because we are told that there was no one in need. There was enough for all. And as long as you have more resources coming in and not as much going out then you have a system that eliminated poverty. It is a tempting model.

But I want to step away from economics for a bit. I believe there is something else in this description of the early church that is more central. Sure, the holding all things in common economic model grabs

our attention. But there's something else we need to look at that I believe provides the foundation of their life together.

We read that they were of one mind and one heart. That is a powerful statement. I say that this is the nucleus of the early church, the force that held the community together and fueled its expansion. I want to break this down for us so we have a sense of what this is about.

First, they were of one mind. Now that does not mean they shared in groupthink. That is, I am sure they had disagreements, different points of view, different ideas. To have the same mind does not mean thinking the same thing or finishing each other's sentences. No, to have one mind is to be on the same page. It is to have a sense of clear purpose and vision. All who were a part of the church knew what they were about. They knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, had forgiven them of their sins, and made a way for them to experience eternal life. They believed in Jesus Christ. Having their minds stayed on Jesus, that's what held their community together.

They had one mind and one heart. To have one heart is to say that they were intimately connected to each other. You might say to the one you love, "I give you my heart." When the one you love passes away you may feel that a part of your heart has died. That's what having one heart is about. It's trying to describe a deep and abiding love for each other. They all shared a heart for Jesus and for each other. They were bound together in love. One mind. One heart.

So, you could say that the first community of Christians was a community of friends. Friends share similar values, have the same mind about the most important things while still have room for disagreement. Friends share their hearts with each other. These Christians were friends. We see how this community of friends expressed their life together.

The apostles spoke their testimony of the resurrection with power. Yes, they had the Holy Spirit. But they also had the security of proclaiming their message among friends. And even if they were giving their testimony before hecklers and doubters, they could still speak with boldness because they knew they had a community of friends that were there for them, who had their back. Proclaiming their testimony with

boldness was possible because of the security they had in being a part of a community of friends.

There was great grace upon all the people. In a community of friends you find grace. It is among friends that we can be honest and vulnerable, let our hair down and be real, without worrying about our friends critiquing us. Friends are able to acknowledge when they have hurt each other. They can ask and receive forgiveness. Friends take you just as you are. You don't have to pretend to be someone you are not when you are around friends. A community of friends is a community of grace.

All their resources were shared. To a friend you will say, "My house is your house." Friends look out for each other. This got me thinking about what friendship economics looks like. Let's say you join the Christian community and you understand that part of the deal is the sharing of resources so that no one lacks anything they need. So what if you drive your truck over to the truck lot where other people have given up their trucks. You park it, leave the keys with the truck and walk back home. Then, say Joe has a load of brush that he needs to haul away. So he walks over to the trucks and hops into yours, hauls his brush, and then brings the truck back, hopefully cleaned out and gassed up for the next person to use. Joe was able to satisfy his need but he didn't have to engage with you. You probably didn't even know he took the truck.

But what if instead of you giving your truck to the community, you kept your truck. So if Joe is going to get access to your truck to haul away his brush he will have to come to you and ask for it. Of course, since you two are friends, there's no problem with Joe borrowing your truck. And you can be sure that after he's done he will have the truck cleaned up and gassed up because that's what friends do for each other. That's how a friendship economy works. No one is in need because they can always go to their friends who have what is needed. That sounds like a workable economic system to me. Of course, I guess people who buy trucks better be prepared to loan them out every now and then!

Last week on Easter I talked about how we are part of a new family. When Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene he said that he would ascend to his father and her father, which makes Jesus her brother. Part

of the mystery of Christ's saving work is the establishment of a new family of brothers and sisters, co-heirs with Christ of the coming reign of God. We have another homeland that one day we will walk on together with those who have gone before us. We are all brothers and sisters to each other through Christ Jesus.

Today, I am saying that we are friends. Our church is a community of friendship. I will admit, our level of friendship with each other is not the same. Some have been dear friends for many years. Others have just recently come to be a part of this community. But although the intensity and depth of our friendships vary we can all embody the spirit of friendship. We can relate to each other, not just as brothers and sisters, but also as friends. We can all have our minds stayed on Jesus. We can share our hearts with each other. We can back each other up. We can practice grace with each other. We can share our resources when any of us are in need. We can embody a community of friendship.

The question becomes, "Who are you willing to be friends with?" That may not be always easy to answer. Let's be honest. There are people in this world who we don't necessarily want to be friends with. I will grant you that. People that are mean, who are manipulators, who only take but never give, those who wish to do you harm, friendship is not likely going to happen. So yes, there are some people that we don't want to be friends with. But I want us to think of this question in a different way.

In those days, the days of the first believers, they lived in a society where there was a strict code over who you could be friends with. The only people you could befriend in those days were your equals. Any other relationship, which would necessarily be between people with different levels of status, would be a patron-client relationship. This was a mutually beneficial system. A patron would seek clients to support. The clients in turn would speak well of their patron. The patron with this good reputation would look for someone to be his patron so that he would have access to resources to continue to provide for his clients. Of course a patron whose clients are patrons to others is a big cheese, the top of the heap. The ultimate patron, of course, was Caesar. Everyone was his clients. You can imagine being Caesar was lonely. There was no

peer you could be friends with. But that's how it worked. You could only be friends with your equals. Every other relationship would be some form of patron-client relationship.

But it was different in the early church. In this community the patron-client system was broken down. In this community, those with higher status were not to see those below them in status as clients needing their patronage, but rather as equals, brothers, sisters, friends. Status was flattened so that everyone in the community related to each other as equals, thus as friends. Maybe you get a sense of how revolutionary this community was, and maybe part of its draw. You can see why outsiders would marvel at how the Christians loved one another because they didn't play the patron-client game. Rich people and poor people treated each other as equals, as friends. That went directly against the grain of society in those days.

But are the times we live in much different? I wonder. We live in such a stratified society. Poor people live and hang out in certain areas of town, middle income people in another and then rich people in yet another. Everyone has to go to the BMV. But there are a lot of ways our society is structured in which poor people and rich people don't interact, much less socialize or befriend each other. There are glorious exceptions. The church at its best is a gathering of all people, poor, middle class and rich, doing life together, loving and serving each other. But I don't see that as the norm. I'll just speak for myself. I am more comfortable building a relationship with a poor person than with a rich person. Maybe you have different hang ups. That's the question I am left with. Are we willing to befriend those who are of a different status? I'm pretty sure we all would say we are, but it's hard to be friends with people you don't see or socialize with. And we live in a society that does a good job of keeping people separated. How far are we willing to go to remove those barriers that keep us apart? And we know there are all kinds of barriers that separate people, politics, religion, ethnicity, language. We may be willing but we have some work to do to realize this description of the early church.

So as I look at the passage before us, the real challenge is not so much their economic model of pooling all their resources together and

distributing to all who have need. The deeper question is who are we willing to be friends with. What are the barriers that separate us and prevent friendships from being forged? How willing are we to take the initiative to break down those barriers?