

2nd Sunday of Easter

4/12/15

Acts 4: 32-35

“One in Heart and Soul”

- × I would venture to guess that in many of the churches that follow the revised common lectionary, the reading that will receive the most attention is the story about Doubting Thomas.
 - ✓ That’s because the first reading from the 4th Chapter of Acts is loading with political and economic landmines
 - ✓ First of all, when we hear this line:
 - “no one claimed private ownership of any possession, but everything they owned was held in common...”
 - That definitely sounds like communism, which, Godless or not, has got to be bad
 - ✓ Second of all, even if we were to set aside the godless communism comparison, the ideal of giving up all private possessions
 - —Especially for those of us Christians who own houses in Skyline and who own, at the same time, an iPhone, an iPad, a MacBook Air and other technological marvels—
 - It just sounds like economic suicide.
 - If we don’t keep buying stuff America’s industry will grind to a halt (...OK, maybe it’ll be China’s industry, but that’s beside the point)
 - ✓ At the same time, there are lots of opportunities for today’s readings to lay some pretty serious guilt trips on people
 - Just as soon as I hear about the Christian community sharing all they had and wondering why I can’t do the same...and just as I can rationalize all that by saying, “that that was then and this is 21st century America, so I guess I’m OK with that, and I’m sure Jesus is, too...and I’m pretty sure I’m without sin on this count...”
 - We hear from the Epistle of John: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”
 - And then, to top it all off, we hear Jesus saying to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”
 - Haven’t we all, at one time or another, been like Doubting Thomas?
 - ◆ Isn’t that the state of humankind, to live—as Herman Melville writes in *Moby Dick* (paraphrased): “We go from childhood’s faith to adolescent doubt to [humankind’s] pondering repose of “If”?”
 - ◆ Could Jesus being implying to Thomas, “ Not blessed are those who live in doubt?”

- ✘ However, my mission today is to help us set aside some of that guilt we all might feel from this reading of Acts, and, instead, I'd like to focus on what's more important in this reading.
- ✘ First of all, let us put the issue of sharing all things in common in perspective:
 - ✓ It's a little unclear if everyone donated all their goods to the Apostles, who held all their possessions in common.
 - It seem from reading Act 12:12 that Mary, the mother of John Mark still owned her own home, as did Lydia (16:40) and Philip the Deacon & Evangelist (21:8). (Home ownership being a feature of deacons from earliest times, apparently.)
 - Perhaps the standard was that membership in the community also included a willingness to sell one's property when the need arose.
 - That might explain the translation of the text of verse 34:
 - ◆ NRSV: "There was not a need 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.
 - ◆ NIV: "There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time, those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need."
 - ✦ The NIV is celebrated by the evangelical churches as the more reliable of the translations...but it is the only one (of seven I have around the house) that includes this phrase ("From time to time"). Yet... in the larger context of Acts, this may essentially be correct.
- ✘ The important point is this:
 - ✓ What motivated people to share what they had did not arise from any law that we find stated in the Book of Acts
 - If there were a law, then we could speak of guilt for failing to follow the law as the reason for compliance.
 - ✓ What drove the practices of the early Christians is found in the very first line of today's reading:
 - "Now the whole group of those who believed was of one heart and soul."
- ✘ Being "of one heart and soul..."
 - ✓ That's a lots deeper than saying, "The community had shared doctrinal understandings about the Resurrection."
 - ✓ Being "of one heart and soul" is more intimate; it implies more of a commitment that goes beyond the boundaries of personal rights and private property.

- × Being “of one heart and soul” is much like the relationship we find in marriage or the relationship we have with our kids
 - ✓ 47 years ago Lynette and I opened up a joint bank account where we pooled our fortunes (such as they were),
 - and the issue was not “here’s what I want (need),but rather, what do we need to that will enable us to work in partnership, as soul-mates
 - ✓ And the same applies to our being “of one heart and soul” with our kids:
 - What parent would hear a phone call from one’s daughter (or made a call to one’s parents): “Dad, someone ran a stoplight and mashed your car...” and what’s the first thing that you have said? I’m sure it was, “I don’t care about the car; are you OK?”
 - Our kids are more important than stuff, than our possessions.
- × Marriage changes things. Being a parent changes things.
 - ✓ And in the same way, the Resurrection and the Gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost changed things in our relationship with God, with Jesus and with each other.
- × Yet, even with all that, the church in Jerusalem remained a poor congregation. No one person had it all together, but together they had it all.
 - ✓ Sunday-by-Sunday, through word, sacrament, and fellowship, these early followers of the risen Christ drew strength from one another.
 - They saw their community as the places from which they would depart to witness and serve.
- × And they, in their communal sharing, in their being “one in heart and mind” understood themselves as being one body.
 - ✓ When one part hurt, the whole body suffered. Every part of the body depended on the every other part.
- × Today, one part of the body that is suffering is the Christian Church in Palestine/Israel.
 - ✓ Since 1948, the number of Palestinian Christians has decreased from being about 20% of the population to about 2%.
 - As it was explained to me by my teachers of Arabic at the State Department language school,
 - Palestinian Muslims were treated horribly by the Israelis and Palestinian Christians were treated horribly by both Israeli and Muslims. So it was time to emigrate to America.
 - ✓ And yet, the Anglican communion remains.
 - It is small in numbers, but great in deeds.
 - The Episcopal diocese of Jerusalem has two-dozen parishes that operate 26 schools and clinics and health-care ministries in Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon.

- And in a region where an eye-for-an-eye and revenge seems to be the major form of dialogue between peoples,
 - ◆ The Diocese of Jerusalem's Peace and Reconciliation Department is one of the centers of dialogue and reconciliation between Christians, Muslims, and Jews.
- ✘ We, in Anacortes, as one part of the Christian Community, is being asked to become a partner in this effort by partnering with Emmanuel Church in Ramleh.
 - ✓ The Reverend Stan Fowler, a member of the Bishop's Committee for Israel/Palestine will make a presentation after/during Coffee Hour about how this relationship may be established.
- ✘ The wonderful theme that we can follow in the Book of Acts is this: "God will direct God's people."
 - ✓ Early in the Church, a problem arose concerning the poor widows of Jerusalem. The believers sought God's direction, and God led them to set up a social action committee led by deacons.
 - ✓ A little later the church in Antioch was fasting and praying about the next steps they were to take, and God indicated through a prophesy that Paul and Barnabas were to set out on a missionary journey.
 - ✓ The theme is: God can show Gods' people specifically and concretely what we ought to do as soon as we are serious about knowing it.
 - When I was in Jerusalem in 2000 during the 2nd intifada, the Papal Delegate to the Holy Land told me that neither side in the Arab/Israeli conflict had a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to show that there was another way out of their conflict, someone who could turn the other cheek.
 - But who knows? In 2007, Bishop Dawani was consecrated as the Bishop in Jerusalem, and he is a strong advocate for peace and reconciliation and is a strong Christian presence for moderation. He may become that Dr. King that the region needs.
 - And I believe that God might show us that way that we can be a part of this effort to aid in the work the Risen Lord, to make his will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.