

All For One
Acts 4:32-35 John 20:19-31

What's the first thing you think of when you hear the phrase, "All for one and one for all!"? How about the rallying cry of the heroic swordsmen who fought for justice...The Three Musketeers. "All for one and one for all" is their pledge of unity to each other in the face of adversity.

"All for one and one for all". We often think of that sense of unity and common purpose when a group needs to act together to pursue a common goal or oppose a common opponent. Take, for example, team sports. We encourage each other to put our own aspirations, our own desires aside to work together as a team, a unit. For sure, that's the hallmark of the most successful teams in sports.

But does that pan out in all aspects of our lives?...And should it? Well, we do have some instruction, some guidance in our reading from Acts this morning. Here we have a snapshot of the early Christian community and how they dealt with facing their challenges together - as a team. Luke tells us in Acts of how they shared their resources, making sure that all were provided for.

A lot has been made of this passage over the years - from different points of view. It could be argued that this description of the early church suggests a socialist way of life, where all property is shared in a common pool for the use of all, based on need. Others have argued that people still retained their property but were willing to part with it to meet the needs of others. Regardless, there was this sense of wholeness, of being part of one unit, one team, one community ensuring that all were cared for. Some may have still had money, but they weren't consumed with attaining wealth. After all, it's not money, but the love of money that is the root of all evil.

What's important is that they had a sense of a common purpose. You could even say that they were living the resurrection of Jesus, just as the apostles were in our gospel lesson

from John today on that first Sunday after Easter ...The old had passed away and been reborn as something completely different and new. The old ways of living: the importance of one's honor and standing in the world, of wealth and prestige, are gone. The disciples are no longer students of the rabbi...but were apostolic teachers and evangelists in their own right.

When Jesus appears among them in the locked room, it's no small detail that the first words from his mouth are "Peace be with you." We may think of it as a nice greeting, but the implications, the meanings are much deeper than that. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means much more than just the absence of conflict. It implies a desire for wholeness, for well-being and prosperity...It is wishing someone divine grace. So, in that simple phrase, "Peace be with you" the risen Christ is implying that the ideal community he promoted throughout his ministry - that your neighbor is just as important as yourself, in fact, implies you should be their servant.

This mindset continues in their ministry together as we see in Acts. The kingdom they promote is not one built on power and prestige, but one on concern for the other, for there are no true outsiders, all are our neighbors. But just as important, Luke tells us in Acts that this new community was unified in "one heart and mind." This doesn't mean that they voted unanimously at congregational business meetings or successfully implemented a consensus model of decision-making, but rather that they shared the same purpose, mission, and core values.

Now, that kind of unity rarely appears in the human story, much less church history. This perfect image of togetherness is beautiful, but it doesn't necessarily imply that all differences ceased to exist. If they all were of the same mind on everything, we would only have one gospel with one focus, instead of four gospels with different perspectives. We wouldn't have needed the first Council in Jerusalem to sort out differences. There

were different interpretations then as there are now on some of the theological details, I'm sure.

But the difference then was that "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace (or great grace) was upon them all"...They were given grace by those around them, and they gave grace in equal measure ("love others as I have loved you"). While they may have had some differences in perspective, they were unified in what was important, the good news of the resurrection, and in their mission to witness that gospel to the rest of the world around them.

Whether it is a political party, a sports team, a family, or a church, unity is found when they have something that they rally around. As you seek to have the same attitude Christ has about me, and I seek to hold the same opinion Christ has about you, we will grow in harmony. We learn to truly model the grace we ourselves have been given.

Sadly, however, we have often lost that "shalom" perspective as Christ's body in the world. Look at where we are today. We fight over details of morality and political agendas. We fight over biblical interpretation and the validity of people's identities. Where is the concern for the wholeness and well-being of another when we question their very legitimacy? Where is the love we claim to embody when we feel we can exclude others, when we question their value as human beings?

The results of such quarreling are clear to see...We wonder why our pews are empty when the public face of the church carries such an ugly visage/ugly appearance. It's not a case of people being less spiritual or having a lack of faith. It's more the case of not wanting to be part of the religious institutions that so poorly represent that faith. It's the case of not wanting to support groups that have lost their focus and sense of mission. Our own denomination is on the verge of splitting apart because we can't get past our petty squabbles and regain our focus on what our mission should really be - on shalom; on

seeking the wholeness, integrity, and spiritual health of our neighbors...or in other words, everyone else.

You may argue, “But Clay, those aren’t petty issues”. My response, “Do those concerns weaken our message of love, of grace, of unity of purpose? If so, then we need to readjust our priorities and our focus”.

The sunflower is a great example to help us understand “focus”. The sunflower is probably one of the most amazing flowers God created. They literally follow the sun. Now I don’t know about you, but one the most amazing things I have seen is a garden full of sunflowers. While watching one follow the sun is cute, watching all of them, in absolute unity, follow the sun is quite incredible. Something I found out recently is that sunflowers continue tracking the sun’s direction long after sun set – slowly turning their heads back to the east ensuring that they are always oriented in the direction of the sun. Their unity, their focus, is totally dependent on one thing, their relationship to the sun.

As we travel together in our resurrection journey this week, what is our relationship based on? Is it likewise focused on the resurrected Son, or is it more focused on priorities of a lesser importance? Are we living in shalom with each other, or does our mutual grace have limits?

The early Christian community had it right. They really got the concept of grace, of shalom, of truly loving their God and their neighbor above all else. They grew in numbers as they witnessed to those core values, because the life they modeled was one of wholeness, of integrity. I hope and pray that we as a congregation, and as a Church (with a capital C), can find our way back to those humble beginnings and model the kingdom of unity and resurrection that Christ represents, and witness that kingdom way of life to the greater world around us. We just might find our numbers increasing as well. May it be so, Amen.