

## All For One

Acts 4:32-35 John 20:19-31

All for one and one for all. It's a phrase I'm sure we've all heard before. It's the rallying cry of the three musketeers, their pledge of unity to each other in the face of adversity. We often think of that sense of common purpose and unity in situations like theirs, when a group needs to act together to pursue a common goal or fight a common opponent. Take, for example, team sports. We encourage each other to put our own aspirations aside to work together as a unit. For sure, that's the hallmark of most successful teams in sports, and that aspect is certainly immortalized in many popular films.

But does that pan out in all aspects of our lives? And should it? Well, we do have 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, and ensuring that all were cared for. Some may have still had money, but they didn't obsess 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, on this first Sunday after Easter, that they were living into the resurrection of Jesus, as were the apostles in our gospel lesson from John today. The old has 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 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 are much deeper than that. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means much more than the absence of conflict. It implies a desire for wholeness, well-being and prosperity...It is wishing someone divine grace. So, in that simple phrase, the risen Christ is implying the ideal community that his message has promoted consistently throughout his ministry – that your neighbor is just as important as yourself, in fact, ideally you should be their servant.

This mindset carries forth into 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 importantly, Luke tells us in Acts that this new community was unified in "one heart and soul." 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.

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'd only have one gospel with one focus, instead of four 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 “God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all” or as the NRSV reads “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 their mission to witness that gospel to the rest of the world around them.

A.W. Tozer observed in his book “The Pursuit of God”, that if you tuned one hundred pianos to the same tuning fork, they are automatically tuned to each other. They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which one must individually bow. So, one hundred worshipers meeting together, each one looking to Christ are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.

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.

How often have we lost sight of this concept, and suffered the consequences for it? One could argue that we all could still be part of that one catholic (with a small c) and apostolic church the Nicene Creed speaks of, if we were better at sharing grace with each other. Will we still have differences in theology and doctrine? I’m sure. But if we can focus on our common goals and mission, and the value that Christ places on those we may disagree with, it’s hard to be divisive.

Sadly, we have often lost that “shalom” perspective as Christ’s body in the world. Look at where we are today. We fight over morality details 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/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 focus and our priorities”.

When I think of focus, I’m reminded of the sunflower. 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 of the most amazing things I have seen is a field of sunflowers. While watching one follow the sun through is cute, watching hundreds in absolute unison follow the sun is actually 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 is totally dependent on one thing, their relationship to the sun.

As we travel together in our resurrection journey together 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, to 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.

Clay Z. Moyer

April 11, 2021      Hatfield Church of the Brethren