Sunday Sermon Notes

One Heart and One Soul

Acts 4:32–37 · English Standard Version

Peter made one of the most practical statements in the New Testament when he told suffering Christians not to be surprised at the fiery ordeal among them, which comes upon them for their testing, as though some strange thing were happening to them. We are surprised constantly. When something goes wrong, when a plan fails, when someone is difficult, or when an enemy appears, we treat it as an anomaly, as though life were supposed to run smoothly and this particular trouble were a glitch. Peter's answer is that we live in a fallen world, that we are fallen people, and that we are surrounded by fallen people, in a creation that God subjected to futility and corruption because of sin. The greater surprise, on those terms, is that anything ever goes right.

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1 Peter 4:12
"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."

One reason things are hard is that God makes them hard. Peter says the ordeal comes for testing, which means God is doing it, and we should not be surprised that he does. Another reason is the devil. In the next chapter Peter tells his readers to be alert, because their adversary prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. So we have God testing us and the devil trying to chew us up, and when things get hard we ask why this is happening and why it is happening to us, as though it were not always us. Things will always be hard. If there is no problem, that may itself be the problem. If God has removed a church's lampstand, as he warned the church in Ephesus he would, he is not going to test a people who have already departed. If the devil has already devoured a person, he has no further work to do. Do not trust the person who goes to the gym and never gets sore, who says the new routine is going great and nothing hurts. No soreness means nothing is being done, and nothing is progressing. A pulled muscle is not the goal, but it will happen if the work is real. A problem means things are normal.

The text is Acts 4:32–37, and one of the things Luke seems intent on telling the church is that problems will not stop. From chapter 4 on, the pattern is relentless. Chapter 4 brings persecution from outside and then need on the inside. Chapter 5 brings pretense and hypocrisy in the church.

Chapter 6 brings neglect, prejudice, and discrimination among the widows. Chapter 7 brings murder. Chapter 8 brings more persecution. It is constant, and Luke appears to be saying that if you are a Christian, and if you are a church, you should settle in and know that it is going to be hard.

The setting is the healing at the temple gate. In chapter 3, Peter and John are going up to the temple at the hour of prayer when they meet a man lame from birth, who is carried there daily to ask for alms. He expects money. They have none, and they tell him so, and then they give him something better: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, they tell him to walk, and he does. The whole city takes notice, and the apostles preach in the temple. The Sadducees, who run the temple and who do not believe in a resurrection, do not like it, and they arrest the apostles and threaten them. When the apostles are released, they do not hire an attorney or make protest signs. They go to their brothers and sisters and pray, not to be delivered from the threat, but to be emboldened to keep speaking. Their meeting place is shaken, they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and God answers the prayer. The church's response to these events is what Luke describes in verse 32.

How They Handled It

The church in Acts 4 is facing persecution from outside and desperate need on the inside, which raises two questions. How did they handle it, and will we handle it the same way? We are a people of the pattern. In the churches of Christ we have always said that we follow the pattern of the New Testament church, and that what they did under the apostles is what we are to do. So what did they do when they were faced with difficulty? The pattern here is worth following.

For this church, the name was not a sign on a building or a denominational title. Jesus was Lord, they were the church of the Messiah. Verse 33 says the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is not a courtesy title. On the contrary, we use titles loosely. A well-known man in the county can say, "What's up, boss man," and mean nothing by it. Mr. once meant master. We do not mean that when we say it. We can do the same with the titles of Jesus. The Jewish Sanhedrin were powerful men. While at this time in Jewish history the Sanhedrin's power to inflict capital punishment was extremely restricted, they had great liberty to restrict freedom and inflict corporal punishment. Without concern for this power, the apostles say that God has given them a very different message for the people, and that they will do what God said. That is what it means for Jesus to be Lord. He is the cornerstone. Salvation is in him alone. When things go wrong, the appeal is to him, not to human authorities.

They also handle hardship with God's word as their standard, not the views of other people. The Sadducees want the apostles to stop preaching in the name of Jesus and to stop talking about the resurrection, which the Sadducees deny. The apostles will not conform to that. It is hard to imagine that there were not apostles standing in front of the Sanhedrin for whom, their entire lives, that

council had been the ultimate authority, the men who decided what was true and what was permitted. It is equally hard to imagine that none of them thought, even for a moment, that they might give in on this one, that the pressure was too great, that a compromise was in order. They do not, because God's word is the standard, and the Sadducees' teaching is not.

They are also a Spirit-filled community that prays together. They have needs, challenges, and difficulty, and they do not solve them by strategy or by appeal to the authorities. They solve them with fellowship and prayer. They are already filled with the Holy Spirit, and the fellowship and the prayer lead to a greater filling, for Luke says that when they had prayed, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word with boldness. That is how they handle their difficulties.

Those Are My People

The result is in verse 33. Abundant grace was upon them all. When this church said that Jesus is Lord and lived it, when it made God's word the standard, and when it opened itself to the filling of the Holy Spirit and met and prayed, God did more than acknowledge them. He marked them as his people. Most of us know the feeling of being among people who are not ours, and then of finding the ones who are. Years ago, a friend invited me to Chapel Hill to watch Kentucky play Carolina, in the dark days of Kentucky basketball, when the program was struggling. I was the only person in the county in a Kentucky shirt, walking through a store full of Carolina blue, feeling the looks and the remarks. Those were not my people. A Christmas return to Lexington, to the center of that world, was the opposite. Those were my people. That is what God does when a congregation makes the word its foundation, Jesus its Lord, and the Spirit its life. He says, those are my people.

Acts 4:33
"And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all."

Verse 32 is the remarkable thing, for the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul. At this point the church in Jerusalem is something like three or four thousand people, and it would be hard enough to find forty people and make them one heart and soul, let alone thousands. These were not a neighborhood club. Many of them were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, from all over the world, speaking different languages, coming from different cultures and different economic places, standing at different spiritual levels, men and women. And God made them one. It is a divine achievement, and it is stunning.

Acts 4:32

> *"Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common."*

Groups do not do this on their own. A football team wears one name and one uniform, and anyone who has been around one knows there are three teams, offense and defense and kickers, who do not entirely trust one another. A political party is one party and half a dozen factions, and a military is one military whose branches have names for each other. That is how groups work, but not this group.

The question for a congregation is how it is doing with the same achievement, since the church is not a human organization assembled because people like one another or share a background. How are we doing with race, with seeing people without the divisions we inherit? How are we doing with politics, where some issues are genuinely spiritual and cannot be waved away, and a great many are not spiritual at all, and still divide Christians who ought not to be divided by them? How are we doing with the aftermath of recent years, with churches that are still two churches rather than one, still recovering from a crisis that should not still be sorting them? How are we doing with age, the old and the young seeing things differently and needing to work with each other? How are we doing with class, culture, education, and roles in the church, with the fact that someone else has a function we might have wanted? How are we doing with opinions about church itself, the preference for one kind of song over another, the absurdity of a congregation split into a contemporary service and a traditional service so that it is two churches meeting in one building? New songs and old songs can be worked out so that we stay together. How are we doing with cliques, the little group that has little to do with the other group? That is not how church is supposed to be.

They also spoke the word with boldness, and the placement of that fact matters. Verse 32 describes the unity and the care. Verse 33 describes the preaching, the apostles giving testimony to the resurrection with great power. Verse 34 returns to the need, and the return is not a mistake or an afterthought. The reason they were unified and caring for each other is that they were faithfully preaching the word. That is what produced the unity and the care, and then they cared for the needy.

The Source of Their Care

Three things explain the care: the source was God's grace, the process was generous sharing and radical sacrifice and wise procedure, and the result was that there was not a needy person among them.

Begin with the result, as a strategist would say, with the end in mind. There was not a needy person among them, and that is a congregational goal, the goal of elders, deacons, teachers, preachers, and every member: no material need unmet, no emotional or relational need unmet, so that a person who is struggling or lonely finds what he needs, because that is God's plan, and no spiritual need left unaddressed, no member struggling or failing or weak while the church looks past him.

How it happens is grace, for God provides every resource, and selfless love is not natural. Selfishness is natural. Looking out for oneself, keeping what is mine and wishing the other person luck with his own, is natural. This is why it was hard for so long to believe that Paul meant what he said in Philippians 2, that we are to consider one another as more important than ourselves. That cannot mean what it says, because it is not natural. It has to come through grace.

Acts has a great deal to say about grace, and all of it bears on this. Luke calls the word of God the word of grace, which means that for him the Bible is not merely the word of God's rules, regulations, and ordinances. It is the word of God's grace, describing grace and given because of grace. Acts also says that we believe through grace, because God graciously allowed it, so that if it were not for grace we could not believe. We are saved through grace. When we go forward in anything for God, we do it by grace, and we continue in grace. What this church needs as it deals with challenge and difficulty is not smart people, or talented people, or rich people, or clever people, or educated people. It is the grace of God. That is what leads a church to handle its business.

Second Corinthians 8 makes the connection between grace and giving plain. Paul writes of the congregations of Macedonia, and what he describes is almost ridiculous. In a great ordeal of affliction, so that they are hurting terribly, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in a wealth of liberality. They gave according to their ability and beyond it, of their own accord, begging Paul for the favor of participating in the support of the saints in Jerusalem. He had not expected it. They first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to the apostles. Paul can be heard saying that they cannot afford it, that they can barely eat and barely pay their bills, that they should not worry about it. They will not stop until he lets them give. The reason is in the first verse of the chapter. The grace of God has been given to them. There is a special connection between giving and serving and grace, and the connection is that giving and serving are unnatural. They happen only when God graciously causes them to happen.

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2 Corinthians 8:2
"For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part."

The Process

The process of providing for the church, which in this passage is about money and which holds for anything the church is trying to get done, has three parts: they shared generously, they made radical sacrifice, and they handled it wisely.

All things were common property to them, and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own. We use language like this and do not mean it, telling a guest to make himself at home without meaning that he should go into the bedroom, put on the pajamas, and get into the bed, or raid the pantry, or take the keys and the car. He does not mean it either. They meant it, and they had all things in common.

They went further, into radical sacrifice. If they owned houses or land, they sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles, who distributed to each as any had need. That is already a great deal of faith. If I am going to sell something and have money to give, I would rather give it out myself, so that I know where it is going. It takes trust to hand the money to the apostles, or in our setting to the elders, and let them handle it. Barnabas is the example Luke gives, a Levite from Cyprus whom the apostles called Son of Encouragement, who owned a tract of land, sold it, and laid the money at the apostles' feet. The difference between kindness and sacrifice is easy to see in smaller terms. Not long ago a family in the congregation lost the use of a car, and there were extra cars to lend, so one was lent. That is a kindness, and it is not a great sacrifice. Selling the car and giving them the money to buy their own would be another thing entirely. That is what these people were doing with houses and land. That is how much they wanted to provide for one another.

The wisdom is just as important, because God never called the church to sling money around with no plan, giving to whoever looks like he needs it and not worrying about the rest. What we see in the Bible is that the church uses wisdom and biblical principle to handle money correctly. This is true of those who supervise and of those who are served. The Bible has things to say about elders, about deacons, and about anyone put in charge of anything, and it has to be done in a certain way by certain people. It is also true of those who receive. The Bible does not authorize the church to put everybody on the dole. When it comes to meeting needs, the individual is responsible first. If the individual cannot do it, the family is responsible. If the family cannot do it, then the church is responsible. God never said to throw money at a need and be reckless about it. We are to be generous, radical, and sacrificial, and we are to keep our heads and do it in the wisest way we can.

Concluding Thoughts

Acts 4 describes the church we want to be:

- A Jesus–exalting congregation, making him Lord and putting him over everything.
- Bible–centered, facing everything that is said and done on the Bible.
- Spirit–filled and governed by his influence.
- A people who love fellowship rather than merely being obligated to it.
- A people who pray together.
- A people who share the gospel.
- A people who make sacrifices in order to meet needs.

Most of us would say that this is what we want our church to be. The question is how a church becomes that, and the answer is that it becomes that when every believer is that. We cannot be anything we are not and this church cannot be that church without being that kind of believer.

When we are, we find that we are built on one foundation, which is Jesus, that we adhere to one standard, the Bible, and that we are empowered by one source, the Holy Spirit. We are devoted to the fellowship of one body, the church, we face challenges with one response, which is praying together, and we speak one message, the gospel. We meet our needs not as an organization, not as an institution, not as a club, but as a family, and we can never forget that they did it and we will become that model church because of His grace, A Jesus-exalting congregation, making him Lord and putting him over everything.

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2 Corinthians 8:1

"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia."
