

## **“EVERYTHING IN COMMON.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Scripture Texts: Acts 4:32-37**

### **Introduction.**

The book of Acts was written by Luke. Dr. Luke, a physician. There is the possibility he was the richest among the inner circle of apostles and those close to the apostles.

Matthew was a tax collector but he gave that job up to follow Jesus.

It's interesting Dr. Luke includes many stories about rich people in his Gospel and Acts. The rich fool, the rich young ruler, Joseph of Arimathea, John Mark's mother Mary who owned a big house, Lydia a dealer in purple.

Remember the wonderful story about that wee little man Zacchaeus. Remember he was very rich, a much despised tax collector. Then Jesus came to his house and into his heart and there was a sudden and very noticeable transformation, a total change of heart. Suddenly he was giving half his possessions to the poor and he paid back four times whatever he had defrauded. That's radical generosity.

The heart that is transformed by Jesus loves people more than it loves stuff. The heart of a believer in the Gospel uses their stuff in order to love people. Faith toward God produces a freedom toward possessions, a lack of fear about our provisions.

The story of Zacchaeus is the story of what happens when a person's life is totally turned around by Jesus, when the love of Jesus takes over.

The story in Acts 4 is a story of the transformation of a whole group of people, of the early church some 10,000 strong. It follows after what happened in the previous text.

**Acts 4:31** And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Luke highlights three ways the Holy Spirit showed Himself powerfully at work in the hearts and lives of the believers. Three things that are the marks of great church. Great unity in spirit, great power in preaching, great generosity in caring, all of which are signs of great grace.

**First**, they were of one heart and soul, they were together in *great unity*.

Tell me how 10,000 people can be of one heart and soul, one mind and spirit? Remember who was in Jerusalem at Pentecost, diverse people from all over the Mediterranean, and not just all Jews, but proselytes, Cretans and Arabians and visitors from Rome.

How is this possible? Does this mean they all lived the same lifestyle, educated their children the same way, had the same likes and dislikes, all agreed on worship style, had the same musical tastes and liked every decision the elders made? They no doubt differed on food, clothing, dialects, local customs. So how were they united at the heart level?

Think about tuning pianos. If you use the same tuning fork to tune 100 pianos, then all the pianos will be in tune with each other. They are not tuned to each other, they are all tuned to the same standard.

Our text for this evening speaks to this:

**I John 1:7** If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another,

This kind of unity is possible only if they are all tuned to the same standard which is Jesus Christ. He is the one who makes us brothers and sisters. As long as we are all looking to Him first and foremost, we will be in harmony with each other.

Paul writes about how this kind of unity is possible:

**I Corinthians 13:4-7** Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

**Ephesians 4:2-3** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

**Ephesians 4:32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

This kind of unity is possible only by the Holy Spirit. Where there is great grace there is great unity, there great things happen.

There are lots of ways to express unity of heart and mind, but perhaps none gets as close to showing our true heart as sharing our money and possessions.

*Second*, the apostles, full of the Spirit, gave great testimony with great power, they were boldly proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus.

Not only were they doing what they were doing before and told not to do, but they were doing it with more zeal and fervor.

Where there is great grace, there is great power, great proclaiming in the name of Jesus.

What follows in our text doesn't come out of a sermon series on tithing or a capital campaign or a year end budget promotion. What follows comes out of preaching the resurrection of Jesus. And what does preaching the resurrection have to do with giving? Here is how John saw the connection.

**I John 3:16-18** By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Generosity is the spontaneous action of those who get the resurrection. God has done everything and given us everything so that we can share everything. When we know how Christ has been to us, how can we not be the same?

Great unity comes when we die to ourselves, great generosity comes when we know the great power of the resurrection in our lives and are transformed by it.

*Third*, there was a mutual sharing of possessions according to one's need. Their love was made evident in real, tangible, sacrificial ways. This was the fruit of their unity and love for each other.

You can love things or you can love people, but it is hard to do both. One will rule over the other. Our money will go to where our heart is. If our heart is in stuff, possessions, property, bigger and better, that's where our money will end up. If our heart is in people, that's where our money will end up. If our heart is in building the kingdom of God and the church of Jesus, that's where our money will end up. Where is your heart? Show me your check book and credit card statement and I will show you your heart.

Jerusalem was not wealthy, there had been many famines and droughts, and they were under the heavy thumb of Rome. This was not an affluent church, the majority were

relatively poor, fishermen, shepherds, peasants, servants, and widows. Remember the middle class is a relatively recent phenomena in history, barely two hundred years. Most of the world for most of history has been a small upper class, maybe five percent, and the rest lower class, poor.

Those who had an abundance of possessions sold some of their abundance to relieve the needs of those who were poor.

Over history this text has led to many failed experiments in various forms of communal living. And some say this is a Biblical basis of communism.

That is easy to refute. First, this was completely voluntary, which of course communism is not. Second, private ownership continued, people still owned houses and land. Third, this is not about an equal distribution of wealth to everyone, but a meeting the needs of those most in need.

Communism basically says, what's yours is everyone's. Christians say, what's mine is yours. If you have a need and I have the means of meeting that need, then it is my pleasure to do so. This is not communism, this is community. This is not denying wealth, but using it for God's glory.

This is an example of believers not possessing their possessions and accumulating more possessions but generously giving what was their own to others. They weren't selfish, they weren't jealous or envious, they didn't covet or say they earned it and they deserve to keep it.

This is a work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the early believers. Not everyone did this, not everyone did the same amount, but each according to their ability.

Was it natural for these first century Christians to liquidate some of their assets they had spent a lifetime accumulating and give them to the needy? Was it more natural for them than it would be for us?

No. Theirs was a supernatural response. It was the result of a transformation that took place at the filling of the Holy Spirit. Joyful giving and sharing and letting go are natural responses only of those who have been transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ and are no longer conformed to the standards of this world.

### **Joseph, called Barnabas (son of encouragement).**

Luke gives two contrasting real life examples of how this transforming effect of the Gospel played out in the local church, a man named Barnabas and a couple named Ananias and Sapphira.

Barnabas shows how the heart of a man with some means, was changed and how he showed his greater love for people and especially people in need, and his lesser love for his stuff. This radical generosity.

We will get to know Barnabas more later in Acts and we will see he was a risk-taker. He embraced Paul before anyone else would, he gave John Mark a second chance when Paul would not. He used his gift of encouragement in many risky ways, including with his money.

He didn't love money and things and the comforts having money and things gives. He loved the good he could do with what God gave him. His actions matched his faith.

A great church is filled with people who do great things. A great church is Christ-like, generous beyond measure. A great church has great unity which spills over into great grace and great self-giving care for others, even taking risks for the sake of the Gospel.

And we should expect this in the Church of Jesus Christ. Who has done more for us? What more could possibly be done than what He did? Are we not the richest people on earth because of Christ? So who can out give Him?

### **Implications and application.**

We Americans love our stuff. There are over 50,000 storage unit facilities in the US. There are more storage units in the US than MacDonaldis. One in ten Americans pay an average of almost \$100 a month to store their stuff.

The average square footage of our homes in America has increased a 1,000 square feet in the past thirty years while family size has decreased. As a culture we relentlessly accumulate stuff to fill our homes, garages and storage units.

We forget Jesus' words, that a person's "life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

What does it profit a man to gain the world and lose his soul? Why do we neglect our soul when it is the only eternal thing we possess? And why do we put so much energy into stuff that will only be kindling for a really big fire?

The early Christians didn't look at each other and compare, they weren't filled with envy, jealousy, greed or contempt. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and looked at each other with love and compassion. They looked at each other as fellow heirs of the same salvation and the same destination.

The church that knows the power of Christ's resurrection will be willing to die to worldly standards and will show the world the true depth of loving relationships and the joy of generous freedom. It will expose the hollow and soul depleting values of the world. It will show the world great grace. May God give us this great grace.

Calvin said about this passage, if we are not moved by generosity, we have iron hearts. If we are not as generous as them, then we are not of the same heart and mind as our earliest brothers and sisters.

May we be a church of great and generous grace toward each other.

May we guard our attitude toward those less fortunate and especially the poor, and especially those in the body of Christ. God cares and He expects us to.

May we guard our attitude toward what we have. It's not ultimately ours but God's and we are only stewards and managers. When we forget that money and things get in our hearts.

Money is not the problem, love is. What do we love?

If we love people, we will be free and generous.

If we love money, we will be bound up and selfish.

Money lies to us every day, it tells us it's more important than people and most other things.

The best way to guard against that is to be generous with our money.

Think and pray about what radical generosity might look like in your life and in your family.

There are no inspiring stories of accumulation, only inspiring stories of sacrifice and giving.

And if you don't have much money, there are other ways to practice generosity, be creative. Everyone is rich in something, be generous with your life, with your time, with sharing what you do have. There are many opportunities and needs here that are going unmet. We can all meet a need and we will all have a need to be met, like being prayed for.

God has shared everything with us so we can share everything with each other.

**I Timothy 6:18-19** They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.