

Over the course of the past week, as I've been thinking about what to say this morning, I've given a fair amount of thought to the passage from Acts in the lectionary. It's short, so let me read it over again – “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy 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.” Since I've been chairing the stewardship committee for the last few years, you might be concerned that I'm going to make a desperate mid-year stewardship pitch at this point, asking you, like the early Christians, to sell your houses and bring the proceeds, so that we can distribute them as each has need. Fear not; this is not what I have in mind. But, I do have to at least mention that I've always been struck at just how socialist this scripture seems. Maybe Karl Marx was inspired by the phrase “each as any had need.” This has struck me especially because in our country, some have made it seem like capitalism is synonymous with true Christianity, and communism with atheism. This passage is a welcome antidote to that sort of thinking. While it does not call for governmental control of the means of production, it does call for a radical rethinking of our own economic glorification of consumption and materialism.

But enough of that. In the last week, I've been much more struck by the phrase, “the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” I should say at the outset that I have mixed feelings about this phrase, and it may take me a bit of time to explain why. In my own experience, I haven't had too many times when I've felt “of one heart and soul” with any particular group. So many things seem to get in the way of being of “one heart and soul.” For one thing, we're all so different in our personalities. Some of us like to be in big groups of people, thriving off the energy of so many interactions – those are the folks who walk around during the passing of the peace. I'm the kind who generally prefers solitude, so you'll please excuse me if I stay in my pew during the passing of the peace. I'm not saying I don't wish you God's peace, I'm just not so gregarious or extroverted. Also, I personally like things to be organized, well-structured, and on-time, so, I sometimes have trouble with spontaneity. That usually makes the Episcopal church fairly comfortable for me. But for others, spontaneity is sometimes exactly what they need to feel close to God, and reading prayers out of the prayer book, rather than being moved by the holy spirit feels stifling and fake to them. I admit I rather like intellectualizing my faith; for others, too much thinking and not enough feeling and experiencing kills faith. Some people like incense and sacred images; others don't. Some like organs, others like guitars. Some like to raise their hands when they pray, others would prefer that we keep our arms down. So how are we to be of one heart and soul? Surely the same kind of diversity must have been present among those in the early church. So, how were they of one heart and soul?

I will also express some misgivings because I fear a fake kind of unity. If you look at the passage in Acts that follows our reading, in chapter 5, you'll find that there was a man named Ananias married to a woman named Sapphira, who sold their property, but kept back some of the proceeds from the apostles. In a passage that seems like it's taken from the book of Joshua or Judges, Peter rebukes Ananias, who then promptly falls dead. Shortly after this, Sapphira, not knowing the fate of her husband, is asked about the property, claims that Ananias had given the entire proceeds to the apostles, is rebuked herself by Peter, and she too falls dead. Somehow passages like these escape our lectionary, but they are important in showing us that even in the early church, the kind of unity that we see in Acts chapter 4 quickly broke down.

Finally, when I think of the highlights of Christian history, the moments that strike me as most inspiring are the ones when someone dissented from the group – John Wycliffe translating the Bible into English,

thus defying papal authority, Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses on the door of the church at Wittenburg, and since I grew up a Methodist and am delivering this sermon today, I can't resist mentioning John Wesley, who defied Anglican authority by permitting lay members to preach. What if these great Christians of history had shrunk back, lest they not be "of one heart and soul" with the Christian community?

So, I certainly have problems with this notion that we must be "of one heart and soul." On the other hand, when I was a student in graduate school, I participated in a Christian Fellowship group affiliated with Intervarsity. From time to time, we would go off on retreat, getting out of Chicago, into a rural area with a retreat center. We had the chance to spend time in reflection, prayer and corporate worship, having left our work behind for a day or two. I do remember coming back from those trips on something of a spiritual high. It's true that in many ways, I often felt very different from others in the group. I had different political leanings. I was much more of a traditionalist when it came to the kind of music I preferred for worship. As I said above, I felt rather uncomfortable with spontaneity, and I tended to get very uncomfortable when others would raise their hands during prayer or worship. But despite all this, I nevertheless felt that we could be of one heart and soul, and after these weekend retreats, I felt that way especially. During the week, we all lived and worked in a community that could almost be said to have worshiped scholarship, and while we had ourselves dedicated a good part of our lives to study and scholarship, we had a common belief that our own call to be disciples of Christ had priority over our call to be students of our disciplines. During our retreat, we had spent time praying for one another, worshipping together, and resetting our priorities. Somehow, the differences we had then seemed minor in comparison to what we had in common, and didn't at all get in the way of my feeling of belonging to the community. I felt that even if we were perhaps not always of one mind, we were of one heart and soul, and I continue to this day to cherish the memory of those feelings.

Coming back to the story in Acts, perhaps a little background can be helpful in understanding what was going on. Peter and John had earlier been going out to pray when a man, who had been lame from birth, asked them for alms. Peter told him 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And the man did. As you might expect, this attracted some attention, and Peter used it as a chance to share the news – it was faith through Jesus that had healed this man. He is quoted as saying "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord..." His preaching and teaching irritated the priests and Sadducees, who arrested Peter and John, and instructed them to stop preaching in Jesus' name. You can guess Peter's reaction to these instructions. And the priests could do nothing to stop Peter and John, because this time, the crowds were on his side. Peter and John returned to their friends, and everyone prayed that God would allow them to speak "with all boldness." The room shook, everyone was filled with the Holy Spirit, and that's about how we come to our story. "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." I think that these early Christians were so excited about the power of God that their differences didn't seem to matter so much. If you've just seen a lame man receive the power to walk, and shortly thereafter, you're praying in a group and the room starts to shake, you're going to be impressed.

So there's something rather wonderful about being of one heart and soul with a community. And, it seems to me that God gives us such unity when we pray as a community and for one another. Such moments of unity can be times of spiritual euphoria, like coming into a clearing on a hike through the mountains and seeing a magnificent view. At the same time, I would defend and honor our individuality, and our need to disagree. I think God wants both from us – God wants us to be honest with each other, even when it means we may say things that others don't like so much. But once in a while, especially after prayer, God grants that we may be of one heart and soul.