

Scripture Reading

Acts 4: 32–5:11

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

5:1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

¹ *There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people.*
² *For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.* ³ *But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be.* ⁴ *For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident.* ⁵ *So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.*

⁶ *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* ⁷ *Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* ⁸ *And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*
⁹ *As it is written:*

*“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.”^[a]*

¹⁰ *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.*

¹¹ *You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*

¹² *This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.* ¹³ *Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.* ¹⁴ *And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.* ¹⁵ *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

Footnotes:

- a. 2 Corinthians 9:9 Psalm 112:9

Morning Message
Koinonia & Sharing Possessions

From the time most of us can first remember, we heard the word “SHARE”; usually voiced as an imperative declaration of a parent: “You two need to share!”

Whether it is a Frisbee, a paintball gun or an Xbox controller, a Chatty Cathy doll, a Barbie, a Big Wheel or during adolescence, a family car; “sharing” has been an attribute most parents try to instill in their children from birth.

To be honest, our early sharing experiences occurred solely out of obedience to our parents and the threat of losing whatever we had to share, if we didn’t obey. “I’m going to take it away if you two can’t share!” Am I right?

But hopefully, with maturity came that sense of joy when you realized that while sharing costs you something, the positive impact it makes in someone else’s life is well worth the cost.

I hope this is a truth with which you resonate, and if you are younger parents I hope that “sharing” is something you are pushing every day with your kids.

Another thing I have found to be true is that while sharing becomes easier with maturity, in many ways it also becomes harder as our experiences with scams, con-artists, and irresponsible people generates cynicism and distrust in our hearts. How often are we conflicted when a panhandler comes up to our driver-side window on our way through Worcester? Wanting to help but not knowing the person whose needs seem so apparent, what do we do?

And what do we do as we come to God’s Word this morning and hear an encouragement to share; not just a little bit, but to share at a level that would totally redefine life for all of us?

This fall we began exploring the Greek word *KOINONIA* used in the New Testament to describe the Spirit-led fellowship of the first Christians. And today we recognize just how often the word *KOINONIA* is translated “to share”.

- What does it mean in Acts 4 when Luke writes:

*No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own,
but they shared everything they had.*

- What does it mean for us today, to strive for that same *koinonia*;
a willingness to consider all that we have as available to meet the needs
of others?

Let me share a few observations about the biblical call for sharing:

1. Sacrificial sharing was a major element of early Christianity.

I emphasize this because I don't want you to think that Acts 4 is the only reference to Christians needing to put their money where their mouth is.

- Shortly after Luke gives us this early description of the generous sharing of Christians in Jerusalem, in Acts 6 he tells us that the Jerusalem Church had established a common fund for the support of widows (Acts 6:1-6). Though the exact numbers of needy widows is not recorded, that it took the appointment of seven men to administrate this need indicates that the need was substantial.
- We also see, scattered in the letters of the early church, numerous encouragements for *koinonia-sharing*:

1 Timothy 6:18

*Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds,
and to be generous and willing to share.*

Hebrews 13:16

*.... do not forget to do good and to share with others,
for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

When I read the following words to you, you might think they come from a contemporary critique:

*"There is your brother, naked and crying!
And you stand confused over the choice of an attractive floor covering."*

But as contemporary as that sounds, it comes from Ambrose, a theologian and church leader of the 4th century!

Basil the Great (a 4th century bishop) wrote,
"The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry. The garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of the person who is naked. The shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot. The money you keep locked away is the money of the poor." - Basil the Great

Sacrificial sharing has always been a part of being a follower of Christ.

A second observation:

2. “Koinonia - Sharing” in the Church was based on a unique communal identity in Christ; a resurrection community that did not fear dying to itself out of obedience to Jesus.

While there are some connecting cords with God’s calling on the Jews, Christian sharing initiated a radically new & different way of life.

The differences between pagans and Christians on the practice of charity was even recognized by pagans of the time. For example, the pagan satirist Lucian (130-200 c.e.) mocked Christians for their charity. He said:

The earnestness with which the people of this religion help one another in their needs is incredible. They spare themselves nothing for this end. Their first lawgiver put it into their heads that they were all brethren.

Lucian (130-200 A.D.)

In essence, our oneness in Christ and the fellowship we share defines our character:

a. With Christ as Lord, the Head of the Church body defining our common goals, trust facilitates extravagant sharing.

Think about what happens when people rally around a common cause and full trust those who stand with them, because they’ve spent time together and know they will offer nothing short of their best effort.

What happens is success.

Many years ago now I wondered if we could successfully add on our much needed Fellowship Hall and classroom space. But people worked together, and

they offered more than money; it cost their time, expertise and energy to see the building built.

There was trust that the pledges that were made would come in, and our common goal and that trust facilitated generous giving; more than I imagined we could generate. Christians are empowered by common goals defined by Christ and a trust established through fellowship.

This morning you heard the interesting story of Ananias & Sapphira. Sometimes I wonder if I'm more amazed by the generosity of Barnabas described in Acts 4 or the sudden death of this husband and wife team.

I certainly hope their story has never been used by preachers to scare more money from their parishioners, for theirs is a story of broken trust; of deception in fellowship. For the amount they gave or withheld is not important. The issue was trustworthiness and truthfulness in the Body. Did they give what they said they gave? No.

A church is wounded and weakened when we fail to be truthful. How many 20th and 21st centuries church have we seen implode because trust was broken by someone?

With Christ as Lord, defining our common goals, trust facilitates extravagant giving.

Also, when united with Christ...

b. One body means that people share needs as well as their assets.

In Acts 4:32 we are told that these early Christians...

..shared everything they had...

.. and while we usually think about “everything” as describing material possessions, other biblical texts (Romans 12:13) cause us to view these words from a different angle; they cause us to make the needs of other Christians our needs as well. So not only do we share our assets with one another, but we also share needs.

- If your car is broken my car is broken,
- If your pantry is bare, so is mine.

When we share everything, we share our needs as well as our assets.

In 130 A.D. these words were recorded describing a Christian community:

And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.

The Apology of Aristides (130 A.D.)

Koinonia-sharing; your hunger is our hunger; our food is your food.

Are we there? Do we define ourselves by all we hold in common in Christ, or do we still define ourselves by our differences?

- I'm working you're not.
- I'm rich, you're poor.
- I have, you don't!

I can't help but think of JPUSA Covenant Church in Chicago; a fellowship living in community; sharing an old 11-story high-rise, taking turns cooking a common meals for hundreds of residents and homeless, working side-by-side to support common Christian ministries and services to Chicagoans. Maybe it takes a setting like that to come close to *koinonia*-sharing.

In such a setting no need is “out of reach” when there is trust and desire to meet the commonly-held need.

I laugh these days as certain beer commercials come on TV, depicting the strange things football fans will do if they think they can help their favorite team win. “Nothing is weird if it works!” the commercial voice reminds us, as people rub the head of a friend for luck or hold their beer bottles in exactly the same way.

On a more serious note, do we not see the power of sharing needs and assets whenever a soldier received an award for valor; for risking (losing) their own life to save another’s.

The Apostle Paul willingness to suffer for the sake of others was simply a reflection of what Jesus was willing to do to bring God’s salvation to all of us.

For followers of Christ, no need is too great if God says “Go for it!” We are one Body empowered by trust; a people sharing needs as well as their assets.

And, being united in Christ also means

c. We share locally & far away because of that same trust.

Scripture records in numerous epistles/letters that Paul took up a collection from all of his churches to help support the Jerusalem Church when it fell upon hard times. (1 Cor. 16:1; Romans 15:25; Gal. 2:10).

This home church that initially set the koinonia-sharing example was now undergoing great persecutions. But because of a common identity in Christ and trust in one another, offerings were received from strangers living in distant lands.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the response of Macedonian churches:

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

8 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.

Koinonia - Sharing in the Church was based on a unique common identity in Christ; a resurrection community that did not fear dying to itself in obedience to Jesus.

To be honest, given human nature such sharing is a miracle:

- It is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work.
- It is also evidence of a people who actually believe in resurrection; being willing to die to themselves and live a new life.

Easter not only redefined life as we know it personally,
but it also redefines us corporately.

A final observation about the biblical call for sharing:

3. While we are called to strive to be an extravagant koinonia-sharing community, empowered through a common purpose and trust, we are also called by God to care for the needy of this world.

Jesus regularly challenged the Jews of his day concerning their misconception that charity was to be exercised among their own tribe & people.

Perhaps you remember that once, at a banquet put on by a “prominent Pharisee”, Jesus said to his host

Luke 14:12-14

¹² *“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

In His parable of the “Good Samaritan” Jesus defining what it means for us to be a neighbor to anyone in need, even your enemy!

As the result of their Lord’s teachings, as Christians shared with one another they also shared with the needy of the world. In fact, their sharing and caring for the needs of people was so faithful in Rome that the Pagan Emperor Julian was threatened by the growing influence of Christians.

History records that this Emperor, who attempted to lead the Roman Empire back to paganism, was frustrated by the superior morality shown by the Christians, especially when it came to charity.

“The impious Galileans relieve both their own poor and ours It is shameful that ours should be so destitute of our assistance.” – Emperor Julian, *Epistles of Julian*, 49.

When that internal joy of *koinonia*—sharing spills over into a needy world, God is revealed; glorified. The God of love and compassion draw non-Christians toward a new kind of community; not a political ideology but the Community of the King where common purpose and trust, obedience to God and joy frees us up to share everything; needs and resources alike.

These days I cannot help, as I look back into history, and wonder if God isn't setting up Christians to repeat a new revelation of His love and compassion. For just as Christian charity helped Christians and non-Christians alike through the fall of Rome, what might Christian charity do through struggling school systems, in bankrupt Detroit, and in states and in countries on the verge of economic collapse?

And I wonder, will we be ready as the early Church was, to glorify God through the possessions He has placed in our hands to share?

In his book *Out of Solitude*, the late Henri Nouwen wrote about healing & restoration:

What we see, and like to see, is cure and change. But what we do not see and do not want to see is care: the participation in the pain, the solidarity in the suffering, the sharing in the experience of brokenness.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (Ave Maria Press, 2008), pp. 35-36

It is costly to share. We all wrestled with that as children, and if we shared back then it was out of obedience to our parents.

So maybe that's where we begin as we seek to be a *koinonia*-sharing community; we do it out of obedience to our Lord and to God's written word.

But then, as obedient children we mature in our sharing to experience the joy that comes when we share. As we read in Proverbs:

Proverbs 11:25

*A generous person will prosper;
whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.*

Do you know that truth? Have you tasted that joy? It should not surprise us when people find great joy in “paying it forward”, or find pleasure in doing a “random act of kindness”. God’s Word tells us that will happen. There is great joy awaiting those willing to share!

In fact, studies by a generation of behavioral scientists show that while material goods usually don't deliver lasting happiness, *there is one way that money can buy happiness—when you spend money with and for others.*

Think of treating someone to a special meal, a sports game, or a concert. Dozens of studies show that these opportunities to share bring us closer to other people and bring us *more* happiness than spending money on ourselves.

In a book called Money Happy, researchers Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton, reported on the following experiment:

We handed out Starbucks gift cards on a university campus [and] told some people to head to Starbucks and buy something for themselves. We told others to pass their gift card along to someone else. And we told a third group of people to use the gift card to buy something for someone else—with the additional requirement that they actually hang out with that person at Starbucks. "Who was happiest?"

Dunn & Norton concluded that it was those who treated someone else and shared in that experience with them.

Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Horton, "How to Buy Happiness," Los Angeles Times (5-19-13)

In many ways we've done ourselves a disservice by outsourcing sharing. We contribute money to funds that meet the needs of people, and we shortchange the joy we could have experienced if we became personally involved.

Our recent experiences with New England Seafarers' Mission and Common Cathedral highlighted this truth; *when sharing can be done in a community setting, joy will quickly supplement our obedience to God as the motivating forces needed for extravagant koinonia-sharing.*

Let us strive to be such a trusting, and extravagantly-sharing community of Christ. AMEN

Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011
by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.