

One Heart and Soul

Acts 4:32–5:11

July 8, 2001

“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” Again and again we come to this: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Again and again The Acts of the Apostles tells us this: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Again and again the apostle Peter preached this: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Why do we hear this again and again? Because this is the starting point, this is the foundation, this is the basis of everything else, this is the truth upon which we stand, this is the reality by which we live, this is the core belief of the Christian faith: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Without it we have nothing. With it we have everything. Thanks be to God!

It is startling to realize how seldom we hear this good news in the church today, how unusual it sounds to us, and how uncomfortable it makes us. That is because we live in a day when the church is largely content to relegate resurrection to Easter, then to leave it alone the rest of the year, quietly ignoring it as a more than mild embarrassment to our modern sensibilities. But that is not what the apostles did. They preached the resurrection with great power. It does not say they told Christmas stories. It does not say they told nice parables. It does not say they told about the miracles. It seems that they did not even deal with the crucifixion, except as the negative presupposition to the resurrection. They did not deal with ancient philosophy. They preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the mighty act of God, and they did so with great power. And they did so every time they preached. This is the one reality to which they pointed. This is the one great truth which they knew. This is good news beyond all other: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

We would do well to learn from them. No, we have not met the risen Christ, as did they. Our witness is a secondary one, based on theirs and going back to theirs. But their witness is a primary witness. The risen Lord Jesus Christ came to them, spoke with them, and commissioned them to preach his good news. They did so at the cost of their own lives. The apostles did not die rich or old. They did not die in their sleep at home in bed. They died violently at the hands of a world not unlike ours, a world dealing in death, a world undone by the good news of God, a world afraid of the risen Christ. The hard realities of their lives and deaths show that they had nothing to gain, here, by their preaching of the gospel, and everything to lose. The hard realities of their lives and deaths give us good reason to accept their testimony as trustworthy, true, and reliable. And to this they bore witness in one voice: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Again, we would do well to learn from them. We would do well to preach the resurrection of Jesus Christ today, and to do so gladly, bravely, boldly, passionately, and with great power. We do not have to claim to understand it. Surely we are not so arrogant as to think we can explain it. We have only to receive what has been given to us, and so to pass it along to others. Think with me about a church that preached the resurrection. Here would be a church based on the word of God recorded in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Here would be a church centered upon the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Here would be a church that both knew and said aloud that good news which is the only good news to human souls consumed with filth and rot, to human lives wasting away, to the human spirit grasping for meaning and security which it cannot find, that solitary good news which no one else besides the

church knows: God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. God help us to be just such a church, and to do so while there is still time!

“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” Great power led to great grace. Great power in preaching led to great grace in the congregation. Great power in preaching the resurrection of Jesus Christ led to the great grace of a congregation believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! What did that do to the early church? “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.” That is amazing! Not the part about the possessions; we will get to that in a minute. It is the first part that is truly amazing: “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” Have you ever, in your life, seen, heard, or been part of, a church that was “of one heart and soul”?

There is the power of the resurrection. It was one thing to raise Jesus Christ from the dead. It took years for me to believe that. I remember as a teenager, not having to encounter death among people much but seeing dead animals, some on the farm, some, not many, when I went hunting, and I remember thinking that dead things do not and cannot live again. Of all the claims and teachings of the Christian faith, that one bothered me the most. Eventually I came to realize that it was a matter of power and that God had more power than death. If God could create life and the world out of nothing, surely he could recreate life out of the something of a dead body, out of a life that had been. And so what had been troublesome for me became the bedrock upon which everything else rested. Only later did I come to realize the importance of the testimony of the apostles. So, it was one thing for God to raise Jesus Christ from the dead.

But do you really want to see the ongoing power of the resurrection? Look at what happened to the early church in Acts: “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” That is power! We are not talking about just the twelve apostles being of one heart and soul. That would be significant in and of itself. But we have already read about at least five-thousand, and maybe as many as eight-thousand, converts into the new church. That is who we are talking about here. That is a lot of people to be of one heart and soul. And that is a lot of resurrection power. Do you know of a church that could benefit from that today? The whole world wide church is divided into countless denominations. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is divided over understandings of the authority of scripture, the exclusive lordship of Jesus Christ, and standards for ordination to the offices of minister, elder, and deacon. The same divisions run through some congregations and sessions. Think what it would mean for a single church to be “of one heart and soul.”

Just to be clear, we are not talking about some mushy, sentimental unity here. We are talking about land, houses, and possessions. This is for real. I told you we would get back to this. “No one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.” That is great grace, to break us free from the love of money and private property! And that flows from great power in preaching the resurrection. What does it mean that “they had everything in common”? Well, it does not mean that they shared their wives. It does not mean that they all impoverished themselves. It does not mean that they divided everything equally. But it does mean that they took care of the needy. And

that, in and of itself, is remarkable. Could we do that today? Yes, we could, and we do, or at least we try, to some extent.

I want to say several things here. First, the outer sharing of property, as striking as it is, is the expression of a prior, greater, inner reality. Without the inner oneness of heart and soul, this sharing would never have happened. The great power of the preaching led to great grace among the people, the grace of Christian unity. When we are one in Jesus Christ, we share Christian unity. When we worship the same God and Father of Jesus Christ, we share Christian unity. When we are led by the same Holy Spirit of God, we share Christian unity. We do not find that unity in race. We do not find that unity in class. We do not find that unity in gender. We do not find that unity in nationality. We do not find that unity in achievement. We do not find that unity anywhere else. We find that unity, the Christian unity of being of one heart and soul, in Jesus Christ alone. That is the prior, greater, inner reality. Without it, there is no outer expression.

Second, if the prior, inner reality of oneness of heart and soul does not issue forth into some kind of outer expression, sharing of property or something equally as significant, it is not a reality at all. It is not enough to have a warm heart. It is not enough to have good feelings about one another. It is not enough to think good thoughts. If, by the great power of preaching and by the great grace of God, we have actually received the prior, inner gifts of faith and of unity of heart and soul, then that real and true inner unity necessarily spills forth into all sorts of outer expressions of unity: a visible unity transcending racial barriers, a visible unity transcending economic barriers, a visible unity transcending gender barriers, a visible unity transcending class barriers, a visible unity transcending national barriers and even national borders, a visible unity transcending age barriers, and a visible unity transcending every barrier and every force that seeks to divide us. The Christian faith is for real, and the Christian life is for real.

Third, the outer sharing of property was a reality in the early church, but it was not a requirement. The people we have read about in Jerusalem did it, but they did not have to do it. They did it freely, out of love for one another. Again, there is no indication that the wealthy impoverished themselves. And, interestingly, there is no indication of equal distribution. "Distribution was made to each as any had need." And yet, people did give to the church, through the apostles, not only the income they received,

but the very means and sources of income, lands, houses, and fields. So it is that Barnabas is held up as a particularly good example of one who sold a field he had so that other Christians might have the necessities of life. And Ananias was criticized not for not giving something he was required to give but for lying and holding back something when he pretended to be freely giving all. The giving done was a free response to the grace of God.

Fourth, what is really destructive to the faith and life of the church is the attempt to lie to God. According to Peter, Satan must have filled the heart of Ananias, leaving no room for God, to convince Ananias that he, and his wife, Sapphira, could get away with lying to God. God knows everything! And Ananias should have known that. Not only does God know everything, but even more to the point, it is God with whom we have to do in every action and relationship of our lives. Do we think we are dealing only with the church? We are dealing with God. Do we think we are dealing only with our bothersome neighbors? We are dealing with God. Do we think we are dealing only with our employer, or with our employees? We are dealing with God. Do we think we are dealing only with reprehensible reprobates? We are dealing with God. In all our thoughts and actions, it is God, ultimately, with whom we have to do. Do not forget that.

Finally, though, today's reading contains a word of judgment upon us. The good example of most of the early Christians shows us how far we are from the mark. The bad example of a few of the early Christians shows us how serious the situation is. Human life is inherently insecure. The fundamental temptation is to think that we can secure it by our own efforts. And we live in an age when the primary means of doing so is through wealth and money. If we cannot buy eternal life and health, at least we can pass it along to our families and we can perpetuate our name if not our individual existence. We are tempted to hang onto more than we need. We are tempted to tell God that we are giving all we can give. We are tempted to let the needy, even our Christian brothers and sisters, suffer in want, need, and poverty. And this is a terrible thing. The truth is, and especially in the Presbyterian Church, we could give a lot more than we have ever dreamed of giving. Where we have added houses to houses, fields to fields, and companies to companies, we could sell and give so that none are needy.

Today's reading tells of great power in preaching leading to great grace upon the congregation. It also tells of another "great," and that is "great fear." And it mentions that twice. First, following the death of Ananias, "Great fear came upon all who heard of it." And second, following the death of Sapphira, "Great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things." This is not just appropriate awe before the awesome God. This is downright fear, trembling, and trepidation. The word of God, which comes to gather, to save, and to make alive, has the opposite effect in those who reject it: it drives them away, condemns them, and kills them. This is deadly serious business. Fear of judgment is appropriate. Does the word of God in today's reading expose our idolatry? Does it make clear the danger that we love money more than we love God or even each other? To the extent that this happens, this same frightening word of God invites us to repent and gladly to believe the gospel.

And so it is that even fear can be an instrument of grace. Even fear can capture our attention. Even fear can make us stop and think. Great fear might turn our hearts around. Great fear might make us seek great grace. Perhaps, at an even deeper level than taking good care of the needy, we might seek the grace of Jesus Christ to be "of one heart and soul" with all who believe. We have come a long way in that regard. What a joy that will be when that is complete! And so, perhaps one day it might be said even of us, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church: "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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