

Acts 4:32–35 (RSV)

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. And 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 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.

The Beloved Community

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Acts 4:32-35

They had everything in common. Writing of the earliest church community, the Acts of the Apostles says, “They had everything in common ... and distribution was made to each as any had need.” What an unsettling idea. In our last presidential campaign the same people who called the United States a Christian nation said that even the idea of compassion was nothing short of despicable socialism. But this passage goes way beyond compassion. It says, “As many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them ... and distribution was made to each as any had need.” This truly is socialism. It’s a redistribution of the wealth so that none had need. Private ownership was relinquished. What an unsettling story, indeed.

It turns out it’s unsettling even to some Biblical scholars, at least those who serve the religious right. John Polhill in the New American Commentary says, “Evidence is that the early Christian practice was wholly voluntary.”¹ That is, according to Polhill, sharing wasn’t really required; it was purely optional. Polhill knows that at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, sharing was a requirement of the community, and he knows that the early Christian communities had many similar practices to the Qumran community. John the Baptist and Jesus spent time in that area down by the Dead Sea. There is some evidence that John the Baptist may have been at Qumran for a period. And yet Polhill concludes that any comparison to the Dead Sea community and the early Christian community is to be rejected. He bends over backwards to assert that the Christian community described in Acts is not socialist; it’s not a commune. It’s not; it’s not; it’s not, he says. The man doth protest too much. It’s an example, I’m afraid, of just how far some will go to say the Bible says what they want it to.

The plain sense of the passage of the passage is clear. Acts says that the first Christians kept the communal in the word community. They shared and cared with one another. It was expected they do so.

But, as my kids used to say, there are still issues. Even if we conclude that the passage accurately describes the early church community and even if we think our own church communities ought to be like the early church as described in Acts, we have to admit that they aren’t. I don’t know of any community is as flawless as the early church described in Acts 4, and I’m not sure how to build one, at least not if human beings are a part of it. It seems impossible.

Fear not, though. There are a couple of convenient escape hatches left. In a way liberal Biblical scholars can deny the truth of Acts 4 easier than Polhill. Unfettered by believing the text is historically accurate, they can say that the original church community was never as pure as it sounds. They can say that it’s a fairytale. They can say the writer of Acts was looking back with vision clouded by nostalgia. They say it’s a nice story, but don’t worry, it’s not really true. Of course, that’s a cop-out, too.

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 153.

Then there are the realists, the people of the real world, ordinary people who say religion is fine as long as you're not a fanatic. They say that like so many of Jesus' commandments and parables, the story about sharing in Acts is good for Sunday school and sermons, but it doesn't hold up in the real world. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemy. Hold everything in common. You can't live in the real world like that, they say.

Still other people, more serious about their religion, say that the passage more or less accurately describes the community of the early church and that ideally we should live like that. But then they slam the door shut. They say no one can live up to the ideals because we are broken human beings, and we live under the shadow of original sin. In a very clever move they say, on deep theological grounds, that sinful humans cannot live up to the ideal community. Indeed, they say, the story is there not to get us to try to live by it, but instead it is there to show us just how impossibly sinful we really are. When we see how completely sinful we are, they say, then we can appreciate just how amazing is the grace of God that saves us despite our depravity. So, once again, we don't really have to take the story in Acts as a model.

They had everything in common. How unsettling this simple description of the first church community is. To avoid its claim on our communities today people have said that the sharing described in Acts was optional, or that the story is a fairytale, or that it's a fine story in Sunday School but not in the real world, or that the story really serves to prove that we can be saved only by God's grace for we cannot possibly live up to God's expectations.

All of these options or excuses try to say that we aren't really supposed to try to live like the community of the early church did. Some don't like the socialist idea in the first place. Others think it's beyond our reach.

But let's imagine for a moment that we were to actually try to build our community on something like the first church community. Let's lower the bar a bit and not try for a one hundred percent commune to start with. Let's just say that we want to build a community in which there was complete love and compassion for one another and in which there was generosity so that no one went without anything they needed, a community in which there was no conflict, or backbiting, or disappointment with one another. Surely this is the kind of community that the church should be, isn't it? Isn't this the beloved community we are to create, a community like King and others before him envisioned? If not in the church, where else? Isn't that why some of us come to a church in the first place?

And yet, do we ever find this church community? I love this church community, but let's be honest I don't think it's a Utopia, do you? I don't think it lives up to a perfect ideal, do you? How many times have you heard, or even yourself said, "This is a church; it shouldn't be like this"? How many times has someone here irritated or upset you? How many times have you wished something was different?

A smart theologian once weighed in on this problem in a rather surprising way. He said, "On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image. ... [People] often bring with them a very definite image of what Christian communal life should be, and they will be anxious to realize it. " But before very long, "... A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us ..." He then goes on to say something quite surprising. He says, " Only that community which enters into the experience of this great disillusionment ... begins to be what it should be in God's sight, begins to grasp in faith the

promise that is given to it. The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both.”²

This is unexpected. The best thing that can happen for a church community is for people to become disillusioned about it, he says. It sounds counterintuitive. But the point is this. We are called to be a community like the one described in Acts. And yet we will never achieve the ideal. We will become disillusioned. And the important part is this: when we try to build a church community, and when we inevitably fall short, only then can we get about the business of becoming a real church community. Does this make any sense? Thank God, it does.

This is important. In the face of our failure to be an ideal community we don't throw our hands up and say this is just a Sunday school idea and stop trying to be a community. We don't say our failure shows us how impossibly sinful people are and that we should become passive and wait for God's grace instead of trying to be a community. In the face of our failure, we begin to learn how to be a community that learns to be a community within the reality of its flaws and failures. We do not give up. Indeed, in many ways our work has just begun.

Rather than a kumbaya experience in which everything flows easily with bliss and good feeling, God calls us into messy communities in which friction, dislike, disillusionment and all manner of human failings are commonplace. It is in these communities that we learn to live out the Gospel not perfectly but perhaps most authentically. For in such communities we work to develop patience with others and ourselves. We learn to love others and ourselves even when we may not like either very much. Here we learn to bear one another. Here we begin to live out the Gospel not in some simplistic idyllic way but as real honest-to-goodness and honest-to-badness human beings. Here we may even begin to change and be changed.

Let me give you a simple but powerful example. Praying for others is a big part of our life together as a community. We pray for one another in the midst of life's hurts and hopes every Sunday. But we also are to pray on our own. There is a special kind of prayer that can change the community and our relationship to it in amazing ways. It's very simple. Set aside time in prayer to pray for someone you are having trouble with, someone you don't like at all. This isn't easy, but stick with it. After a while it becomes very difficult to condemn or hate others for whom you pray no matter how much trouble they cause you. A smart theologian says this form of prayer “bringing one another into the presence of God, seeing each other ... as poor human beings ... in need of grace” rather than as our enemies and God's. “Then, everything about other people that repels [us] falls away.”³

In the end, this is what church community is all about. We work toward caring and praying for one another. And we begin to notice that slowly but surely we and the community change. We discover that perfection may be out of reach, but a blessed community is not. Amen.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 35.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, ed. Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Albrecht Schönherr, and Geoffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, vol. 5, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 90.