

## STARTING SMALL

Acts 4:32-35

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson,  
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA  
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*"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." Acts 4:32*

### IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

St. Luke tells us that the entire Christian community in Jerusalem "were of one heart and soul." In other words, we were united -- probably the last time the Christian church was so united. No Protestants, Catholics, fundamentalists, liberals, conservative evangelicals or charismatics. Actually - I think it's the other way around. We were *all* charismatics, liberals, conservatives, evangelical. At no time has the church been both so Protestant and Catholic at one and the same time. There was one Christian church which included all believers.

To a very high degree some of us experienced that feeling about eleven years ago. I forget that many of us are relatively new to the community and to the church. Some people may not be aware that our historic church building was destroyed by fire on Memorial Day weekend in 1989. The loss of our beloved church building brought us together. So many people gave of their time, money and energy to enable us to keep up the ministries of our church. Liberals, conservatives, charismatics, and evangelicals within and outside our church joined together to move Christ's ministry forward.

Most churches experience a down turn in the number of people attending worship. <sup>after a fire or loss of bldg</sup> We experienced the opposite. Our attendance went up. New members were drawn to us even though we didn't have a beautiful building like we did before the fire and like we do now. Not only our church -- our entire community came together. Father Baldrick at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic church came to me early on Monday morning when the embers were still glowing and said, "Ted, you're going to need a place to worship. We'll rearrange our mass schedule so you can worship with us and we'll give you donuts, orange juice and coffee." Father Obenchain at Saint Christopher's insisted that we worship the first Sunday after the fire at the Episcopal church. The Methodist and Baptist churches opened their doors for our weddings and funerals. "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." We were still Methodists and Baptists and Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Roman Catholics but we were one in heart and soul. I believe the Holy Spirit enabled us to experience something of what the early Christian church experienced in those heady days after the resurrection of Jesus when the memory of the Risen Lord was fresh and the presence of the Risen Lord was so palpable and real.

*Compared it to*

Many scholars who study the experience of the early church in Christian communism have pointed out ~~that Marxist-Leninism is a Christian heresy~~. *Sound - Cuban style Communism.* Soviet communism attempted to legalize and impose upon a whole nation what the early Christians experienced by the power of the Holy Spirit. Communism as a political ideology is different from what the earliest Christians practiced. The Christian communism of the early church was entirely voluntary. It was practiced only by believers with no attempt to impose it on the political system. Above all, it was based on an intimate and powerful experience of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian men and women. It was faith based, Christ centered, and Spirit filled. The love of Christ for one another enabled them to bear one another's burdens.

Today most people live with great insecurity about the future. We hang on to our possessions because we fear growing old and becoming a burden to family and community. Wealth also provides status and identity for most people. We find it difficult to share so totally as did the early Christians. Not only that - we middle class Christians have a tendency to blame poverty on the poor. But that's not true. The great majority of poor people are children and can hardly be blamed for their poverty. The early Christians, filled with the Spirit, didn't lay blame on needy people, they attempted to fix the problem. Luke tells us, that "there was not a needy person among them... the resources of the Christian community were distributed to each as any had need."

*still ripples, echoes ...*

The vision of the early church has never been entirely lost. I think of the special funds that our church oversees which in a small way replicates the ideals of the early church. Some of the new members may not be aware of our special funds, the Brown, Springer, Wilson, Rhodewalt, Grier, Pollock and Alexander funds. They were created by people who wanted to imitate in a small way what the early Christian church experienced. They took some of their resources and laid it at the feet of the elders of the Oxford Presbyterian Church to be distributed to those in need. The interest from the Brown fund has been used to buy a van, mattresses and provide financial assistance to residents at Ware Presbyterian Village. The Springer funds are used to help needy people in the church and community. Over the years interest from these special funds have forestalled foreclosures on a homes, paid electric, gas, and oil bills; paid for medical procedures not covered by insurance.

More recently, members of our church have given \$5000 a year for the last two years to enable people who need counseling to receive it. I'm so thankful that the Spirit of the early church is still at work open the hearts of our members to minister in creative ways to members and non-members.

These saints show us how to be generous with our material resources. God has blessed our church with valuable resources: minds to love God; hearts to love one another; wills to serve God. May God pour out his Spirit on us, in our generation, as God has done in the past, so that we use our resources wisely, for the benefit of all. "The hungry need bread, the homeless need a roof, the oppressed need justice, and the lonely need fellowship. At the same time on another and deeper level - the hopeless need hope, sinners need forgiveness, and the world needs the gospel. On this level no one is excluded, and all the needy are one. Our mission as the church is to bring hope to a desperate world by declaring God's undying love - as one beggar tells another where to find bread."

Some of you may be familiar with the <sup>stories</sup> ~~story~~ told in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. One story reminds me of our Scripture lesson: *A friend of mine named Paul received an automobile from his brother as a Christmas present. On Christmas Eve, when Paul came out of his office, a street urchin was walking around the shiny new car, admiring it. "Is this your car, Mister?" he asked.*

*Paul nodded. "My brother gave it to me for Christmas." The boy was astounded. "You mean your brother gave it to you and it didn't cost you nothing? Boy, I wish..." He hesitated.*

*Of course Paul knew what he was going to wish for. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the lad said jarred Paul all the way down to his heels.*

*"I wish," the boy went on, "that I could be a brother like that."*

I wish I could be a Christian like those described in Acts 4:32. "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."

Thanks be to God.