

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Acts 4:32-37 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (ESV)

“The Beating Heart of Jesus is the Church”

Family photos have a way of capturing my attention. They capture those beautiful moments when your college graduate of today lost his first tooth, when your daughter started kindergarten and now has a daughter of her own. They are just snapshots, freezing time on one moment when everyone is smiling, no one is crying or yelling or fighting, when everyone was looking their best. We don't know what was going on behind those scenes, but we can be fairly certain who was behind them. Mom. What pictures don't tell us, mom is able to narrate. She lets us know who is the heart of the family.

That's what we get when we open our Bibles to the Book of Acts chapter four. We get a great picture of a different family: the Christian church. We hear about this reality: **“there were no needy persons among them.”** (Acts 4:34) We learn how that happened: **“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.”** (Acts 4:32) What a blessing to see such a beautiful picture. It is the beating heart of Jesus in the church.

When you first learn about this picture of the Christian church, maybe you wonder if it is real. Maybe instead it was stitched together and edited with a computer. Or maybe it makes you aware of something you didn't know was even possible, like some of those exotic locations from vacation photos of friends. But this is very much reality when we get to see the beating heart of Jesus. This is a picture of real Christian fellowship. Fellowship in ministry and care for each other. Most of all, this is the picture of the church as the beating heart of Jesus.

Ever want to be part of someone else's family? Be honest. Moms, cover your ears. When your classmate told you he got to watch as much tv as he wanted or the neighbor kid told you he had a later bed time, didn't you wish for a moment that was your family? Or the family with the newest video game system? Or the family with the pool? Or the parents who didn't have as many rules, who let their daughters wear makeup before you and stay out

late on weekends? We zoom in on certain benefits but have no idea what life was really like inside that home.

I want to drive that powerful vehicle and live in that gorgeous home, but I'm not sure if I would put in my dues at the kind of job that would allow me to get there. I want the body that would grace the cover of magazines in the grocery store checkout aisle. I want the Instagram-worthy family life. I want amazing experiences that would incite envy in all my friends. I want the same thing for my spiritual community. I want my church to be like the one in Acts chapter 4.

It's a great image. It's a beautiful picture for us to shoot for. But so often we forget about how to get there. We want to skip over what it takes to get those results. Instead, we focus on what it would be like for me. I would love it if everyone treated me like that. So many times I come to church just happy to have made it this week. I have hurts and needs no one else seems to know about. I want people to notice. I want people to realize. But I don't want to blurt out all of my troubles to them. I want them to be there for me. I need their support, strength, encouragement. No matter what picture I show to people on the outside, that's what I have on the inside. I want to experience the Christian family of Acts chapter four, because that's what I need.

And that is what God wants our spiritual community to be like. God's design for his people is that they gather together around his Word of grace to experience generosity and power. But there is a danger that comes from looking at results without seeing how it happens. I so often focus so much on my own needs that I lose the big picture. It's true in any of my relationships. If I focus on what I need in marriage, I will never be satisfied with what my wife does for me. If I focus on what I need from my family, they will never give me enough. If I focus on what I need from friends or co-workers, they will always fall short of my expectations. Focusing on my needs just reveals my emptiness. The more I focus on what the people around me aren't doing for me, the more it drives me deeper into that emptiness. The more I come to grips with that longing, it just leaves me more and more unsatisfied. It's a vicious cycle where I keep looking for more from the people around me.

Here's the greater danger. Focusing on what I need from other people just causes me to drift farther and farther away from Jesus. I look at myself and them and back at myself. And I fail to look to the one who is able to supply my deepest needs. My heart is out of sync with the heart of Jesus.

I need to be drawn back to the beating heart of Jesus. Here's the irony. When I depend more and more on Jesus, then I will depend less and less on the people around me. The more I am filled by what only Jesus can give me, the more I will see how full my life is. Filled with the riches of Jesus Christ allows those riches to fill my life and then to overflow into the lives of the people around me. The beating heart of Jesus beats in the life of the church.

So how do we get this beautiful picture of a church in Acts chapter 4? We need to see what went into getting these results. These verses actually sound very similar to what we hear about in Acts chapter 2. We get this picture of the church right after Pentecost: **"All the**

believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.” (Acts 2:44,45) But right before that we see what came before those results: **“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”** (Acts 2:42) This isn’t a step by step guide for growing a church. But it does provide some key elements for how that happened and some focus for churches today: Bible teaching and sharing something very meaningful, bringing our hearts to God in prayer and gathering around His table to receive His gifts.

Before we get this snapshot of the church in Jerusalem a few chapters later, we need to see some pretty troubling events. Maybe you remember a few weeks ago we saw Peter and John healing a disabled man in Acts chapter three. That didn’t sit well with Jerusalem’s religious leaders. They threw Peter and John in jail. They ordered them to stop preaching in the name of Jesus. They threatened the apostles. But then they were forced to let them go.

Do you know what happened when Peter and John went back to the other believers? Did they grumble and complain? Did they shake in fear for their safety? No, they raised their voices in prayer and praise to God! And they didn’t pray that God would remove the dangers or get rid of the evil people standing in their way. They simply prayed for boldness to keep speaking the message of Jesus Christ. We would expect problems to erupt, panic to break out, believers leaving the church or fleeing for their own safety. But the church kept the focus on the heart of the matter. Rather than zooming in on their own personal needs, they kept the focus on the needs of the church. They kept their focus on Jesus. Jesus is the heart of the church.

The heart of Jesus beats with God’s grace and God’s power. Jesus brought about those results: **“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.”** (Acts 4:33) In the face of opposition they had boldness. They were bold to witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus showed Jesus really was who he said he was. Jesus is the Son of God and promised Messiah. The resurrection of Jesus shows he accomplished what he came to do. His suffering and death removed the barrier of sin between humans and our God. Every requirement of holiness and every demand for perfection has been met by Jesus and given to you. The resurrection of Jesus means he lives and rules his church to keep it and bless it.

In all of your great need, Jesus is your answer. Your emptiness is filled by Jesus. In Christ your greatest need is satisfied. You are a blood-bought child of God. Instead of fear of God, you have the approval of God. Through faith in Jesus you are rich. Through faith the heart of Jesus beats inside of you.

Taking care of fellow believers is not a new concept. All throughout the Old Testament God had given commands to take care of widows and orphans and aliens so there would be no need. But the reality was very different. The Law was never enough to make people act generously. That’s because the Law always shows us something more we have to do. Only the gospel shows us that Christ Jesus has done it all. Grace tells us God’s love and God’s

concern for us has been given to us as a gift without our efforts. So maybe it's no surprise it was the powerful preaching of grace that motivated the earliest Christians to generosity rather than preaching specifically about money or possessions. When we see our greatest needs satisfied in Christ, it changes the way we see our needs. What we have in Christ is always more than what we need. My possessions and gifts are not really mine to begin with. So I don't need to use themselves exclusively for myself or guard them for me.

Faith makes this more than just a purely personal issue. Faith in Jesus Christ brings brothers and sisters from various ages and incomes and backgrounds into one true unity. Faith gives us the same goal in life: the salvation of souls. Faith gives us the same focus for living: faithfulness to Jesus. Faith gives us a shared experience: the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives through the Word. Faith is something personal in our hearts that produces outward results in our lives.

He obviously wasn't the matriarch of the church, but Barnabas provides a snapshot of genuine Christian care and concern. He was a Levite. At this time they were known for wealth and education. In those days land ownership was the source of wealth and the biggest status symbol. Barnabas gave up his field and his wealth, along with the praise and honor that came along with it. He cared more about his fellow believers. But his life isn't just a picture for us to admire. We get to be part of this family. Jesus provides more than we need through the riches of His grace. Through the beating heart of Jesus we get to be encouraged like Barnabas. With the heart of Jesus beating inside us we let the heart of Jesus beat in his church today. Amen.