



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Easter 2

April 7, 2024

Peace and Love in the Mother Church

Acts 4:32–35

³² 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.

Congregational health is ever forefront in the minds and hearts of Church leaders. There are workshops, Bible studies, and in depth evaluation tools published by the Office of National Mission and various Districts within the Synod. Add to this the seemingly endless stream of books on the topic, and one can only conclude that the health of the local congregation is a contemporary concern.

If we were to compare ourselves with the Jerusalem congregation in Acts 4, we would see that these concerns are not without justification. It should be noted that in due course the typical problems of congregational life did eventually present themselves, as they inevitably will wherever and whenever human beings are brought together into community, but at the time Luke was writing concerning the earliest days of the Christian Church, the congregation in Jerusalem was indeed a shining example of what a Christian congregation ought to be, which is good and right.

This was, after all, the archetype, the progenitor, the mother church, from which the Christian Faith was being sent into all the known world, with the blessing of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. What was this congregation like? What were its characteristics? What was the shape and form of her congregational life? Luke gives us valuable insights here in Acts chapter 4.

The first thing Luke notes is that “the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (v. 32a). This was a vast number of people. Luke says earlier in this chapter that “the number of men came to about five thousand” (v. 4). When you add women and children to that, who knows what the total membership might have been. And these were from a great variety of backgrounds – old and young, rich and poor, with many differences in occupations, gifts, and temperaments. The three thousand who came to



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faith at Pentecost even had different native languages. What was it that held all these people together? Luke says that these were “those who believed.” It was their common faith in Christ that bonded all these people, from such varied walks of life, together into a community of believers.

You might think that’s something that should be obvious. I mean, what else are congregations to be built around besides a common faith in Christ? But many congregations today are constructed on other principles which the members think are necessary for their common life together. Do you think such things as economic status, political affiliation, or racial and social persuasion mattered to the congregation in Acts 4? It doesn’t seem so, does it. But these things tend to mean a lot to people in our day. And they become major sources of division among us, do they not? The Jerusalem congregation wasn’t bothered by this.

What unified them was their common faith in Christ. Faith is the essential bond of union in the church. It is a spiritual state in the soul, not a matter of outward arrangement. Christians may or may not agree politically, they may or may not have the same socio-economic status, they may or may not even have the same primary language, but this does not alter their internal unity, which is the unity of faith, nor ought these differences be permitted to cause division among them. Granted, faith does produce visible results, and these results may be as varied as the believers themselves, but it is the same faith and the same Spirit of God producing the fruits of faith manifested in them.

The chief fruit of faith in the Jerusalem congregation was indeed their unity. They all wanted the same thing, which was to be saved eternally; they all thought the same thing, which was to be faithful to the Lord Jesus; they all experienced the same thing, which was the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Despite their great number and their great diversity, no divisions, no factions, no contentions existed among them.

I wonder: Can the same be said of us? Not likely. On what do we base our unity? What do we allow to divide us? Do we all want the same thing, think the same way, experience the same comfort of the Holy Spirit? Do we offer that same comfort and forgive one another when our desires, thoughts, and experiences do not align? Oh, the mother congregation of Christendom serves as a rebuke to us who have come after her, especially to those who cause rifts, strife, or disturbance in the Church of Christ. Let us, rather, look to her as the model of unity and faithfulness to the one true faith and doctrine, and strive with one mind to maintain the peace of Christ among us, for these were the things used of God to produce growth in the early church, and they are used by Him to grow the church today.

What, now, does Luke mention as a true sign and indicator of the unity of the Jerusalem church? He writes: “No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was



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his own, but they had everything in common” (v. 32b). This was not communism, by the way, or socialism, as some have suggested. They were not living a communal existence. But, everyone regarded his possessions as not being intended for him alone, but to be employed for others, should the need arise. So, even in the matter of personal property, they were all of one heart and mind.

What produces this kind of unselfish giving in people? Luke says, “With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (v. 33a). This is where it begins. And you can’t speak of the resurrection of Jesus without speaking of His suffering and death. Christ’s unselfishness in giving His all, body and soul, for heartless, cold, selfish, sinful humans, inspires those same heartless, cold, selfish, sinners to be more like Him: heartfelt, warm, and giving. The result of this in Jerusalem was that “great grace was upon them all,” (v. 33b), and they gave of themselves from their own personal storehouse.

The further result was that “there was not one needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (vv. 34-35).

This is how it has always been with those who believe. The Christian church has always taken care of those in need. It began with caring for its own widows who had no family to support them. Christians built the first hospitals and orphanages. Our synod spends a great deal of energy and resources coming to the aid of the needy in our own country and around the world. Our congregation feeds needy families through our food pantry, at a great cost of time and energy. It’s not up to the government to take care of our needy neighbors; it’s up to us. It’s called charity because it grows out of *charitas* – Christian love. The Spirit of Christ moves those who believe to look beyond themselves and their own needs, concerns, and desires, and to come to the aid of their neighbors as Christ came to the aid of all humanity, giving His very life for the life of the world.

As the Jerusalem congregation cared for the needy in its community, it did so by following Christ’s own pattern of care. Jesus didn’t just attend to the physical needs of those to whom He ministered; every act of charity was accompanied by a proclamation of the gospel. So, too, with the Jerusalem church. Caring for the needy always included the testimony concerning Christ. And what happened? “Great grace was upon them all.” The number of those who believed kept increasing. It wasn’t just bodies that were cared for. I mean, why feed the body only to let the soul go to hell? No, in great grace, the Christians in Jerusalem remained focused on the real task at hand: the saving of souls, the winning of souls, the caring for souls, the redemption of souls from the highway to hell to the narrow path toward heaven.

She was able to keep this focus because she wasn’t distracted by unimportant matters. Personal interests were set aside. Differences were set aside. All sources of



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division were set aside for this one purpose, this one goal: the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen for our salvation, and not ours only, but for the salvation of all whom we are privileged to serve in Christ.

Of course, we can only serve when we have been served. The Jerusalem church was a community of the lost who had been found dedicated to the mission of serving the lost that they may be found.

Beloved, we are the lost who have been found, we are the servers who have been served, we are the lonely who have been loved, the hungry who have been fed, the naked who have been clothed. Your risen Savior, in His immense love and compassion, has drawn you into His family by Holy Baptism, given you His Spirit, fed you with His own body and blood in the Holy Supper, and has clothed you with the robe of His righteousness, by grace through faith. And He has set us apart to be His body – His voice, His hands, His feet – to the world in which we live, with this one purpose, this one goal: the saving of souls, the winning of souls, the caring for souls, the redemption of souls from the highway to hell to the narrow path toward heaven.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us not be distracted by earthly things that have no heavenly meaning, but let us employ our earthly means toward the proclamation of our crucified and risen Savior, together with acts of love and kindness toward our neighbor, thereby following the pattern of peace and love set forth by Christ Himself, that the grace of God may rest upon us as it did upon the mother church, to the glory of God and to our great blessing. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen