

# “The Common Life”

Acts 4: 32-37

Easter 4B, Boise, 2021

In our readings from The Acts of the Apostles, we haven't gotten yet to the “other sheep” not of the Jewish fold, whom Jesus promised to bring in by the preaching and baptizing of His ministers. We're still talking about the original fold that the Good Shepherd spent His three years with in the Gospels, yet now expanded by several thousands. St Peter has not yet made his journey to Caesarea to preach to Cornelius of the Italian Cohort.

Our reading today from The Acts gives us a description of how some in that original Jewish fold lived in the years following Pentecost — at least in Jerusalem. For the second time, St Luke the author reports that members of this believing messianic remnant of Israel “had all things in common” [2: 44; 4: 32]. Those who owned “land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds” to lay “at the Apostles' feet — and they were distributed to each as any had need.” Barnabas is the one named among those who did that, because, as you know, he will later become prominent as a companion of St Paul.

Well, does this kind of behavior make anyone here nervous? It shouldn't. You can have a commune without having communism. There is no ideology here in this earliest society of Christians — only voluntary sharing and a desire to live a common life in Christ, as we find in monasteries all over the world, a few of which have lasted for over a thousand years. No one is forced to enter these communities of faith, and no one's property is confiscated to support them. But what St Luke describes here is not a celibate, single-sex community; rather, a holy commune consisting of families.

Perhaps the Epistle we read today can help us understand what these believing Jews were attempting, and in fact succeeded in doing until Jerusalem was taken over by zealots, 3 1/2 decades later — which, as most of you know,

brought on an invasion by the Romans. St John writes in his First Epistle, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God? And so we are” [1 Jn 3: 1a]. Now, if God has adopted us believers into His Family, making us His children and the siblings of His Only-begotten Son, then that makes us all brothers and sisters. Indeed, we try our best to make our congregation to behave as a family, with all of us looking out for one another.

The first congregation, which we read about in The Acts of the Apostles, did that fully. Like a well-functioning family, the members shared everything with one another, each contributing what he or she could, and each taking only as much as he or she needed. Having received the Spirit and having allowed Him to penetrate their hearts fully, they found themselves able to live in complete charity, treating one another like members of a family living under the same roof. That is what is meant by the common life. In a convent, the women call one other “sister” and the abbess “mother.” But such is a lot harder to pull off when you have both sexes and children; so experiments to imitate the Jewish believers in Jerusalem tend to be brief. But that earliest of congregations was able to sustain a common life over two generations, so powerful was that first burst of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and in the days that followed.

Further study of these early chapters in The Acts will reveal that this common life the messianic Jews were living was not their main objective. It was the fruit of their devotion to God and anticipation of the Return of His Son, who would then extend His Kingdom over the whole earth. The passage at the end of chapter two notes that this community attended the Temple together daily. In other words, their devotion took a traditionally Jewish form, centering on the morning and evening sacrifices that were accompanied by prayers and the singing of Psalms. The same passage also notes that they shared meals

together in houses, eating “with glad and generous hearts, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” [Acts 2: 46-47].

The passage we read today adds to that description: “with great power the Apostles were giving their testimony to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” Now let us think why such continual reminders of Christ’s Resurrection would bring such grace, the grace that enabled them to live the way they did. The Apostles saw that, by the power of God displayed in Jesus’ body, raising it from the dead, death itself had been defeated. Death to the early Christians was now no more than a sleep. It would not have the last say. Daniel in the OT learned in a vision that God would raise men and women from the dead at the end of history, and then judge them [Dan 12: 2]. These Jewish believers in Jerusalem now knew that Jesus had died for the repentant to be forgiven of their sins. They also knew that they had so repented, and so could look for the resurrection at the end with pure joy. The appearances of the risen Lord before his Ascension showed the Apostles and others humanity in its final state, humanity without sin and mortality, the human race in the splendor that God intended for it at the Creation. That’s what the Apostles were testifying to, and those who believed the testimony began to anticipate that end in the way they lived, to get ready for it. They began acting selflessly toward one another, unburdening themselves of their individual possessions to share them with whoever had need. I’m now trying to read between the lines of the text here to get into the minds of the first Christians.

Sir Thomas More, before he ran afoul the king whom he served over his marrying Anne Boleyn, before even he became Lord Chancellor, wrote a tale of what a society might look like in which its members lived with complete charity toward one another, and like the first Christians did not own individual property.

The book was published four centuries before the word “communism” was coined. The name of Sir Thomas More’s tale? “Utopia,” a Latinate word that he coined, which means “no place,” no place in the real world. The story was a thought experiment, a fantasy to be enjoyed, not a blueprint to be followed — at least not in this life. Those of us who are familiar with 20th-century history get less enjoyment from it than earlier readers, because we are aware of real-life experiments to force people to live that way, the results of which were impoverishing and even murderous.

Is there anything to learn, then, from More’s benign fantasy, or how the church in Jerusalem in fact lived for two generations? What I learn is that we do not yet live in full accordance with the faith we profess. The Spirit was granted to each of us at our baptism, but we have not yet yielded to Him fully. Charity has a long way to run in us before it is exhausted. Nay, Christian charity is of God; it is Divine, and thus can never be exhausted. The Divine love, manifested in the gift of His Son, and in His Son’s gift of Himself for us on the Cross, is infinite. It has no limit. When, in the end, our transformation by the Divine love is complete, our love too, for both God and one another, will be inexhaustible. Sharing God’s life and His love, we will have everything without owning anything, nothing of which we can say, “This is mine, not yours. Keep your hands off of it.”

In a small way, we anticipate that day whenever we let go of something we now possess to share with another — our time, our treasure, a little bit more of ourselves. Having our own property is a characteristic of this life. Nothing wrong with that. But greed is a characteristic of the fallen, unregenerate man, and it is unworthy of men and women who, by grace, are having the likeness of God restored to them.

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