

Acts 2:42-47: **The unity in God of all that is**

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Our second scripture comes from the book of Acts, chapter 2. Listen with me for God's word to us today.

<sup>42</sup> The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. <sup>43</sup> A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were united and shared everything. <sup>45</sup> They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. <sup>46</sup> Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. <sup>47</sup> They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

The Middle East erupts...again.

Hurricane Helene rips apart Western North Carolina.

We sit here in relative comfort while neighbors a block away have nowhere to sleep.

Since Americans no longer consume the same media, our touchstones of ideas and truths seem to represent entirely different cultures.

One house near us has Republican yard signs and the neighbors with whom they share a driveway have Democratic signs. I wonder if those households are able to talk with each other.

Even our religious affiliations create barriers, often between people who claim to worship the same God.

All of us could readily add to the list of centrifugal forces spinning us apart from each other.

First century Jews also knew such forces. They lived subjugated, under threat of imperial violence. Was it best to become a zealot plotting for independence, or a collaborator making the best of the situation, or an ascetic retreating to the wilderness? Or maybe just try to keep your head down and scrape out subsistence for your family? The people of Israel did not find themselves in unified response to Rome's domination.

The first followers of Jesus Christ lived with all that, and they also witnessed the crisis of Jesus' state-sanctioned torture and murder. The bafflement provoked by his resurrection appearances. Then what to make of his ascension? Soon after that God the Holy Spirit blows through and sets their tongues on fire proclaiming the gospel on the street in every language.

The book of Acts "depicts life in the disrupting presence of the Spirit of God."<sup>1</sup> By this second chapter these believers already have been through a *lot*. And what do we find them doing now? Growing in faith together.

Sharing meals together, like we do on this World Communion Sunday.

Praying together.

Pooling all their resources and giving them out to anyone in need.

Together experiencing a sense of awe.

Meeting in the temple and in each other's homes.

Together praising God and showing goodness to their neighbors.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennings, Willie James. *Acts*, from the series *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017. p. 1.

What united those diverse individuals? What's the gravitational center of all their togetherness? The ministry, death, resurrection, and promised return of Jesus Christ. Acts teaches us that the God who accomplishes life out of death can also inspire unity in the midst of division.

And that, friends, will be the theme through our preaching over the next several weeks. I've invited Megan to tell you where that idea originated and what we can expect.

[Megan McCarty:] I do need to say that Cynthia Campbell actually gets a lot of credit for this sermon series since she did a majority of the heavy lifting and leg work of putting this all together. But, I am part of a lectionary group of local pastors who gather weekly to discuss what is happening in the world and how we can respond faithfully. As things have grown increasingly tense this fall and most especially this election season, we realized that a call for unity was maybe what felt the most authentic. It's not a call for uniformity, because we recognize and celebrate the difference of thoughts and opinions in our congregations. But we wanted to look at the things that did bring us together, specifically as Christians and even more precisely as Presbyterians.

Through these conversations we realized that as a denomination, we have one of the best resources available: our Book of Confessions. This is a book that has shown what it looks like to be Christians in different times and places. Not every part of our Book of Confessions always feels relevant, but it's a beautiful look at what it means to be unified in theology and belief. It's the story of humanity wrestling with the big questions and doing the hard work of putting to words what it means to be Presbyterian. It is a beautiful reminder that although things can feel complex and challenging in our world, it is not unique to have these struggles. We are once again facing a specific time in history that feels daunting. So we hope that this sermon series might help us face this time of uncertainty with boldness and a call for unity in the midst of division.

"All the believers were united and shared everything" says verse 44.

Theologian Willie James Jennings identifies the Holy Spirit as the creative force that those early believers had in common:

Time, talent, and treasures, the trinity of possessions we know so well, would feel the pull of this holy vortex.... [A]nything they had that might be used to draw people to life together and [to] life itself and away from death and end the reign of poverty, hunger, and despair — such things were subject to being given up to God.<sup>2</sup>

Over the centuries Christians have resisted the economic implications of this scripture. Some sideline these verses as aspirational — no one actually would share *everything* but it's a nice ideal for the Bible to uphold. Or maybe the earliest church experimented with this kind of unity but life ever since is too complicated to allow it. Possibly we're skittish because this communal living sounds a little Marxist. A line Karl Marx made famous — "From each according to ability; to each according to need" — could have been lifted from right here in the book of Acts.

If we resist the message of Acts chapter 2, might our private possessions have locked up our hearts? It's hard for me to respond generously to someone else's need if I presume that my resources are primarily for my own needs, or for my own tribe. Rather than redistributing my property to people in need, I may prefer to keep quiet about my assets. But as Belmont professor of

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<sup>2</sup> Jennings. p. 39-40.

religion David Dark says, “God sees everything that money hides.”<sup>3</sup> Or put more hopefully, God’s Spirit can help us overcome our economic individualism, enabling us to take collective, righteous action.

Early each October we join the broader church in remembering the life and ministry of St. Francis. It’s why we’ll celebrate the Blessing of the Animals this afternoon at 4:00 on the front lawn across the street. I’ve always pictured St. Francis as gentle, humble, happily preaching God’s love to the birds, promoting peace among people and all creatures.

There’s truth to all that, and as I recently learned from a biography of Francis<sup>4</sup>, his story was also more complicated. Son of a well-off merchant family in the Italian town of Assisi, young Francis partied hard, spent money lavishly, and as often as possible avoided working.

In the year 1205, at age 23 Francis happened to enter an abandoned little church. Above the altar he gazed at a painting of Christ crucified, and he felt Jesus speaking directly to him, tenderly: “Francis, go rebuild my house for me.”

For the next 20 years Francis rejected all money and privilege as he labored in solidarity with and for the poor. He chose to live dependent on God alone, preaching the way of Jesus — loving self-sacrifice — in his words and in his actions. A few others began to join Francis in this radical lifestyle that made little sense to his fellow townsfolk, nor to church leaders who exercised their own power and growing wealth.

This life was not idyllic for Francis. He endured many weaknesses and diseases and failures to accomplish his desires. Francis’s spiritual life brought him major ups and downs as his faith matured. Still, his humble way of following Christ inspired and challenged countless people over the years. And Francis was himself transformed. Here’s how one biographer put it:

Francis’s perception of the world and everything in it had become completely God-centered.... He was drawn to the divine; he was in love with God.... At the beginning of his conversion, Francis saw people in their specific, unique situations: lepers and beggars, poor and sick, wealthy and powerful. Now [near the end of his life] he had a sense of something deeper: the unity in God of all that is.<sup>5</sup>

The unity in God of all that is. When with Francis we see through the eyes of Christ, when the Holy Spirit sets our hearts aflame, we and those around us can be drawn into that unity.

In Acts 2 the believers act together not out of obligation but out of joy, out of enthusiastic love. Generous care for all makes their unity tangible. That’s attractive. “The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.”

And you know generosity is easier when we practice it together. We have long valued unity in generosity in this church community too. No one person or family at Highland is asked to meet everyone’s needs. Instead we *together* are stewards of everything that God has entrusted to us, so that everyone may thrive.

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<sup>3</sup> Instagram post by @jdaiddark, 3 Oct 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Spoto, Donald. *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi*. New York: Penguin Compass, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Spoto. p. 204.

That principle from Acts 2 also can inspire our actions at a societal level. Some needs are simply too great for any person or community to meet. So we take this share-resources-for-the-good-of-all model up to a national scale, even international. Unity in democratic care means that our collective national resources can help regions recover from disasters. Collectively our society helps provide medical care for retired people and veterans. As a nation we protect species and parts of the land from environmental destruction.

Does the earliest church have something to say about our 21<sup>st</sup> century political choices? Yes, insofar as the Spirit of God always asks us what we *together* have to offer, and who has needs our resources could meet. "They demonstrated God's goodness to *everyone*."

As the tail of Hurricane Helene swept through, Western North Carolina suffered tremendous damage and loss of life. Many of us have seen the terrible photos and videos of floodwaters devastating whole neighborhoods and towns. The Presbyterian retreat center in Montreat is a place close to many hearts here, and it's currently closed as cleanup continues. Nearby towns of Black Mountain, Asheville, Swannanoa and others lost many houses, businesses, roads, bridges, power, communication. Our church connections there tell us that survivors are overwhelmed and in some cases have nothing.

We of this congregation can offer unity in our care for flood victims. As Acts 2 reminds us, we can do more together than we could individually. Our Church in the World team, along with others, are working on what we can do in the short term and in the long term to meet the need. For right now we encourage everyone to contribute to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. That's our denomination's disaster response organization and they are already getting supplies into these hard-hit areas.

Before long we may be able to send our own deliveries and care teams into North Carolina, when it's safe enough to travel there and when local folks can put us to work. If you'd like to be part of such an effort, let one of us pastors know and we can help get people connected. May our compassionate actions contribute to saving the hopes and the lives of people in desperation.

And pray. Pray for victims in mourning. Pray for relatives and friends of this church whose lives are upended. Pray for first responders and work crews trying passionately to patch up infrastructure. Pray for people who don't know where their next meal will come from. Pray that they will experience our loving unity with them as we share all we can.

Willie James Jennings sums up this passage from Acts by weaving the practical and the theological into a unified whole. He reminds us:

What is far more dangerous than any plan of shared wealth or fair distribution of goods and services is a God who dares impose on us divine love. Such love will not play fair. In the moment we think something is ours, our our people's, that same God will demand we sell it, give it away, or offer more of it in order to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or shelter the [unhoused], using it to create the bonds of shared life.<sup>6</sup>

May divine love work such signs and wonders through all of us — united.

In the name of God gathering, Christ enlivening, and the Spirit disrupting.

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<sup>6</sup> Jennings. p. 40.