

THE POLITICS OF SCRIPTURE AND MARXISM

TEXT: Acts 4:32-35

Someone asked me one time if it was true that all sermons should begin with a story or a joke. I believe I replied something to the effect that only if it was relevant to the message that was about to be presented. In that spirit, I'll ask you if you were aware that the disciples had an automobile. No? Well, it says in the Book of Acts that "they were all in one "accord". That will be my one foray into proving that the answer to the original question is "no".

However, the book of Acts does tell us that, following the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples were of "one accord" – in other translations "of one heart and mind". And this is the really important point. For the early church, the resurrection of Christ was less a creedal article of individual faith and hope than a creative force of community formation and fellowship.

The early church worked out its resurrection faith through regular communal practices, such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, scripture study, and prayer. An earlier summary reports: "So those who welcomed his message were baptized. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

But they also engaged in a radical resurrection practice not so popular today. "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.*"

Our text particularly highlights the habit of land/homeowners' selling their properties and laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet for distribution to anyone in need.

Therefore, “there was not a needy person among them” in this power- and grace-filled resurrection community.

What a remarkable group! They held everything “in common”, yet were notably *uncommon* by normal social standards, both in the limited goods, zero-sum world of Mediterranean antiquity and in the private-boosting, wealth-expanding economy of modern Western capitalism.

We see two themes of this newly transformed community, the first being their missional “unity”. It is impressive that this statement is made, not just of the original followers of Jesus who had been with him in the Upper Room, but also about the purported thousands of new arrivals who seemingly had already been integrated into the community within this short period of time. This is especially important because of its relation to the second theme of today’s passage, which is that possessions were held in common. Unity of mission led to and supported a communitarian attitude toward things. In today’s world where the Marxist doctrine of Communism, where in the name of equality and unity only those in power benefited from this universal sharing, we cringe at these words.

But this community existence was essential for the well-being of the new converts and for the stability of the entire community. It was a way of integrating everyone into the life of the believers. No one had more than enough and no one lacked for the necessities of life.

Two thousand years later, when Israel again became a nation in 1948, this communal way of life again became the norm. As exiled and persecuted Jews rushed to their new homeland, somehow there had to be a way to assimilate them into the community – and the kibbutz was born. As shipload after shipload of refugees poured into the fledgling nation, the ever-ingenious Israelites again began building community as their ancestors had done. For the first time in the history of the world, a language thought to be dead was resurrected and Hebrew became the official language of the country. To help people assimilate into this new culture, “ulpan” or language schools were created so

that the new arrivals who came speaking a myriad of languages, could quickly learn to communicate with each other. The communal kibbutzim brought in these folks, gave them a place to live and everyone worked together. Some took care of the children, or began the schools. Since the majority of the locations were agricultural, some tended animals, some worked in the fields. Everyone had a place to live, food, clothing and other necessities, and a job to do. When the Arab blockade prevented the settlers from importing needed technology, appliances, goods and services, they found ways to create their own. In those early years, Israel was the only place in the world where you could not purchase Coca Cola. So Mitz Paz, an Israeli invention, became the national sodapop.

There is a long thread of “unity” in the history of both Judaism and Christianity. The early Christians survived by joining together in life and in ministry. It was this unity that allowed them to increase their numbers and move forward in the name of their resurrected Lord. Modern day Jews reclaimed their country and built a nation on the unity that created their new life in their Promised Land.

What has happened to that unity in our time? What is creating the so-called schism in the United Methodist Church? In his recent book called *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*, David Kinnaman of the Barna Group presents statistical research and extensive interviews from a three-year study that documents how an overwhelming percentage of 16 to 29 year olds view Christians with hostility, resentment and disdain. And it speaks to the disunity that pervades our United Methodist Church today, and to what that disunity is doing to both our denomination and the Christian Church collectively.

According to Kinnaman, here are the percentages of people outside the church who think that the following words describe present-day Christianity:

Antihomosexual – 91%
Judgmental – 87%
Hypocritical – 85%
Old-fashioned – 78%
Too political – 75%
Out of touch with reality – 72%

Insensitive to others – 70%
Boring – 68%

Kinneman says he doubts that we think of ourselves in these terms, but that's what outsiders think of us. No wonder young people today reject – and feel rejected by – Christians.

Our United Methodist Church has a long history of unity – and division. One of the high points was in 1968. In a year convulsed with assassinations, riots, war in Vietnam, when it seemed much of the world was violently splitting apart, a group of Wesleyan Christians peacefully and joyfully came together as two bishops followed by two children, two youths, two adults, six ordained ministers, two church officers and finally all 10,000 people present joined hands and repeated in unison: “Lord of the church, we are united in thee, in thy church, and now in the United Methodist Church. Amen.” And the 750,000-member Evangelical United Brethren Church and the 10.3 million member Methodist Church became The United Methodist Church.

But times have changed. Just this week members of two Mississippi congregations led by the same pastor have chosen to leave the United Methodist Church. At First UMC in Louisville, Mississippi, 175 people present voted to withdraw their membership from the denomination, six voted to remain and one was undecided. All 22 people who gathered at nearby Bevil Hill UMC voted to leave. This followed the vote of two large Mississippi Conference churches to exit the denomination in 2017. In all four cases, lead pastors expressed growing frustration with The United Methodist Church's ongoing debate around how accepting the church should be of homosexuality.

Our 2016 General Conference authorized our bishops to form a commission to help bridge the divide as rumors of a potential split reached a fever pitch. The bishops have called a special General Conference in 2019 to take up legislation they are submitting based on the commission's recommendations.

Each one of us has an opportunity to join in discussions around this issue. Table Talk sessions are scheduled throughout the Greater Northwest Conference. I will be

attending one at Olympia First UMC on Saturday, May 12, and I invite anyone who would like to go to attend as well. It will be our opportunity to be heard, and to listen to others.

Can we learn something from Luke's account of the early followers of Jesus? After a period of confusion, doubt and disbelief following the gruesome execution of Jesus, and despite threats from the religious and government authorities, his followers became convinced that "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

To the shock of almost everyone, these unschooled and ordinary Jesus followers proclaimed their message with courage and boldness. In Jerusalem, converts joined the movement *en masse*, first 3,000 people, then increasing to 5,000. Luke gives us a snapshot of this vibrant Jesus-community that helps to explain the appeal of their message, the consequent expansion, and their local reception.

Luke's depiction of the Jerusalem believers identifies a signature characteristic of their movement – in a word – generosity. Their social generosity expressed itself in community and their financial generosity expressed itself in compassion. The so-called primitive communism of the early Christians subverted conventions of envy, avarice and accumulation.

Neither Jesus nor his first followers advanced an economic, social or political program, even though Christians on the left and the right do so today. I get discouraged when I read studies like the one I quoted earlier. But I believe they have a point. My prayer is that we Christians could somehow recapture the witness of those first believers who, because "great grace was with them all", demonstrated overflowing generosity to their neighbors, and who consequently "enjoyed the favor of all the people". So, how shall we live out our faith in the risen Christ today? Amen.