

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 4:32-35

^{4:32} 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. ³³ With great power the apostles gave 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 owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Commentary

The reader of Acts is reminded that the church's internal witness is centered by the sharing of goods, even as its external witness is centered by the proclamation of the gospel. The early Christian community is described as a unified fellowship that involved worship and study, regard for the presence of the Spirit, internal harmony and solidarity expressed in concrete concern for one another, and sharing possessions. Luke sketched an idealized communal goal that inevitably met with real dissension and conflict. This passage recalls an element of what Jesus began to teach at Nazareth in Luke 4:16-30 – *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* The practice of sharing possessions appears to be unique to the Jerusalem church. Our passage emphasizes property sharing in a way that offers us a model for how Christians are to relate to one another. Marks of a Spirit-filled community include not only sharing possessions but also almsgiving and showing hospitality. Barnabas is an exemplar of this practice (4:36-37) while Ananias and Sapphira are negative examples whose tragic deaths underscore the vital importance of this practice as social marker and spiritual barometer for this community (5:1-11). This passage gives us a glimpse of Luke's theology of grace: the effective power of God's grace upon the assembly of believers enables it to produce those public behaviors that cultivate good will and interest among outsiders. Luke indicates that God's grace upon the community's social life has a powerful affect: "there was not a needy person among them."

Reflection

1. The early church was filled with the power of the Spirit, enabling them to enact an extraordinary degree of selflessness. What evidence do you see today of the Spirit's power at work in the church?
2. Ananias and Sapphira sold property they owned and gave only a *part* of the proceeds to the church while claiming that they were giving 100%. Their lie cost them their lives. What is destroyed in a community by dishonesty? How does honesty build community?

1 John 1:1-2:2

^{1:1} We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – ² this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – ³ we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. ⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. ¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Commentary

The writer of First John is addressing an internal conflict in the Johannine Christian community early in the second century A.D., at least ten to twenty years after the Gospel of John was written for the same community. Some members had departed from the community's traditional beliefs about Jesus and had discarded the high ethical standards that accompany those beliefs. In short, they were not practicing love toward one another. While emphasizing the importance of loving fellowship within the Christian community in order to have full fellowship with God and Christ, the author of this letter acknowledges the reality of sin within that Christian fellowship. The author reminds us that the church is not an assembly of spiritually healthy people; instead, the church is where the sick gather to be healed from the disease of sin. The community set apart in Christ lives continually by the gospel of God's forgiveness, precisely because we are sick and in need of healing. Proper communion with God is identified by the quality of our relationships with others. This involves both owning up to sins that destroy community and striving for deeper fellowship with one another.

Reflection

1. What qualities of Christian fellowship have you seen in people whose spiritual life you admire?
2. How do you reconcile the reality of sin in the lives of those whose faith is strong?

John 20:19-31

^{20:19} When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." ²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Commentary

On Sunday evening, many of Jesus' followers (not just the twelve disciples) were meeting behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. Jesus appeared among them and offered them peace – fulfilling the promise he had made in 14:27. When he showed them his wounds, they joyfully recognized the risen Christ – fulfilling yet another promise. Once they recognized him, Jesus again offered them peace; now that they recognize him, they can receive it. Then he commissioned them to continue the work God had sent him to do: "As God has sent me, so I send you." He "breathed" the Spirit into them to empower them to continue his work. *Breathed* reminds us of God breathing life into the first human being in Genesis. It reminds us that this is a new creation, that those who believe receive new life sustained by the Spirit. For John, the Resurrection directly and immediately results in the formation of the Spirit-filled community. Jesus commissioned the entire faith community – not just its leaders -- to forgive or retain sins. Forgiveness of sins is Spirit-empowered, an extension of the work of Jesus

himself. Usually, we understand the word *sins* to mean specific acts of wrongdoing. This view may be what leads the church to believe that it should judge, punish, penalize or ostracize others from the community of faith. In John, however, Jesus says that sin has to do with our relationship with God, not our particular behavioral transgressions. Sin is a failure to believe in God; a failure to witness to our belief in God. To *retain sin* means to remain blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. Thus, neither individuals nor the church are arbiters of right and wrong. Further, in John, to *forgive sin* means to witness to God's identity as seen in Jesus. The witnessing brings the other to a moment of either belief (forgiveness) or unbelief (self-judgment and alienation from God). If we combine Jesus' command in John – to forgive the sin of others – with his earlier charge to “love one another” (13:34), we begin to see what John means. The church's mission is to forgive, to witness to, and to love one another as Jesus and God love us. Thomas, who was not present the first time Jesus appeared, said he needed to see and touch the risen Lord in order to believe. Christ forgave Thomas's unbelief by offering himself, thus witnessing to God. He gave Thomas exactly what he needed, urging him to move from unbelief to belief.

Reflection

1. Jesus commissioned the community of followers to carry on his work of witnessing to God through the forgiveness of sin, or unbelief. How do you witness to God? What does it mean to you to carry on Christ's work?
2. How do we usually understand the word *sin*? How do you personally understand the difference between sins as moral transgressions and sin as unbelief?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 133

- ¹ How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
- ² **It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.**
- ³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
**For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.