

Grappling with Giving: *The Power of One*

This week we're continuing our series "Grappling with Giving." In this series, we're asking the tough questions that rattle in our minds this time of year, as various organizations--including our church--ask for support. Today the question we're going to ask is this: What makes the church so special?

This question came home for me in a new way several months ago, on a Sunday when I stayed home from church. Caitlin woke up incredibly sick on a Sunday morning--there was no way she could go to church, and I decided I would stay home and take care of her. This was unusual for me because when I miss a Sunday of church, every now and then, usually I'm on vacation. And on those days, I'm sitting on the beach, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the paper. So, to be at home on a Sunday morning was a new experience. Around 11:30 that morning, I went to Shop Rite to get a few things--medicine, tissues--and I couldn't believe what I saw! It was like a day at the fair! The parking lot was packed with cars, and families were strolling the aisles--the parents looked contented, the children were smiling, everyone was taking their time. It was like *Leave it to Beaver* went to Shop-Rite. On other days folks are rushing around, stressed and frustrated; but on this day everyone was taking their time. It was so nice, so pleasant. And I thought, why church?

Times have changed in America in the last forty years. It used to be that not much was open on Sunday--certainly not on Sunday morning. Especially in small towns, the thing to do was to go to church--that's where you could see all your friends. But today it's different. There are many things to do on a Sunday morning: ball-games, shopping, farmers' markets, flea markets, festivals and fairs and fundraisers. So, why church? Why do we make a commitment to come to this place, to be with these people, week after week? What makes this special?

The scripture lessons this morning help us to answer that question by telling us what made life in the very first church such an incredible place to be. When we read accounts of the early church, we don't read about a life that was mundane or boring--not in the least! Instead, we read that the Holy Spirit--and that means the very power of God--came and rested upon each person; we read that signs and wonders were performed by the apostles; we read that people were being healed almost daily. In fact, this community was so dynamic, so life-giving, so powerful that every day more and more people were added to their number. What was the secret of their life together?

Here's the answer I want to suggest: it was the power of one. The secret of their life together was the power of one. At my ordination service several years ago, I remember that one of the preachers--we had three sermons!--preached a sermon that he called the "Power of One." His message was that one person, one life, one minister can make an incredible difference in the world. When we hear the phrase "the power of one," that's usually what we're thinking--we're thinking about the power of one person, one dynamic and inspiring individual to make a great difference. And it's true. One person, especially when that person is completely and passionately dedicated to something, can make an unbelievable difference in a community, or a school, or a church.

But the power of one individual is not what this story of the early church is about. Sometimes ministers and congregations think that if someone could just preach like Peter, if someone could just pray like Paul, then the church would be a dynamic and life-changing place, it would be a community that would touch the lives of more and more people. Now, sure, there were powerful apostles in the early church, and they made a great difference. But this text is not pointing us to the power of one *individual*. Listen to the words from Acts again:

“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.” The “power of one” here is not the power of one individual, but the power of the whole group of believers joined as one heart and soul. It says that the whole congregation were of “*one heart and soul*.” What does this “one heart and soul” mean?

In the Greek language, which is the language in which the New Testament was written, the word “heart” means much more than just a literal heart; in fact, when all the meanings are taken together, the word encompasses every aspect of our lives. First, the word “heart” can mean the center and source of our physical life. It’s sort of like when we say, ‘To eat to your heart’s content.’ When we say this, the heart becomes a representation of the physical life. So part of what this text means when it says one heart is that the early Christians spent their physical lives together. They shared meals together, daily. They shared houses; in fact, the first churches met in people’s homes, and the leader of the church would welcome the other believers into their home. They shared possessions as each of them had need. In the scripture I read, we hear one of the most famous examples of this sharing of possessions; a man named Joseph sold a field that he owned, and brought the money to the apostles and gave it to them so that they could use it as the community needed. For this generous act, the apostles named the man Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. The scripture says that “*Everything was held in common*”--meals, houses, possessions--their lives were joined as one.

I thought this week of how many people are physically in this place each week, and how often they are here. There are worship services, and Sunday School classes, weddings and memorial services, breakfasts and dinners and parties, AA meetings, an Al-Anon meeting, a Senior Exercise Group, Food Pantry, Men’s Group, Bible Studies, Presbyterian Women, Choir and Praise Team, Session and Deacons and Commission meetings. Just last night, we had over 200 people here for a Roast Beef Dinner. Every day our facility is used for people to gather together. Each week hundreds come through the doors of our church, and if you add those hundreds together over 52 weeks, it becomes thousands who experience the very same power that we read about here in Acts--the power of one heart joined in one place.

In addition to our physical life, the word heart can also mean the center and source of our inner life, our feelings and thoughts. When the Bible says that the early church had “everything in common,” it means more than their possessions. In some ways, sharing physical space and possessions is the easiest thing to we have to share. But the early church shared everything in common-- not just their physical lives, but also their inner lives. What do I mean by “inner life?” I mean our emotions and feelings, our thoughts and desires, our dreams and hopes. Our inner life makes us who we are much more than our physical life;

my “inner” life is what makes me tick, it’s my personality, my soul. The inner life is more difficult to share with others because it’s much more private and personal than our physical life; for instance, I can’t stop you from looking at me, or sharing space with me; but I do not have to tell you what I am thinking or feeling. That part of my life--my inner life--is mine, and I can choose to share it or not.

The early church did share their inner lives. We read that they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching; in other words, they shared what they knew of God and life, and what they had learned from the scriptures. We read that they shared their testimonies; in other words, they shared what God had done for them in their lives, how God had saved them in Jesus Christ, how God had changed their lives. They shared their prayers; which means they shared what they hoped for and how they needed help.

When we gather together physically in this place, we also share our inner lives with each other. When we meet in these rooms--the parlor, fellowship hall, sanctuary, conference room, class rooms--we do more than simply gather to eat or drink. We come to share: we share our faith in God; we share our past, what has hurt us and what has helped us; we share our fears and our failures; we share dreams and hopes for our friendships, for marriage, and children; we pour out our griefs and our heartbreaks; we offer each other compassion and forgiveness; we give and receive love. This is sharing the inner life, being joined together in heart and soul--in one physical place sharing one spiritual life. It’s a life that is so much more than the sum of its parts; a life that is so much more than any one of us. I want to take this opportunity to say that if you haven’t experienced this life together, maybe you’ve been attending for a while but you’ve haven’t experienced the power of sharing your life with others here, I hope you will get involved and experience for yourself what I’ve been talking about. Talk to me, or contact one of the folks on the list on the back of the bulletin, and we’ll help you get plugged in.

So the power of one is the power of one heart and soul. But there is more to the power of one, and the story of the early church points us there as well. It is the power of one Spirit. One Spirit that unites us, and joins us together in one heart and soul. At the core of our life together, at the heart of our community, is the reality of one God--one God whose Spirit is in each of us, linking all of us together. In the text I read from Deuteronomy, we hear these words: “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.*” This sentence is known in Hebrew as the *Shema*, which means “Hear!,” and it has served as a confession of faith for Israel through the centuries. In the New Testament, the Gospels call the *Shema* the first commandment, meaning that it’s the most important commandment. The commandment is to recognize that we serve one God, not many Gods; there is not one Lord here, and another somewhere else, but there is only one God--the Lord, who is above all, and in all, and through all.

When the Apostle Paul is writing to the Corinthians, he expresses the same conviction that there is one Lord, and one Spirit. In the church at Corinth there were many people who displayed a variety of spiritual gifts--some had the gift of healing, others had the gift of prophecy, others had a gift for teaching, and so on. And some people looked at these various gifts thought that because there were various gifts, there must be various Spirits. But Paul writes to them and says, “*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who ac-*

tivates all of them in everyone.” Here, Paul is saying the same thing that we read in Deuteronomy, and applying it to the life of the church: there is one God, one Spirit who is in all, working in all, joining all of us together in one life.

Our church is made up of many unique and very different people. No two of us are the same. We each have our own personalities, we each have our own stories. If we were each to share how God has worked in our lives, and what difference God has made in our lives, each of us would have a different story to tell. But within each story, each unique story, the same God is working and the same God is moving. And because it is the same God, my story is connected to your story, and my life to your life. My healing is part of your healing; your joy is joined to my joy; my forgiveness is found with your forgiveness. Because the same God is working in us all.

Several years ago, a student at Princeton Seminary signed up, like many students do, to preach on a day in chapel. But instead of delivering a sermon, she did something that I have not seen done before or since: she asked people to share their testimonies. To simply tell how God was working their lives. One person stood to share, and then another, and then another. And soon tears began to flow, and laughter, and clapping. It was the most moving service I remember in that chapel. And why? Why does it move me when I hear how God has worked in someone else’s life? Why? Because it is my God too; because the God who lives and works in them lives and works in me and in you. Our lives are not separate, but we are joined in the power of one heart and soul, by one Spirit.

As your pastor, I have been privileged to hear from many of you what God has done in your life, and what this church has meant to you. Each story is unique and each is powerful. For some it’s a story of healing; for others a story of friendship; and for others, a story of peace. You know, better than anyone, why this church is special. Hearing your stories brings me joy. But what brings even more joy is when I hear that you’ve told others. When I hear that you’ve reached out to a friend in need, and encouraged them to come here, to come here and experience the power of one: one heart and soul, united in one Spirit. Thanks be to God.

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October 11th, 2009*