

April 18, 2021
Third Sunday of Easter

To Understand Why

Acts 4:32-35

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Dear Friends in Christ,

Please note that the text for the sermon this morning, Acts 4:32-35, might seem a bit strange for the post Easter season. I'm thinking that, quite possibly, the words that cause conflict for some are these from verse 32: "...no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common." Connect that to these words from verse 34: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them..."

This observation has been made: "The church's unity expressed itself in a willingness to share. This was not a regulation of the apostles. The right to hold property and have personal possessions had not been abolished. But no one took the attitude 'what's mine is mine.'" Richard D. Balge, Acts, People's Bible Commentary, CPH, p.56.). Many, I'm sure, would agree with that. Some, I'm sure, would struggle. The goal is . . .

TO UNDERSTAND WHY

I. Begins With Justification. (v. 32a)

What I mean by the title of the sermon, "To Understand Why," is to understand why the members of the beginning New Testament church did not see the material things of this world as belonging exclusively to them. I'm starting our understanding with one word: Justification.

We spend a good part of life justifying ourselves under many different circumstances. The German theologian, Oswald Bayer, stated the following regarding self-justification:

Those who justify themselves are under compulsion to do so. There is no escape. We cannot reject the question that is put to us: Why have you done this? What were you thinking about? Might you have not done something else? In the other's view of us, and in our own view, we always find ourselves to be the ones who are already being questioned and have to answer. Complaints are made against us. We are forced to justify ourselves, and as we do, we usually want to be right. (Oswald Bayer, "Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification," trans. G. W. Bromily, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, 1).

Isn't that the way it works? We're constantly justifying our words and actions. And that spills into our relationship with God; trying to justify things we think, say and do that we know, deep inside, we shouldn't. "Surely God loves me! I've done the best I can. I love Him! I'm a reasonably good person." But, you see, God isn't looking for reasonably good people, as we understand good. He demands perfect. The Scriptures say, "*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*" (Rom. 3:20).

Heinrich Schmid, in his book, "Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church" wrote, "The effect of (God's) justification...is...that act of God by which He removes the sentence of condemnation, to which man is exposed in consequence of his sins, releases him from His guilt, and ascribes to them the merit of Christ." (Augsburg Publishing House, 1961, P. 424). God, through faith in Christ's obedience to the law on our behalf, pronounces us not guilty and "removes the sentence of condemnation" that stood against us. Though still struggling with the sin in us, we are no longer condemned. The Scriptures say, "*Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.'*" (Gal. 3:11). That changes everything. Life is not about what we can grab and hoard of this world.

II. Moves Us To The Resurrection.

Everything we have considered to this point moves us to this - what you heard, in part, at the beginning of this sermon:

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. (vv. 32-33).

This is, in part, the change that takes place within when we know what it means to be justified through faith in Christ; when we understand that His resurrection points us away from this world to our ultimate resurrection. Again, we're told, "...the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." (v. 33b). Please listen to the following two, very familiar pieces of Scripture:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures... (I Cor. 15:3-4).

God bless us to hear, believe and pursue the opening words of that Scripture: "*I delivered to you as of first importance.*" Of first importance for our lives in this world and the world to come: Jesus; His life, suffering, death and resurrection. The second piece of Scripture:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is vain. (I Cor. 15:13-14).

If Christ has not been raised then our faith is in vain and justification is of no value. It was the persecuted Romanian Lutheran pastor Reverend Richard Wurmbbrand who said, "If nothing follows (after death), the most beautiful life is nothing more than a banquet offered to a condemned man before his execution." But, in fact, Paul writes, "...Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." (I Cor. 15:20). What wonderful words of comfort for all here who have had loved ones in eternal life! What wonderful words of comfort for us as we face our final moment here! We cry out the words Peter and John declared to those who wanted to silence Christ's Victory: "*And there is salvation found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" (Acts 4:13).

Many spend a lot of time and sacrifice so much to make this world their "happy place." But Jesus was clear. The question is whether or not what He said is clear with us: "I have said these things to you (concerning His death and resurrection; concerning His winning heaven for us) - *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*" (Jn. 16:33). Brothers and sisters, we're going to heaven when we finish our course in this world! The world has never and will never resolve its violence and corruption. Christ will! We have the joy and peace of knowing God's love in Christ. We are in the process of moving to our resurrected bodies. And that changes everything about how we see this world.

And so, the result . . .

III. The Result. (vv. 34-35)

There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as they had need. (vv. 34-35).

P. E. Kretzmann gives great insight here:

(This was) a spontaneous manifestation of Christian love. The spirit was kept alive and strengthened by the fact that the apostles with great power gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ...It was the result of their acceptance of the resurrected Lord by faith that brought great grace upon them all... When the world begins to rage and to threaten (as it does today), the true Christians cling all the more firmly to the Word, and this Word shows its power, binding their hearts together ever more firmly. (P. E. Kretzmann, "Popular Commentary of the Bible," Vol. I, New Testament, CPH, p.553).

Dear friends, no-one will love and care for a child of God the same way as other children of God in the resurrected Christ. The Lord had John write: *"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"* (1 Jn. 3:16-17).

And just in case we might look at a child of God in their struggles, messes and mess-ups, and don't like what we see, we keep this Scripture in front of us: *"while we were sinners Christ died for us."* (Rom 5:8). We still have our messes and mess-ups! Everything we have considered is why the brothers and sisters of the beginning New Testament church did what they did.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott