

“A New World Order”

Acts 4:32-37

April 26, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

We're looking today at the third of the three opportunities the Church has today to reach our secular world. The three are beauty, lament and belonging. These three, combined with the faithful proclamation of the Word, are able to reach beyond the formidable barriers erected by secularization and into the hearts of people. In some ways, these three are really just another way of looking at the three major divisions of the Bible: creation, fall and redemption. Beauty harkens back to God's good and beautiful creation. But then comes the fall into sin, and everything is broken. We respond to this brokenness with lament, defined as honesty about the sad things, followed by trusting in God. And then there's redemption, summarized today by this word "belonging." When God redeems a person, they belong once more to God and to God's people. These three—beauty, lament and belonging—resonate deep within the hearts of people, even the most committed secularist, because they are true.

For this topic of belonging, I've chosen a passage in the fourth chapter of Acts. The early chapters of Acts make it clear that God is creating in the Church a new world order. The old order is based on threats, violence, fear and division. The new order is based on unity of heart, sharing and grace, all brought about by the power of God's Spirit. Our passage this morning is the second of Luke's snapshots of life in the early church, with the first one occurring back at the end of chapter 2. In both cases, these descriptions of church life follow an explicit outpouring of God's Spirit. God is at work creating a new community. Anyone can belong to it and none can prevent it.

I. The Power for the New Order

The irony is not lost on me of considering this topic of belonging at a time when we are not able to gather together. We have encountered a powerful enemy in the form of this little virus that seems determined to keep us apart from one another, to prevent us from experiencing this deeply satisfying reality of belonging to God's new world order. There is nothing new about powerful enemies being arrayed against what God is doing to form his new community. The context of our passage shows the same thing.

This context reaches back to chapter 3, where Peter and John heal a beggar who has been lame from birth. A crowd gathers and Peter preaches to them of Jesus, his resurrection from the dead and the life he brings to any who will repent and believe. Some members of the ruling council see what is

happening and they don't like it. So they arrest Peter and John, intending on bringing them before the entire council the next day. Then I can imagine Luke smiling as he wrote the next verse: **"But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand"** (4:4). No power is able to stop what God is doing. You can put his leaders in jail, but you can't stop God's Spirit from building his new community.

The next day, Peter and John are brought before the ruling council. The text says that they were "greatly annoyed" that Peter and John had been **"proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead"** (4:2). Peter responds to their annoyance by preaching boldly of Jesus, pointing out that it was this same council which had decided to crucify Jesus, but which God had vetoed by raising him from the dead. What a remarkable change this is that has taken place in Peter! It was just a few weeks prior to this that he wilted in the face of opposition from the threats of this council, denying Jesus three times. Now he stands up to their threats and proclaims boldly the truth of Jesus.

This ruling council, though they had great political power and though Peter and John had no such power, was silenced. The presence of the healed man standing beside Peter shut their mouths. What we have here is what happens when the power of man meets the power of God. Peter and John may have had no political power, but the power of God rested upon them, giving them great boldness. The Sanhedrin can do nothing but issue an order, one that is promptly and openly ignored. **"So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard'"** (4:18-20). All they can do in response is to threaten Peter and John, threats that formerly would have sent Peter running away in fear, but now have a quite different effect.

The effect of these threats upon Peter is to send him to the church, where they hold a prayer meeting. The theme of the prayer meeting comes from Psalm 2, which describes this power struggle between the Lord's anointed and the kings of the earth, those with political power. **"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed"** (4:26). They pray and ask for continued boldness in their speaking of the word, after which we read that **"the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness"** (4:31). Why was it shaken? Some have thought that this shaking was a sign of God's power, and that may very well be the case. But I think there's another possibility. Psalm 2 tells us of God's response to this opposition from political leaders who oppose his people. **"He who sits in the heavens laughs"** (Psalm 2:4). Perhaps the shaking is the laughter of God at any who think they can stop his work. God is gathering a people of his own, and there is no power in

heaven or earth that can stop it. Neither political leader nor virus can stop this new world order God is establishing in his church. As I have said many times, we are the outpost of the coming kingdom, a kingdom that is sure to come.

II. The Goal of the New Order

The goal of this new world order can be seen in verse 32. **“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.”** The goal of God’s new world order is to bring about deep unity between people. The unique thing about this unity is that it crosses the normal lines that divide us. It is often the case that money divides people, separating the rich from the poor. But here, the giving of money unites people, as the rich give sacrificially to provide for the needs of the poor.

The church by this time is not small. Three thousand were added to the church all in one fell swoop after Peter’s Pentecost sermon. Then earlier in this chapter it is reported that the number of men came to about five thousand (4:4). That’s the last time we read of a number, probably because the numbers were increasing too fast to be able to keep up with them. With such large numbers, it is certain that those who were now of one heart and soul in the church would have been separated by great differences prior to coming into the church. For example, there was the difference between the Hebraic Jews who had grown up in Israel and the Hellenistic Jews who had grown up outside of Israel. They spoke different languages and had different cultural practices. There were different levels of education. It is said of Peter and John that they were **“uneducated, common men”** (4:13). Then in chapter six, we read that **“a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith”** (6:7), and these would have been well-educated.

Israel at this time was also divided politically. There were the equivalent of conservatives and liberals. There were those called Zealots, who wanted to expel the Romans by force. There were others who advocated for a more accommodating stance to the Roman occupation. Yet in the church, these differences became less important. I don’t think Luke means to say here that everyone became the same in every way and that this was the source of their unity. Diversity is impossible to remove. Some people stayed wealthy and others stayed poor. Cultural, educational and political differences would have persisted. Their unity was based not on sameness and uniformity, but on the work of the Spirit to unite them in Christ.

Verse 33 explains the two dominant realities that formed the basis of their unity. **“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”** Imagine two brothers arguing with one another about how to split the costs of

caring for their needy mother when they receive a letter from an attorney informing them that a great uncle has died and left each of them ten million dollars. A new reality has washed away former differences. That's the way it is in the Church. The new reality is that death has been defeated in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. God's great grace is upon us all. None of us deserve the favor of God, but all of us receive it as a gift from God.

This unity of God's people is an answer to a prayer Jesus gave on the eve of his crucifixion. Jesus prayed that those who would believe in him would **“all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”** (John 17:21). I don't have to tell you that the world outside the church is politically polarized. We grieve the heart of Jesus if we bring that into the Church. What an opportunity we have today to show that people can have different political views and still love one another through the unity of heart and soul given by the Holy Spirit!

III. The Activity of the New Order

This unity of heart and soul is not merely theoretical. It has its practical expression in the activity of sharing. **“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 any had need”** (4:34-35). The sharing described and commended here is clearly voluntary. This is not a form of Christian communal living where everyone gives up all property and maintains a common purse. In the next chapter, Peter makes it clear that Ananias and Sapphira sinned not by withholding part of the money from the sale of property, but deceiving the church in doing so. They were free to give as much or as little of the proceeds as they wanted, but not free to lie about it in order to bring glory to themselves.

Sharing reverses our natural tendency with regard to our money. We see this natural tendency develop from a very early stage in life, when children insist on not sharing as they utter the one word, “Mine.” We see the same non-sharing, possessive attitude in adults too. We see it in the greedy attitude of Laban, who said to Jacob, **“All that you see is mine”** (Gen. 31:43). We see it in another Old Testament character, Nabal, who objected to sharing from his abundance with David during the years of David's poverty. **“Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?”** (1 Sam. 25:11).

The result of sharing is the elimination of poverty within the church. **“There was not a needy person among them.”** The assumption is that there is enough for everyone within the group as a whole. The things God has

entrusted to us are meant to help supply what is lacking in others. A few years ago, I read the book *Unbroken*, the story of Louis Zamperini. He was a world class runner in the one mile race who became a prisoner of war in Japan during World War II after his plane crashed in the Pacific Ocean. Before being captured by the Japanese, he and two others from his plane drifted in a life boat for many days. Their rations of food and water were meager and were supplemented by fish they could catch and rain water they could collect. One day, Zamperini and another of his companions awoke to discover that their third companion had raided their limited store of food for himself while they slept. What Luke is telling us is that the early church defeated poverty by viewing their community as if they were all on a life raft together. The provisions they had were entrusted to them by God for the purpose of relieving the need of others within the church.

This attitude comes from knowing the love of God through Jesus. When we come to trust God, we come to see that God is willing to share with us. God never withholds from poor, needy sinners, not even a beloved Son.

The text concludes with an example of one sharing like this. Joseph from Cyprus is a Greek-speaking Jewish man. He is a Levite, and Levites were often wealthy, which seems to be the case with this man. He owned a valuable asset, a field. Whether it was located in Israel or Cyprus we are not told. But he willingly sold it and gave up control of the funds as he turned over the proceeds to the apostles for their wise distribution to the needy. Giving away money is no easy thing, requiring skillful administration and the kind of maturity characteristic of apostles who have walked with Jesus.

Whatever you have, whether money, time or talent, God calls you to share it with others. God gave it to you, and he intends you to follow him in sharing that others might be refreshed. Joseph gets a new name as a result of this. He is called Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement.” He is changed by his act of sharing, and we will be changed too as we help change others.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, I want to take us back to something striking earlier in this chapter. In verse 11, when Peter is addressing the Sanhedrin, he says, **“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.”** Note that Peter calls these enemies of Jesus “builders.” But they are building the wrong thing. Willie James Jennings says of this verse, “Peter in this moment offers a truth they desperately need to hear: Jesus is the cornerstone of any building effort that would move toward life. Jesus enacts a new social order that saves.” What are you building? By faith in Jesus and his sharing with us, we are empowered to share with others so that we build a new world order of life and peace.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Acts 4:32-37

1. As we are approaching two months into this pandemic, how are you doing? What do you find most challenging? What's been the biggest surprise?
2. In the context of our passage in the verses just prior, the young church has a prayer meeting in which Psalm 2 figures prominently. The first six verses of that psalm read as follows: *"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, 'As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.'"* List some of the forces arrayed against the Church today (including Covid-19). Have you given more power to any of them in your heart than you ought?
3. The church described here was marked by "one heart and soul." What would that look like in today's Church?
4. Unity in the church doesn't mean the absence of diversity. Unity is not the same thing as uniformity. What do you think is the key to unity among people who are very different? How can that develop in our church?
5. This church learned to share with one another. Do you know any stories of sharing in the church that you can share?
6. What do you think is the biggest obstacle to the kind of sharing being described here?
7. Peter points out how the enemies of Jesus here are builders. But they are building the wrong thing (4:11), because they have no place for Jesus in their hearts. What would it look like for you to build the same thing God is building, this new world order in the Church?