

“All for One OR One For All” Sermon May 3, 2020 - Rev. Grant Dillenbeck.

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be always acceptable to you O God, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

50 long days. 50 days of waiting, of wondering, of not knowing. Almost two months - uncertain, trying to be hopeful but more than a little bit fearful. The first followers of Jesus isolated themselves after his death and resurrection. They were trying to remember his teachings and they weren't sure what was going to happen next. Some believed that Jesus would return and return soon to establish God's reign of peace, getting rid of their Roman oppressors and all injustice and oppression forever. But others were not quite so sure. They were afraid the Romans might get rid of them first. But through it all the only thing that they knew for sure was whatever happened, they had to stick together.

And then on the 50th day something amazing happened. It was the day of Pentecost, which is a Greek word that literally means “50 days.” It was the Jewish Festival of “Weeks” because it was a week of weeks, that is 7 times 7 days, or 49 days since the Passover. Then add one more day and have a feast and that's Pentecost. All of the Jewish people were gathering from all over the world, including the early Christians, all of whom were also Jewish. They came for Pentecost which was also the time when the people of Israel celebrated the first harvest of their crops. Now it's hard for us to believe that when we haven't even really started planning our crops yet, they are harvesting some of theirs. It was on that day of celebration when it happened. The Holy Spirit came among those first believers and the Spirit produced a different kind of harvest. A harvest of renewed faith, of renewed strength, of renewed courage, of renewed vision. We're going to hear more about this on Pentecost Sunday which is May 31st, but the book of Acts reports that first thing which happened was that the followers of Jesus went out and told others about their faith. Acts tells us what else happened in chapter 2 verses 30 to 42. “The Believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship. To the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was amazed at the many wonders and signs of the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple court. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

So what do we hear happened when the Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus? They devoted themselves to his teachings, they broke bread in their homes, they prayed, they shared in fellowship and Acts also says they shared everything they had in common so that nobody was in need. They even sold their possessions to share with those in greatest need. Yes, you heard that right! They sold some of what they had so that others would not be in need. I know that that probably sounds pretty amazing and Luke knew it too. So when he wrote the book of Acts, just in case they didn't catch it the first time, he tells them again in chapter 4, basically repeating what he already said. Acts 4:32-35 “All the Believers were one in mind and heart. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them that there were no needy persons among them. From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles feet and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”

Why would they do such a thing? Why would they actually sell some of what they had and give it to others? Well they knew that's what it was to be a follower of Jesus. As they remembered his teachings, they remembered what he had taught, including what is recorded in Matthew chapter 25 in the story of the king. “The king will say to those on his right, ‘come you who are blessed by my father and take your inheritance the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer, ‘Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?’ The king will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whoever did it for one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, did it for me.’” The early Christians were telling people about Jesus and testifying to his resurrection in words, but also by how they lived, sharing their love and especially helping those in need.

Today is a week to weeks, or 7 time 7 days since our last worship service when we gathered together here in the sanctuary. And so tomorrow will be 50 days, and like those first followers we are waiting in isolation. We are hopeful but also unsure. We can't be together in person, but we can still do what those scriptures were saying. We can still eat bread in our homes and we will in a few minutes when we share Communion. We can still pray and be devoted to Jesus' teachings, as we're doing now. And we can also testify to his resurrection by our acts of kindness and love - by sharing what we have. That may be the hardest part. It is fine to remember Jesus' teachings and pray and develop our spiritual lives but then we come to that part that Luke told us twice where they shared everything they had so that no one was in need.

It seems that in our society today there is a strong emphasis on are putting ourselves first. We saw that early in the pandemic with people hoarding the things that they thought that other people might want. Once we have what we need, then maybe if we have anything left, we might help others. It is true that it's not possible for each of us to help everyone, but that doesn't mean we can't help anyone. I'm reminded of that motto of the 3 Musketeers. "All for one and one for all." It seems that in our society we've tended to focus on that first part - the "all for one" - seeking what we can get from others. There is no question we do each have needs and it's important to take care of ourselves and in this time especially, it's important to reach out and ask for help when we need it and to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. However there is no question that we are going to need more than a "survival of the fittest," "me first" mentality to get through this crisis. We also need to think of the "one for all" part of that motto. We often hear people saying, and I see it on signs around town, "We're all in this together." The only way to really do that - to make it real, is to do something concrete to help those who are especially struggling. There are those who are in special need in our community and we encourage you to support groups like the Stittsville Food Bank or the Lanark County Interval House, agencies we've spoken of in the past couple of weeks. But we can also help those within our own congregation and community through the Local Outreach Fund of our congregation, which I will say more about later in the Minute for Mission. We are told that when the early church did those things - when they shared what they had, when they spoke about their faith, when they focussed on developing their spiritual lives - they grew and actually thrived, even in the face of unimaginable hardship.

There is a story told about an early Roman Emperor who was trying to figure out whether the Christian should all be eradicated or not. His name was Hadrian and the story goes that he sent someone to find out whether they should get rid of the Christians or not. His report included these words: "If a person has something, they give freely to the one who has nothing. If one of them is poor and there isn't enough food to go around, they fast several days to give food to the ones who need it most. This is really a new kind of person. There is something divine in them." That's an ancient story about how the early Christian shared with each other to make a difference in the world. If you want to hear a more recent story, this past week Ruth and I were watching an episode of The Simpsons. In this episode a new, young, hip, pastor came to town and the church was filled because he was he was so engaging and modern - not like the old fuddy-duddy pastor - probably somebody more like me. This new pastor was really bringing them in and at one point he told this story a story I've heard and even shared here in church about the difference between heaven and hell. There's an image of hell which shows a table filled with wonderful food and people sitting around that table. The problem is that their hands are attached to spoons which are so long they can't feed themselves, and so they are starving. And then there's an image of heaven where there's that same table with the same food and the same people and the same spoons - the difference is that in heaven they learned how to feed each other. That's the image of the first Christians. They learned how to feed each other and not just try and take care of themselves first.

It's true that we are living in a time where the future is uncertain even for the church. We wonder how we can carry out our ministry if we can't meet together for several more weeks or maybe months. We wonder what's going to happen. The first disciples give us a clear path to follow. We can continue to focus on our spiritual life, on the teachings of Jesus, on prayer, and we can still stay connected to each other as best we can in this challenging time. And maybe even most important of all - we can share what we have to help those who are in most need. "All for one and one for all." If I were to revisit that motto of the Three Musketeers I think I would add something else. "All for one, one for all, and ALL for ALL." May we be the embodiment of the declaration of the resurrected Lord Jesus by sharing our love with each other, especially those in greatest need. Thanks be to God. Amen.

