

All Together
Acts 4:32-35 & Psalm 133
April 7, 2024
First Presbyterian, Luling

The hymn after the sermon today is “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love,” or it’s also known by its first line, “We Are One in the Spirit.” The footnote at the bottom of the page tells us that the words were written by Peter Scholtes in 1966. He was a Catholic priest at St. Brendan’s on the south side of Chicago, in the 1960s. He was involved in the civil rights movement and directed a youth choir. The choir needed something to sing at interracial, ecumenical events. So Father Scholtes sat down and wrote these words in one single day.

“We pray that all unity may one day be restored.” “We’ll guard human dignity and save human pride.” That sounds a bit different with the backstory, doesn’t it? I imagine the choir rocked this song, and its verses are appropriate for the occasions where they were singing.

Father Scholtes had a way with words, but I do wish he had been more careful with the chorus. They’ll know we are Christians by our love. Which, yes, I dearly hope and pray that we Christians are known by our love. It’s something to strive for, because too often we’re known for who we exclude and who we judge against, rather than who we love. That’s a failing for the church writ large.

I do wish though that maybe he had taken two days to write it, so that wouldn’t have implied that *only* Christians can love, that if you see someone loving, they *must* be a Christian. I know, and I hope you know, plenty of non-Christians who love and act out love for their fellow human beings. I just wish the chorus was a little clearer about what it is we Christians are called to do, and our motivations for doing so. It’s not so we get recognized or patted on the back for being loving. The love itself, and God’s call to us to be loving, is motivation enough.

All that being said, this hymn could be the national anthem for the early church. As we read in Acts this morning, it’s the very earliest days of the church. They aren’t even being called “church” yet. They are Jesus-followers, likely still considered themselves Jewish, and are still figuring out what that means, to follow a risen Lord. Remember that they expected Jesus to return, any moment now, imminently, and so they were working out an ethic and behaviors that reflected that. Behaviors that can be sustained for a short time frame don’t necessarily work out well over the long haul.

Here's an example of what I mean by that. Early in my ministry career, I went on a lot of trips with youth groups. This frequently involved sleeping on the floor, sharing a bathroom with more than a dozen people, eating food I would not otherwise have chosen, and never ever getting enough sleep. None of that did I actually enjoy. But I would do it, because it was only for a weekend, or a week. I can do almost anything for a week. And when I got back home, I could catch up on sleep and eat what I wanted to, and not have to share the bathroom with more than one other person.

When Anna was born, she was in the hospital for two and a half months. Those first few weeks, while I was still recuperating from surgery, I pushed myself pretty hard. I didn’t get enough sleep or eat enough food. I was spending hours and hours with her at the hospital. Many of you have done the same, when your family member was in the hospital, too. It’s understandable. But one day it dawned on me that this was more than a seven day situation.

This was going to be weeks and weeks and weeks. There was no way I could keep up that pace, and I was going to have to make some changes.

You see how our behaviors and ideas change when we think we just have to keep it up for a little while versus for the long haul? I suspect that's a little bit of what's going on in these passages early in Acts. They think, really and truly believe, that their time as a community is not going to last very long. So one of the things they set up is this financial system. As you became a part of the Christian community, you sold your property and contributed the proceeds to the group. Then it was distributed to whoever needed it. Many of the early Christians came from impoverished classes, because a huge percentage of the people in the Roman Empire were from impoverished classes. That's the way the Empire was set up. This was a sustainable practice in the short term, but maybe not for the long term. The very next chapter tells about a property owner who only turned over part of their property to the community and kept part for themselves.

Whether this communal sharing of financial resources was common or long lasting is not really the point of the passage. It obviously catches our ears, since it is so foreign to the way we understand and value financial resources and property. Acts seems to be trying to get across the point that the new Christian community was called together by God, and was unified despite their differences. They were one in heart and spirit. The very deepest parts of them were together, in agreement. They held all things in common, so that those who were in need had their needs met, and those who had something to share, were able to share. And they were blessed with great grace. They were one in the Spirit and one in the Lord.

That doesn't mean they were all the same. Some of them were annoying, I'm sure. Others of them were annoying in a completely different way. They were people, humans, and being one in heart and spirit doesn't mean they never had conflicts or never failed to live up to their commitments or other people's expectations. What the bit about property and no one being in need says to me is that they understood that they were different, now that they were followers of Jesus. Their primary place of belonging was to this new Christian community. Some of them had something to share, and something else they needed. And others of them needed the first thing and had the second thing to share. Still others were in need and didn't have much to give. But everyone was a part of the community, and they took care of each other.

Paul describes much the same thing in First Corinthians 12, the parts of the body sermon. Way back in Genesis, Cain asks God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer there is the same as it is here: yes. Yes. We are our sibling's keeper, even if they have nothing to give us in return. These bonds tie us together, so that we are one, one in the spirit and one in the Lord.

It is the Spirit and the Lord that create and reinforce and strengthen those bonds. We don't create them ourselves, but we live within them.

We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. Let us be joined together, to love one another, and love God, and love the world.