

Acts 2:44, 4:32-35 N.T. 112 (NRSV)

^{2:44}All who believed were together and had all things in common;

^{4:32}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. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 2:44, 4:32-35 N.T Page 112
“’N Common”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. O God may the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. **Amen.**

Introduction: As most of us who still have land lines know, most of the phone calls we get are **nuisance calls**. That’s true even if you have your phone number listed on the “*National Do Not Call Registry*.” All that does is stop telemarketers from calling for commercial businesses. It does nothing to stop those **political robocalls** or the endless barrage of phone calls from the whole host of charitable organizations. Even while I was writing this, the phone rang yet again with a **young woman calling** from a busy call center identifying herself as a paid representative calling on behalf of the **Salvation Army** asking for a **donation of at least \$50** to help needy families in our area. I declined, not because I don’t care about needy families, or because I don’t like the Salvation Army, but because I am weary of such phone calls. **The Apostle Paul** tells us “**let us not grow weary in doing good**,” (Galatians 6:9, NIV) but I’m weary of all of the appeals for help with so little evidence that the help is helping. **I want** the hungry to have something to eat. **I want** the naked to have something to wear. **I want** the homeless to have a roof over their head. But I’ve lived long enough to realize the truth of something Jesus once said. “**You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me**” (John 12:8, NRSV). The world is a broken place. There’s always an abundance of poor and hurting people. The need is so great, and the resources are so few. **Oh, if we could only eliminate poverty** and want. **Oh, if we could only create a more perfect society**. **Oh, if we could only make utopia a reality**. **Oh, if everything could only be fare, and just, and moral**. **Then there’d be** no need for those nuisance phone calls from charitable organizations.

PAUSE

Move I.

We all long for a better community. We all want our family, and our friends, and our neighbors to lead worthwhile lives. We want people to have adequate food, clothing, and shelter.

It's been more than a year since we formed "*Our Future Church Team*" to develop ideas on how best to carry on with our purpose "*of sharing our passion for Jesus Christ with Erie's next generations.*" The pandemic knocked the team off track a year ago, but now the team is back working again having met twice in March. One idea the team is currently developing is holding a **Kid's Carnival & Parade** the first Saturday in June. See Jim Reim if you want to help.

This week in your bulletin, we've printed a list of prayers needs for our church and our community. My hope is that each of you will take some time each week to lift these needs up in prayer. I want to draw your attention to three of the needs on the **community portion** of the list.

- **We're praying that people who don't know Jesus will meet him.** We love Jesus and we know Jesus has the power to transform lives and communities.
- **We're also praying that Erie's economic revitalization will be successful.** All you need to do is take a walk around downtown and you'll be amazed by all of construction underway within blocks of the church.
- **And we're praying that our community will welcome the new people moving here.** A couple hundred market-rate housing units are coming on-line in downtown Erie this year and Erie continues to be a major refugee resettlement center meaning there are new people settling in Erie all of the time. We need to welcome them and get to know them.

Erie has many pluses. The natural beauty of Presque Isle, an abundance of affordable housing, employment opportunities, safe urban neighborhoods, and a culturally diverse people. We all want our community to be better.

Our Bible lesson today depicts a moment in human history that seems almost too good to be true. **The Easter event** has now passed and the Good News that Jesus is alive **is spreading like wildfire** starting in Jerusalem, and then on to Judea, Samaria, and on throughout the Roman world. **New converts** are being added daily to the fledgling church (Acts 2:47). **In Acts 4:32**, Luke writes, “**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.**” And then in verse 34a we learn “**there was not a needy person among them.**” **Raise your hand** if you’d want to live in a place like that. **Everyone is generous. Everyone shares. No one is needy.**

Our Bible lesson today is the kind of passage that inspires a lot of Christians to think “**Why can’t we be more like the early church** described back in the book of Acts?” Why can’t God’s Spirit move among us just like it did among those early Christians? **Let’s all organize** a commune and all live like one big happy family. From time to time throughout history, Christians have made attempts to do exactly that. One recent example are the Jesus People who got started when I was a junior in high school and they’re still around today. **The Jesus People USA** Christian commune is located in this **converted hotel** on the north side of Chicago which has about 400 resident-members. Let’s watch the promotional video from their web site:

{Play Video: “*Jesus People USA.wmv*” [0:53]}

Are you ready to move to Chicago and join? The Jesus People live together, and they share everything in common. They are a community and more that, they are a church. They meet all of their people’s basic needs. **Yes, we all truly do long for a better community.**

End I.

Move II.

But our fallen humanity keeps getting in the way. God's never been the obstacle to utopia, but we human beings always have. Remember, **God placed** Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, a virtual paradise on earth. But it was Adam and Eve's disobedience that **ended up getting them expelled** from the garden. Ever since all of creation has lived **under the curse** (Genesis 4:11). **The earth** is perfectly capable of producing enough for everyone to have enough to eat, **but we have to work** by the sweat of our brow to plant, cultivate, and harvest it. **God created us** to be of one heart and mind, **but each of us has** a stubborn streak that's prone to break away from the pack and chart its own course. **The creation is** absolutely beautiful, **be we're perfectly capable** of spoiling good things.

The idealistic community described in our Bible Lesson today didn't maintain its innocence for long. Now this wasn't a commune in the modern sense of the word. **There was no requirement** to sell all of your possessions and give the proceeds to the church leaders. There was no quid pro quo. Let me read the last part of verse 34 and verse 35 from our Bible lesson today. **“As many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”** (Acts 4:34b-35). Notice what the verse doesn't say. It doesn't say everyone sold their houses and land all at once. It also doesn't say that everyone who sold their homes moved in together. They weren't forming a commune; they were simply giving of their abundance to help those who were in need within their community. The key point to all of these is whatever a person laid at the apostles' feet to help the needy, they gave voluntarily.

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As the Apostle Paul teaches in **2 Corinthians 9:7 (NRSV)**, “**Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**” That’s not communism, **its altruism**. Don’t give to make yourself feel good, or even to look good to your friends and neighbors. Give what you have decided in your heart to give because you’re grateful for what God is doing.

Does anyone remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira found in the very next chapter in Acts? **This husband-and-wife team** decided they would sell a piece of land they owned and that they too will **lay the proceeds at the apostles’ feet**. This is all well and good, but that’s not exactly what they did. **They secretly held back** part of the proceeds for themselves. In the eyes of the community, they looked as generous and pious as all of the others who had sold land and laid the proceeds at the apostles’ feet. No one would be the wiser. No one of course but God. **So, God sent Peter** to confront Ananias and Sapphira with their deception. At end of **Acts 5:4b (NIV)** Peter says, “**What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men, but to God.**” And with that Ananias and his wife Sapphira both **fell down and died**. If you’re gonna be generous be generous. But don’t lie about it.

History is full of stories of communes that formed with the best of intentions and flourished for a while, but sooner or later dissolved under the cloud of scandal. **A number of years ago** an insider in the Jesus People commune, Jamie Prater, released a documentary film called “*No Place to call Home*” that alleged that leaders of the commune covered up **sexual abuse of children** within the community. Now with all of the pending lawsuits, it’s unclear if the Jesus People USA will ultimately survive. Somehow human versions of utopia are never quit as pure an innocent on the inside as they like to portray themselves as being one the outside.

The reality of the human condition is that we're flawed—we're all sinners in need of God's grace. And that even includes Peter. **Do you remember the Skit Guys**, Tommy Woodard and Eddie James? I've used any number of their videos before. **Today** I want to show you one of the *Skit Guys'* Easter season videos that deals with the reality of the human condition and our common need for grace. Here Peter is catching up with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after Peter had just hauled in the largest catch of fish in his life. Let's watch:

{Play Video: "*Skit Guys-Grace.mp4*" [3:30]}

All too often in our zeal to be good Christians, we tend to forget that we're really no different than the people we're trying to quote "save." "**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came from Jesus Christ**" (Romans 3:23-24, NIV). **What Jesus did** on the cross all of those years ago "*takes what is unforgivable and makes it forgivable.*" That's the grace each of us has received, and it's the grace Jesus wants us to extend to all of the people in our church and in our community. **We do so want** to be a better community. **But the truth is that our fallen humanity just keeps getting in the way.**

End II.

Move III.

So, we need to stay focused on the One thing we have in common. So many differences drive us apart, but it's our common faith in Jesus that unites us. As I look around this room, **I see some people** with most of their lives ahead of them, **and others** with most of their lives are behind them. **I see some** who have their act together, **and others** who don't. **I see people** who have savings for a rainy day **and others** for whom every day is a rainy day. **But despite** these all too obvious differences, I clearly see the one thing we all have in common. **Jesus Christ** is the Lord and Master of all of our lives. **Jesus is the One** who is making us one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.

O, how we love Jesus.

O, how we love Jesus.

O, how we love Jesus.

Because he first loved us.

If you love Jesus, can I hear you say Amen? **Amen!** Yes, "*We've got the wonderful love of our blessed redeemer way down in the depths of our hearts.*" That's what's knitting us together into the body of Christ.

There's a saying that so many writers have attributed to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, that everyone has begun assuming he said it. **But more recently** Richard Heitzenrater, a retired Wesley scholar at Duke Divinity School, has been pushing to set the record straight. That saying so often mistakenly attributed to John Wesley is "*In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity.*" That's a wonderful saying for the church today. It reminds us to **stay focused on Jesus** who is the One absolute essential of our faith. So, while this clearly is the kind of thing John Wesley would have said, he wasn't the first person to say it. In fact, it was the great classical theologian, **St. Augustine of Hippo** who first said it some 1300-years before Wesley.

At the center of our Bible Lesson today stands a bold statement about the power of Jesus' resurrection. **In Acts 4:33-34a (NRSV)** Luke writes, “**With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them.**” What a testament to the power of the Gospel to change people's circumstances. My question to you today is why does that only have to be true for the early church back in the first century of Christianity? Why can't it be true for us here in twenty-first century of Christianity? **Do we really care** about the people around us? **Do we really care** about our church? **Do we really care** about our community? **Do we really** have Jesus Christ in common? **Is the Essential** spelt with a capital “E” truly uniting us? “*Then let there be no needy among us.*” Jesus has forgiven our unforgivables. We have received a full measure of God's grace. **And as we have received**, we need to give. **So, please, let's stay focused on the One thing we all have in common, Jesus!**

End III.

Conclusion: I am weary of all of the appeals for help with so little evidence that the help is helping. Oh, if we could only make utopia a reality. **Yes, we all truly do long for a better community.** Why can't we be more like the early church described back in the book of Acts? Maybe we should all become Jesus People and move into the commune in Chicago. **But the truth is that our fallen humanity just keeps getting in the way.** God's never been the obstacle to utopia, but we human beings always have. For we all have fallen short of the glory of God, every last one of us. **So, let's stay focused on the One thing we all have in common.** So many differences drive us apart, but it's our common faith in Jesus that unites us. Remember, "*In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things charity.*" Let there be no needy among us, because we have **Jesus 'N Common.**

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. O God, you raised Jesus from the dead, you can do anything. May your grace work so powerfully among us that there will be no needy among us. **Amen!**

The Great Thanksgiving for Easter

10:30 Closing Hymn: "Because He Lives" Red Hymnal No. 364

All Three Verses

Sending Forth: Are you discouraged? Do you feel powerless? Then look to the resurrected Christ and live. Go forth, and give as you have received, because we all have Jesus Christ 'N Common. **Amen!**