

The Life Together
Acts 4.32-35
April 8, 2018
Easter 2B
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

I'm tired this morning, and it doesn't make much sense to me to launch into a generic sermon or stand before you without acknowledging I would have been just fine if we phoned this one in or just called it a snow day today because we've had a lot of church over the past week. Just this past Monday morning, my children and I headed to Memphis for the events of the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination. Becky Meriwether did, too. Nathan flew up Tuesday night in the middle of thunderstorms after 5 flight delays. Jim Oakes rode a bus all night long Tuesday night; a bus that broke down in Mississippi and spent four hours on the side of the road in the wee small hours of the morning.

We'll tell you more about this Wednesday night with some photos and video amidst our storytelling. It's hard to capture the feeling of standing in the middle of hundreds or thousands of union organizers, union members, neighbors, clergy, activists, ordinary citizens to name and claim the unfinished business of the civil rights movement. I can't remember who all of the great speakers were—the Rev. Dr. William Barber, of course, Senator Bernie Sanders, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, sanitation workers from the 1968 strike, the rapper Common, preachers and representatives and community organizers. It's hard to articulate how that experience is working its way into my soul and continuing to shape and affirm who I am called to be as a faith leader, a Jesus follower, a woman, a mother, a sister, a friend.

I came home Thursday night and almost immediately climbed into bed. But Becky came home and almost immediately drove to the church to join the work here of preparing for the first Beyond Incarceration Summit—a conference planned, organized, run, and led by formerly incarcerated women who are working to dismantle the system of mass incarceration in this country. Kathy Randels and Sean LaRocca practically lived here all of last week.

Nancy Sanders was here almost every hour, too. Carolyn Wright stayed with us the whole time. Many of you were here serving food, welcoming guests, listening to local and national speakers. It has been a week. And there is that privileged something in me that very much wants to get some extra credit for caring a lot, showing up a little,

and doing a tiny bit of good. Enough credit to maybe take a month off from justice seeking and let my compassion fatigue fade. Ridiculous.

Then I think about my hero Dr. Barber who I was fortunate to hear speak twice on Wednesday in Memphis. And I watched his Good Friday sermon from West Virginia on FacebookLive as he met with poor white folks in Appalachia to talk about the commonalities of the working poor across America. And I know he went from Memphis to New York to the amazing Rev. Jacqui Lewis' Middle Church for a Revolutionary Love conference. He is making his way across the country, state by state, with the message of a moral revival for our nation—addressing the sins of poverty, racism, ecological devastation, and the war economy. I think about the union marchers who were behind me in Memphis who were fast food and restaurant workers advocating for a living wage. One of their chants reminded us all, "We make the food! We pour your drinks!"

I think about all those who are organizing and advocating and pushing back against a system that doesn't want to give any breaks for the working poor while it gladly gives breaks to the wealthy, and I hear my privilege. I don't know anything about being tired. I may have been creaky from spending a day walking half the city of Memphis, but I don't really know anything about feet and muscles aching at the end of long days while still wondering how I'll take care of my family. I may stand beside sisters and brothers who are sharing their stories of the carceral state, but I don't know anything of that world in my own day-to-day life. What a luxury to entertain the thought that I might take a break from caring for a while!

And so I wonder, as we approach our third reading today, what is sustainable in the way we are living our faith as people who care deeply about seeking justice, loving neighbors, and welcoming all. If we are passionate about that outward call in our faith, how do we sustain the work we are called to do rather than exhausting ourselves and exploiting those who work tirelessly within our faith community.

Our third reading this morning comes from Acts 4.32-35:

³²Now 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.

Last week, as we celebrated in Easter worship, we began to explore the consequences of resurrection. One of the obvious consequences is that if death loses, then life continues. Living continues. Resurrection life is not the mindless, unaware life so many of us live. Resurrection life is a renewed, bold, going ahead, expansive life. For the weeks of Eastertide, the scripture before us will ask: What will happen when the disciples don't have Jesus with them anymore? How will Jesus be resurrected in their movement? How will they live as resurrection people? These are our questions, too.

This short passage in Acts shows a group with a plan. Unlike John's story from earlier in the service, we no longer see disciples hiding, wondering, still shaking from the newness of it all. In Acts 4, the disciples have taken a deep breath, shaken off the shock, and begun to move forward. They've asked: How will we continue this life together? How will we organize ourselves in the Jesus Way?

With one heart and one soul, they agreed they would share all things in common. In their community, there would be no unmet needs. They would practice true equity and create the world among them that they wanted to see out there for everyone else. They knew they couldn't organize themselves within the community of faith in the same way the world around them organized. Their heart and soul needed to be reflected in the life they shared from the very beginning. This is a radical choice to hold all things in common together—to choose for no one to be rich and no one to be poor. To guarantee that no one in their community would be needy. To organize themselves according to the Jesus Way, to position themselves as resurrection people, they began by talking about economic justice within their circle. We cannot be of one heart and soul, they agreed, unless everyone's needs are met. That was their starting place.

To hold all things in common presumes your life matters as much as mine even if you have less stuff, fewer resources, no home ownership, and a life story with a lot of baggage. To hold all things in common presumes God will lead us overtly; this is a bold move of trust that God is near, active, present, continually going ahead and leading from our midst. To hold all things in common means the *stuff* we cling to in this life becomes insignificant when the common center of Christ becomes what is holding us together.

We aren't making a move quite this radical. I suppose quite a number of us could manage to live here in this building, if we wanted to start selling off houses and making bedrooms in towers and attics and Sunday School classrooms instead. We could attempt a gigantic commune here in this spot. But that's not the essence of the snapshot we've been given of this early church. The essence of who they were had to do with the heart and soul they shared. Their essence was their common center, their

common starting point. In spending time together, sharing meals, being in prayer, laughing and playing and working together, they cultivated a unity that became the foundation of their life together. Their priorities and their work were an outpouring of that heart and soul. Their common center reframed everything else about life—allowing them to move from a scarcity mindset of needing more and never having enough to an abundance mindset that teaches not only do we *have* enough, we *are* enough. You are enough exactly as you are. You are blessed, seen, loved, cared for. And because everyone's basic needs were met, they could relax fully into the blessing of those words. You cannot feel deeply blessed, seen, loved, and cared for if your basic needs are not being met. And it is not enough to meet someone's basic needs without also speaking to them of their belovedness. The early church knew the interplay between these realities.

The heart, soul, and common center is really what we are after here. And that only comes from really sharing life together. Marching for justice in Memphis, working for ending mass incarceration with allies, collecting money for the fellowship fund to help our neighbors when January's cold snap financially crushed many households, raising \$3000 to sponsor children in need of a documented path to residency in the United States, even our regular offering collection to support the programs and operations of this church, all of these are ways we are shaping a world as we believe it can be and should be. But we only know what that world can and should be because we are cultivating a common heart and soul. It's both. It's that inward and outward flow.

And so maybe what I'm feeling today is not so much that I'm tired. Not so much that my body is creaky from the week's events. Maybe what I'm feeling is the reminder that we are human beings not human doings. We cannot serve and act and rise up and do without also resting, sitting, playing, and being. The two ways of moving fuel each other and draw us more fully onto the Jesus Way.

Let's give ourselves to this resurrection life together—generous in sharing from our abundance, quick to spend time together, committed to praying for one another and with one another, eager to share a meal and sit around kitchen tables with each other, passionate in reading and studying and sparking new ideas in each other, cultivating community and friendship, ease of being in ourselves and with each other. And the necessary consequence of that shared heart and soul will compel us to shape a world as we know it can be, we know it should be, because we have experienced it first here together. Amen.