

Greetings. My name is Amanda White. I am the Ministry Director at The Lutheran Center on UNL's city campus in Lincoln, and I am a MDiv student at Luther Seminary.

Today's reading comes from Acts, Chapter 4, verses 32 through 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.

When I taught English to middle school and high school students I would emphasize testing skills in my lessons. I would offer little tidbits like "watch for words like always or never". These words - in the testing world, at least - denote generalities that are often unlikely. In fact, those words are used to signify (at least most of the time) that an answer is incorrect. So, today's reading had me instinctively skeptical. When is it ever true that "everyone" was in agreement?

And, the chance to distinguish ourselves can be quite fun. I, for one, like distinction. I am a 4 on the Enneagram. For those not familiar with this leadership and personality test, the 4 is the "Individual." Each number category possess strengths and weaknesses. So, as a 4 I want to be unique, but I am a person who also doesn't want to draw too much attention. But, one thing is for sure: I want to make my own decisions about how I spend my time, money, and skills. I prefer to avoid situations where the group will decide what to do with the collective set of resources. Perhaps I don't believe that unity devised by humans is really possible.

In our reading from Acts, the believers - all of them - held everything in common. In my mind they live out in the rolling hills of some Western state where the sun shines, and

there's just enough rain to grow rows upon rows of spectacular fruit trees. Perhaps they wash each other's clothes. I bet they also rise every morning together to stretch and pray. And, as I am describing this, I can hear my own disdain. Okay, to be honest, there is a small part of me that just wants to leap into this scenario. It sounds freeing. It is different from the life I am used to living. They have eliminated the needless items, and they have even gone so far as to sell all (ohh, there's that word again). All their possessions.

Nope. I am not headed toward a sermon on stewardship. Although stewardship is one interpretation that can be pulled from the text, but the words, "all" and "everything" and "no one" jumped at me when I was reading the scripture. Questions that came to mind were: *How is it possible for these people to live like this? Who or what causes it?*

Last week was Holy Week. We heard once again the story of Jesus' path to the cross. He cried out to God with desperate cries in the garden; he was betrayed by a close friend; he was tried in a court influenced strongly by the crowd; and finally, killed brutally on a wooden cross. And, then on Easter Sunday we celebrated the triumphant resurrection of Jesus.

He then visits the disciples, blowing on them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus empowers them through the Spirit to serve their neighbors and to share the Good News.

In today's reading, it says, "With great power the apostles gave their testimony....and great grace was upon them all." That power is the Holy Spirit. It is not human ingenuity or talent. It is not the result of a course of study at a top-notch college. The Spirit's power is not earned by the apostles because they are worthy.

The Holy Spirit is given as a gift so they might be empowered to do what they are otherwise completely unable to do.

The Holy Spirit has made it so these believers are of “one heart and soul.” One heart and soul. That’s the goal, isn’t it? I’d hazard a guess that most people deeply desire to be of “one heart and soul” with at least one human being. We crave being known deeply. We crave being loved deeply. And, this isn’t some vague one-ness; it is not mob mentality. This is unity in the heart and soul of Christ. They share togetherness in the One who has the capacity to truly unite.

The dangerous part of hearing or reading a story like this is that we often want to apply a method, or manufacture a product, that will allow us to re-create these idyllic scenarios. We tell ourselves that if we do such and such, or if we apply our best skills and effort, we, too, can be united and everyone will be happy.

But, that unity is a human unity. What is happening in this reading is a Holy Spirit unity. And, that unity is messy. Not easily tracked on a spreadsheet.

Throughout Acts, the new church’s sense of security and unity ebbs and flows. What the church needed, Paul often reminded them, was a shaking up. Even this group of believers who were of “one heart and soul” and were sharing all they had in common, would eventually need changes.

For a time the Spirit draws the community together to bring something into being. And, next it is expanding that community. Expanding means change. Change means rules need adjusted and expectations need realigned.

Are you open to that type of Spirit unity?

I have been at The Lutheran Center for almost 10 years now. I have gotten into a rhythm in my work. Learning that rhythm - if I am being honest - probably took almost 3 to 4 years. And, then just as that rhythm was memorized - I knew every line of the melody with my eyes closed - the Holy Spirit started shaking things up.

I could blame the ingenuity and vision of my partner in ministry, my husband, Pastor Adam. He has a knack for big ideas and a vision that allows him to put really complex situations into place. Like a master puzzle that has 20,000 pieces.

I am the person who is in the details. I have sorted out the corners and the edges of the puzzle. I am taking my time doing inventory on every single piece. I remind him when he forgets to start a Zoom meeting.

This is the best way to describe how we complement each other's skills and talents. But about 6 years ago, the Holy Spirit started to move the Lutheran Center leadership, the students, and the staff in a specific direction.

We began to dream of replacing the building. The dream was not new. Others before us had begun the investigation into the process. I suppose the timing was right. The people were the right people at the right moment. And, that's how I know it was the Holy Spirit drawing us together to a common heart and soul.

And, the Spirit brought us Bruce, a construction project manager professor who knew all the in's and out's of building code and construction. And the Spirit brought us Kevin, a faithful Catholic architect who specialized in church design who was able to skillfully pivot the design long after we had a plan. And so many others. We all had different ideas of what the building ought to look like and what it ought to provide. This was a project where only the Spirit's type of unity could bring together people of different backgrounds and talents and preferences to be of "one mind."

We didn't live together in one home and sell our possessions as the first church did, but we did have a lot of meetings, conversations, and decisions that were only made possible because of the unity of the Spirit.

Somehow, through a very long process filled with delayed deadlines due to circumstances we had no control of and a pandemic that we thought was sure to bring

the process to a screeching halt, the Spirit kept moving and drawing us together into a shared vision and a shared hope.

It was scary. At times, I felt despair. For those who've gone through a big project like this - especially one that spans years of planning, effort, fundraising, and time, you likely know that feeling of both uncontainable hope and also gut-wrenching fear.

When I look back now on the process - that we are still finishing up- I can only testify that the Holy Spirit drew us together into herself as “[a] whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.”

Take a moment. Think of a time that the Spirit was moving in your life or in your community or maybe in your family. Maybe it wasn't a building project, but that event or goal you were a part of was a long process that brought people together. When you look back you may have thought, *How was that possible?* Could that have been the Holy Spirit drawing people together into the unity of Christ's body to do a new thing?

The Spirit does not call us to complacency. The Christian life is about love and hope and forgiveness and so much more, but it also includes change. We are not given the gifts of the Spirit so we might learn how to do one thing, succeed, and then call it quits. The Spirit calls us to a divine unity in which we are called to serve and to love. But, that calling comes with an openness to listening and responding. When the Holy Spirit moves, incredible things happen.

The Spirit moved the first church toward being of “one heart and soul” that led them to sell everything they owned so that no one would be in need. Not one person was hungry. Not one person was left without somewhere to sleep. Not one person was left without friendship.

And, that same Spirit moves us today. The movings and stirrings of the Spirit are way more creative, inventive, and full than anything we can devise ourselves. The Church is drawn into the messiness of the Spirit's unity. Thanks be to God. Amen.