

Sermon: From Each
Text: Acts 4:32-35
Date: June 25, 2017
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul . . .

Acts 4:32

I recently heard a story about a woman who finally found a church she liked. This came as a pleasant surprise to her because she had a rather unusual approach to faith.

By her own account, she said the sentences she uses to describe her faith, the sentences she uses to talk about God, most of these sentences end in question marks, rather than in periods.

Evidently in her experience a church that shares this approach to faith, a church that privileges inquiry over certainty, is hard to find.

Unfortunately, this lady lives in another state, or I would have invited her to come join us for worship here at Warren Wilson Presbyterian. Because I think this description of her ideal church is a reasonably accurate depiction of our approach to faith, too.

We privilege inquiry over certainty. We ask probing questions rather than posit infallible answers.

We take this approach for good reason. Exploring questions is more engaging than declaring answers. It's also more faithful. I mean the whole point of faith is that you can't know for certain. Right? (See what I did there!)

So this approach to faith suits us as a congregation. But I was reminded this week that it's not without risks.

On Monday morning, I logged on to the NY Times to check the news while I ate breakfast. I noticed that the number one most emailed article that day was from a section of the paper called The Stone.

This was intriguing because the The Stone is not devoted to the news, or to editorial comment. Rather it's a forum for public conversation around philosophical questions.

Sometimes these questions have an overtly theological bent. That was the case with this particular piece. I clicked on the article and read the opening sentence:

Is your God dead? it began. I shook my head and did a double take. Yup, that's what it said. *Is your God dead?* And then it got worse.

I don't mean the God of the philosophers or the scholars, but [rather]. . . the "God of Abraham, [the] God of Isaac, [the] God of Jacob." With no disrespect, I hope the question comes as a jolt.

It did. The writer, George Yancy, is a professor of philosophy at Emory University in Atlanta. He went on to stipulate that he was himself "a hopeful monotheist. "I might even be called a Christian," he wrote, "only I continue, every day of my life, to fail."

So, is your God dead? he repeated.

Perhaps by remaining in your "holy" places, you have sacrificed looking in the face of your neighbor on the street.

You know the one: the one who smells "bad" because she hasn't bathed in days; the one who carries her home on her body; the one who begs. Surely you've seen that "unholy" face. I've seen you suddenly look away, making sure not to make eye contact with the "unclean."

My hands are also dirty, he confesses. I'm guilty of missing the opportunity to recognize something of the divine in the face of the Other on the street. I'm pretty sure I looked away when I caught a glimpse of a homeless man approaching the other day. How different is this, he asked, finally, from those who walked by the beaten and abandoned man in the parable of the good Samaritan?

It's a hard question but a fair one. If loving our neighbor is at the core of the Christian faith, if, according to the founder of this faith, loving our neighbor is the very expression of our faith, then outside the doors of this or any other church, out on street level, where is the evidence for this God we claim to worship?

Professor Yancy's article would have been hot to handle on a good day. But the timing of it had a blistering effect on me.

As I'm sure every person here knows, later this week the United States Senate will vote on a proposed bill that, in all likelihood, will strip health insurance from more than twenty million of our most vulnerable neighbors.

Under this plan, the list of those who will lose coverage includes, among others, poor children, pregnant women, the disabled, the elderly, and people of all ages, including children, with pre-existing conditions.

If you are a person who cares about small government -- and that certainly is your right -- the upside of this bill is that it will reduce the federal budget by nearly one trillion dollars.

Those savings will be passed on to the wealthiest two percent of Americans, that is, to millionaires and billionaires who needs this money the least.

I make this point here, during worship, in a sermon, not to make a partisan point but a theological one.

This proposed roll back in health care and the subsequent transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich is supported by a strong majority of Evangelical Christians.

This is surprising because if you are someone who cares about justice and fairness, if you are someone who reads the Bible closely, as we do, this proposed bill is morally bankrupt.

To Professor Yancy's point, we know that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses, the God of the prophets, the God embodied in and revealed to the world by Jesus Christ -- we know that this God favors the poor and the oppressed. This God liberates the enslaved and heals the he sick. This God sides with the broken and the lonely.

Parts of the Bible can be a little murky but it is crystal clear on this point: the God of scripture is on the side of the poor, and privileges people on the margins.

So the question is not whether the new God that has suddenly arisen here in America is dead because, as measured against scripture, this God is a fabrication. The real question is what in heaven's name has the American church created in "his" place?

For those of us who believe in the old God, the God of the Old and New Testaments, the question remains: is there any evidence of this God in the world, on street level?

As for myself, I'm happy to report that on Wednesday I went to the worship and music conference at Montreat and I got my answer.

Where is the evidence for the God of Abraham, of Moses, of Jesus? The God who appears in burning bushes and bursts out of tombs?

It was right there, in the singing, in the reverence, in the devotion evident on the faces of everyone who has sharing in the worship of that God.

Now admittedly worship is a human experience. It is a response to the perception of God's presence. It is not God "him-" or "herself." The reverence and devotion we all felt that day were but signs that indicate God's presence, in the same way that smoke indicates fire.

But starting at 11:00 that sacred smoke was thick in Anderson Auditorium. And while I saw no burning bushes, noticed no tongues of flame flickering above anyone's head as on the day of Pentecost, every one in that room could feel the heat from the fire of God's presence.

And then John Wurster, Pastor of St. Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston, TX, and the preacher for the conference, took the pulpit. To my amazement, and even to my dismay, he picked up where Professor Yancy had left off.

When a child dies, or a spouse dies, where is God? he asked. This was becoming a theme, I thought.

Then he told a poignant story about a man who lost his wife of (as I recall) 57 years that showed how God is right there, in the tears of those whose hearts are broken by grief or loss.

It was a powerful and moving sermon. But in keeping with Prof. Yancy's theme, it reminded me of another hard question, one that a classmate of mine in seminary once asked.

Over dinner one night in the cafeteria we were talking about the Holocaust --- because, well, that's apparently what seminary students do.

Where was God then? my friend asked. *Where was God in Auschwitz and Buchenwald?*

Well, I said, *surely God was in the camps.*

My friend considered my reply for a moment. Then he asked me a question that hit me so hard it left me feeling a little stunned, like I'd been whacked upside the head with a board.

So? he said. *God was in the camps. What difference did that make?*

If your approach to faith favors sentences that end in question marks, these are some of the hardest questions you'll ever have to think about.

But as a church that meets on a college campus, I believe we have to ask them, at least from time to time, if we're going to have any credibility with our neighbors.

Even more than that I think we have to ask them, at least from time to time, if we aspire to be faithful Christians and responsible human beings.

God was in the camps.

Science would ask, *What evidence do you have to support this claim? What measurable difference does that make?*

For two thousand years, the church has stood above these questions. We have practiced a faith that is one hundred percent exempt for the standards of proof that apply in other areas of human thought, endeavor and achievement.

This has allowed us to develop theories about God, and to make claims about God, that may not or may not be true, that may or may not reflect the actual nature of God.

When a child dies, or a loved one dies, or our heart breaks and our world goes dark, it certainly is comforting to think that God weeps with us, that God is there with us, sharing in our tears.

Most of us believe this and it may very well be true that God is weeping with us.

But in these moments of grief or heartbreak, what if the answer is simpler than that, and more immediate. And what if it is actually verifiable?

I think our text for today does in fact provide us with answers to these questions. Let me read it again:

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. 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, for 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.

You'll remember that the title of our summer sermon series is *Utopia for Realists*, inspired by the book by the Dutch historian, Rutger Bregman. This passage could serve as the headliner for the whole series because this is among the most utopian passage in the entire Bible.

I would say that it's almost impossible to convey how revolutionary this program was except that we've seen how revolutionary it is.

In 1875, Karl Marx published the following formulation for how to achieve utopia:

From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.

For Russian peasants living under the thumb of Czarist rule, this idea was so powerful it inspired a revolution. Ultimately, the revolution did not bring about the promised utopia for any number of different and very complex reasons.

But it is no exaggeration to say that the idea itself changed the world.

Two thousand years before Marx outlined his utopian formula, this same idea appears in chapter four of the Acts of the Apostles:

There 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 and laid them at the feet of the apostles.

Why isn't this story told more often? Why doesn't this communal practice of the early church, get more attention?

Maybe because it is too utopian. And maybe because it does, in fact, evoke Karl Marx's revolutionary formula and, frankly, that makes us Americans deeply uneasy.

I don't have specifics around this but my hunch is that this communal ethic did not survive long even in the early church.

And it's certainly safe to say that here in modern America, with our devotion to consumer culture, our veneration of private property, our reverence for rugged individualism, a proposal that elevates communal ownership of property would be voted down by every governing body in every church from Maine to California.

But if we only focus on the material dimension of this practice, only on the sharing of property, we may miss the most powerful aspect of this communal ethic.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul. That's what they shared in common -- one heart and soul -- and we can share those things in common, too.

Christianity is an embodied faith. Christ became incarnate in human flesh. And when he departed the world's stage the church itself stepped into that role. In effect, and in practice, his followers now had the privilege and responsibility of incarnating his ongoing presence in the world.

That is in part why I chose the book of Acts for our summer sermon series. Because these stories are less about God and more about this new incarnational community.

They are about how this tiny band of misfits rose to the towering challenge of embodying the love of God, and making manifest the presence of God in the world, on street level, after Christ left them.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.

In an incarnational faith like ours, that heart beats in one collective chest. That soul animates one collective body.

Where is God when your heart hurts so much you fear it may actually stop beating? In the body and, yes, in the tears of the person whose arms are holding you in a steady embrace, and whose words are praying for you even when you cannot pray for yourself.

Where is God when you are lost and alone, and you fear you may not make it through this dark night? In the person who comes to find you and who takes your hand and walks with you through the darkness until you are safely back home, bathing in the light of love and hope.

Where is God when that lady who smells “bad” because she hasn’t bathed in days; the one who carries her home on her body and who is now about to lose her right and her ability to see a doctor?

In the thousands of people who are willing to rise up to say No to this bankrupt proposal, who are willing to speak truth to power, to declare, in public, that you do not do this in my name nor in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God revealed to us in Jesus, the God whom we love, worship and serve.

Is our God dead?

No, our God is not dead. And with great power and confidence we will testify to the truth of this claim. And the love we embody, the love we share with and show to the world outside these doors, on street level, is all the proof we need.