

John 20:19-31, Acts 4:31-35
Fellowship of the Spirit
Sunday April 11th, 2021

A story is told of Little Johnny who stayed home sick from church one Sunday. It was Palm Sunday and when his brothers and sisters got home from church, they excitedly told Johnny about all the palm branches, and singing and that Jesus had walked down the center aisle with a real live donkey. At that Little Johnny's face fell. His sister asked him, "what's wrong Johnny?"

He replied, "Wouldn't you know it, the one Sunday I don't show up, Jesus does!"

In our scripture story today, Thomas had the same problem. He was missing from the upper room on the evening of Easter when Jesus showed.

Now I believe that Thomas gets shortchanged in that he is traditionally called "Doubting Thomas". Because, when you look at what happened, he didn't ask for, or receive anything different from what the other disciples already received from Jesus.

Thomas said, **"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."** His problem wasn't his lack of belief. His problem was his absence from the fellowship. Here it was Sunday. The Body of Christ, the Church was gathered together, and Thomas was missing. He wasn't there to receive what would have certainly confirmed his faith.

This Lectionary scripture from John is preached on the Sunday after Easter, which is traditionally called "Low Sunday". This Sunday's attendance is usually vastly lower compared with Easter. I think we have been stuck in "low Sunday" for the last year. Anyway, the warning of Thomas' mistake is then missed by the people who would most benefit from it, the people "missing from worship."

When we gather for worship and fellowship, and other events, Jesus always shows up. Those who are missing, miss out on building up their faith. This is why one of our church membership vows we make is to be “present”. It is in our being present that we receive what we need to build our faith.

To be present in worship and fellowship is the most practical advice of this scripture.

Since Thomas was missing, he didn't get the blessing of Jesus presence and peace. He didn't get the blessing and gift of the Holy Spirit until the next week. Nor did he get the blessing of the authority to forgive sins.

You have the authority to forgive someone who sins against you. You have the authority to pronounce God's forgiveness on someone who comes to you seeking forgiveness in Jesus' name. Every week, and even every day when we pray, “Forgive us our trespasses/sins as we forgive those who trespass/sin against us.” We are forgiving sin and granting others the same.

Jesus promised that wherever 2 or 3 are gathered together in his name he would be among them. In our John reading there are two examples of this, the first was on Easter Evening, and the 2nd one week later. Today Jesus is present here with us through the Holy Spirit.

Evangelism, introducing others to Jesus Christ so that they “believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son and that through believing they have life in his name.” This introduction is a team sport. We as a congregation are as good as our individual players. We invite people to the Body of Christ, and in our case the part of the body we inhabit is Vista Church.

In this era of the Virus, inviting to in-person worship has been hard to do. Online much easier, but still our members invited and still do. Last Sunday I invited people to take the lilies that were here and by the grace of God all are gone. We have members who are deathly allergic to lilies which is why they attended the Sunrise service outdoors sans lilies rather than the 10am indoor service.

Well one of our members took 2 of those lilies and gave both away. One went to a new neighbor she heard was a Methodist in order to invite them to attend here. That is how evangelism works as a team sport. The main event is here each Sunday to which our teammates invite others to join them.

The era of the Virus is coming to an end in the next several months. Our DS said, **“There is a time to wait and a time to act, and now is a time for action.”** We must prepare to begin opening up and show-up ourselves as soon as you feel comfortable.

1 Cor. 12:7 says, **“To each is given a gift of the Spirit for the good of all.”** Each of us has a gift to bring to this fellowship of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit draws us together into a body. We each are members of this body. And we are more powerful, loving and creative when together rather than apart.



“Mathematician Søren Eilers was intrigued by a LEGO-related math problem. Let's say you have six "standard LEGO bricks" (the rectangular 4x2 bricks seen on the screen). If you fit them together, how many possible structures can you make?” Answer, **“915,103,765 combinations.”**

Imagine the immense creative possibilities when we are gathered together as a church and each of us practices our spiritual gifts?

The Holy Spirit creates the church. It draws individuals together to form congregations. I affirm the teaching of Acts 2:17 That **“the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh”** in the sense that it is the Spirit drawing us together to be the Body of Christ. It is the Spirit in another person that makes them a Person of Peace to us who recognize and follow the Holy Spirit within us.

In Acts 4:32 we have a snapshot of the church that the Holy Spirit called together in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus' ascension into heaven. "The community of believers was one in heart and mind. None of them would say, "This is mine!" about any of their possessions, but held everything in common."

And the reason why is from verse 33, "The apostles continued to bear powerful witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an abundance of grace was at work among them."

Part of this share and share alike was for the spread of the Gospel.

Now through much of the last century this snapshot of the early church in Jerusalem has been used to justify or encourage Christians to support Socialism and even Communism. I want to be perfectly clear. That is an absolutely wrong use of this scripture!

This experiment in communal living occurred only within a smaller group who were of "one heart and mind". Because of the work and presence of the Holy Spirit. They loved each other like a family and most early churches existed as small house churches of extended family members. It is usually easier to take care of family who you know and love as family.

It was the Holy Spirit, their experience of the risen Lord, and love that drew them together for mutual support in a fellowship.

They were not drawn together by any set of laws, or government, or coercion, or force. It was not a Socialist or Marxist ideology that brought them together in mutual support but their love of and belief in Jesus Christ who was risen from the dead, who they thought was soon coming back.

It is easier to part with your stuff when you think you won't need it much longer. The other day my son was over, and I gave him a part of my coin collection which I hold dear. His first words to me weren't "Thank you." But "Are you dying?" These early Christians thought the "The End" was near so it was easier to part with possessions.

This experiment in communal living where they sold houses and land and held everything in common was only short lived. No other mention is made of this type of living in the scriptures as a society wide effort.

In fact, for this experiment in communal living to continue it had to have support from congregations outside of Jerusalem. That is why St. Paul took up his famous offering that he delivered to “the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem.” Rom. 15:26

Indeed, as it is often said, “Socialism works until you run out of other people’s money.” Just ask the citizens of Venezuela. In my experience the state eventually has to resort to coercion and force to collect funds and ensure compliance to the state. That is why socialism and communism together murdered about 100 million people in the last century.

In the end socialism/communism pulls everybody down except the ruling class. That is why leaders of some countries support its introduction, because they assume they will end up on the top. It heightens poverty not alleviating it. As one of my refuge friends from Cuba said, “In Cuba everyone has a job, but no one works.” This is why we recently sent money for food for our Christian brothers and sisters in the Nazarene church in Cuba. They are impoverished by the state.

I know I have used this definition of what a religion is many times but once more. **A religion is what gives you ultimate meaning.** A god is what gives your life ultimate meaning.

Socialism/communism for many it is their religion. The state gives them ultimate meaning and their support for the state is their religion and their god. This is why socialism/communism have always been at odds with Christianity.

We are two different religions worshipping two different gods. These “isms” are diametrically opposed to Christianity because Christians preach about the worth of the individual and the freedom of the individual.

We stand on **2 Cor. 3:17 “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”** We have never willingly subjugated

ourselves to state religions from the time of the Caesars who claimed to be god.

After “He is Risen”. The very first confession of faith of Christians is “Jesus is Lord!” To state sponsored religions that is an extremely hostile statement that has cost millions of Christians their lives, property and freedom to this very day.

When we claim Jesus is Lord we are saying “Caesar is not Lord, the Presidents for life of China, or North Korea, or Russia, or any other nation are not our Lord.” “Jesus is Lord” is an extremely political statement that flies in the face of all dictators and secular political ideologies and religions.

As I write this there are Christians in China in “reeducation camps” being starved and tortured to renounce their faith. The Chinese Communist Party is removing crosses from churches and forcing pastors to extol from their pulpits the benefits of their supreme leader.

My friends beware and hold onto your freedoms here.

Acts 4 is indeed a call for Christians to be one of heart and mind. Not necessarily goods but to help each other when and how we can. This is why we as Vista Church sponsor things like:

1. Congregational care
2. Stephen Ministry
3. Callers to our congregation during Covid
4. Prayer chain
5. Good Samaritan funds for members and others in crisis.
6. We meet every Sunday for worship and classes. We have fellowship events and programs like Dinner for 6 which is on pause.

The challenge now is how can we safely have “in person fellowship” called together by the Spirit as this pandemic begins to wane. What do we need to do to encourage us being one in heart and mind and love? What do we need to bring back to life, to resurrect in this Easter season to make our fellowship, outreach, and mission better? And maybe, just maybe what do we need to leave buried in the tomb?

I encourage you at the very least, when you can, as soon as you safely feel you can to join in person in worship and those who can't, stay with us online. Help us grow our faith together. In fact, next Sunday we will address "Faith and Hope."

What is God saying to you and what are you going to do?