I’m not much of a piano player. I took lessons as a kid, but most of it didn’t stick. I know a few things: the theme song *The Young and the Restless, Greensleeves*, some little circus melody my kids like me to play. And, of course, I can play *Heart and Soul*.

Do you know *Heart and Soul*? Anybody want to come up and play it one time through with me?

My daughter, Isabel, is learning to play the piano now. So a couple months ago, I taught her *Heart and Soul*. It took some time to get it down, but I’ll not soon forget the look on her face when we finally nailed it for the first time. She hit her notes right on time and I hit my notes right on time and it actually sounded like beautiful music. And when that happened, she looked at me with a great, big smile and said, “Dad, that was cool. Let’s do *that* again.”

I think we played *Heart and Soul* 39 times that afternoon. I hate that song now.

Beautiful music is made – and we see this time and time again right up here on Sunday mornings – when people playing their different parts learn to work together with one another.

The first line of the scripture from Acts this morning tells us, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.”

1  It hasn’t always been this way, as many of you know, but the church, at this particular time and this particular place, was making beautiful music together. The Spirit of God had filled them, and empowered them, and transformed them, and united them, and they were one in heart and soul.

Have you ever been a part of a church where this happened, where the whole community was unified in its life, and faith, and purpose, and love – been a part of a community where after people have been together, they say, “That was cool. Let’s do *that* again.”

The church in Acts 4 was that sort of community. Luke tells us here, in fact, that everything they had was “held in common.” Another translation says they “shared everything they had.”

Do you realize that one of the greatest gifts you can give to this church is to share yourself completely with this community, to immerse yourself fully and openly and freely, heart and soul? Some of you know that. Some of you do that.

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1 Italics mine.
2 On the flip side, have you ever been a part of a church where this was not the case – where there was disunity, and division, and mistrust, and confusion? Where when people get together they often leave saying, “That was not cool. Let’s *not* do that again”?
3 New International Version.
4 Lloyd Ogilvie was helpful along these lines in *The Communicator’s Commentary: Acts*, (Waco, Texas: Word Publishers, c. 1983), p. 111-114. He comments, “To be of one mind is to have the mind of Christ in common – not our ideas about Him, or even our carefully polished theology, but our heart and soul. That means our inner lives – our thinking, willing, feeling. We can be supportive of each other only if we know what’s going on inside each other. And the handle of the door to our lives is on the inside. We must want to be known.”
The reality is, however, that there are some people in this congregation, just like in every congregation, who have not, to this point, done this. For one reason or another, some of you, though you continue to come, you also continue to stay on the fringes, week after week, sometimes year after year.

Some of you come to worship quite often. And maybe you know a few people here and there. But for the most part, you remain on the edges of this community, never getting involved in the work and ministry of the church, never really getting to know other people here beyond some casual conversations over coffee in the courtyard. You’re here, but you’re not here heart and soul.

Others of you are involved, even heavily involved, in the work of this church. You serve on teams, work on projects, participate in classes. And yet, like the first group, you also remain on the fringes. For though lots of people here know you, there are very few people here who really know you, heart and soul, know your doubts, and your fears, and your struggles, and your sins, and your dreams, and your pain.

Let me say this to those of you, for whatever reason, remain on the fringes. Know that, while you are certainly welcome to remain there (nobody is going to kick you out and nobody is going to drag you into the center), you need to know that if you stay on the fringes, in the end this community will be of very little benefit to you. And, more tragically, you will, in the end, be of very little benefit to this community.

Imagine standing in the corner of a great banquet hall while a marvelous feast is taking place. And there is this table filled with delicious food and drink, and people around the table are all taking part and eating and drinking their fill. But you remain on the edges. You can smell the food. You can almost taste the wine. Maybe you even sample here and there from the appetizer platters. Yet you never pull up a chair at the table and dig in with the rest of us.

The Christian life is designed to be lived together. It cannot, in fact, be lived otherwise. It’s just too hard, too lonely, too discouraging, on your own. And the description we read in Acts 4 of these believers who were one in heart and soul, and shared all they had, is supposed to be a description of every Christian community. And some of you here, I know, are experiencing that in this community. You are giving yourself, fully, to one another. You are bringing all that you have – the good, the bad and the ugly – into this community. And you are better for it. And we are better for it.

From time to time I do funerals for families who are not part of this church or any other church. And I sit with these folks who are going through this unspeakable grief and pain. And though they have friends and family, they do not have a community of faith surrounding them. And, to be honest, I wonder to myself how in the world they are going to make it through.

By contrast, I have such an overwhelming confidence that if and when some great hardship strikes my life – if I were to lose my wife or one of my children, for instance – I have such a deep confidence that there is this heart and soul community around me here which would share my grief and pain, and my anger and doubts, and my hope. Some of you, I know, have that same confidence. Some of you have experienced it.

Frankly, I don’t know how people follow Jesus, how they hold on to hope and joy, apart from such a community, or even on the fringes of such a community. I just don’t know how they make it through.

And so, if you are somebody who is on the fringes, and what I am describing today is something you realize you want, know there is place at the banquet table for you. And there is one thing you could do immediately to take your seat at the feast. You can join a Life Group, commit yourself to a small group of other believers and meet weekly, and pray together, and share your self with those others, and experience what these folks in Acts experienced, and what many of us here experience every week.

If that’s something you want to do, get a hold of one of us as pastors and we’ll help you find your way into one of these groups.

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Getting back to the passage, one of the very tangible ways that this Acts 4 community experienced this unity of heart and soul was in the way they began to share their material possessions with one another. Again, Luke tells us, “No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...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 apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” Luke even gives us one example, of a man named Barnabas, who apparently sold a field and gave all the proceeds to the church.

Now, while there are many ways that we share ourselves, heart and soul, with one another in the church, one of those ways, which Luke highlights here, is by sharing our material possessions so that everybody’s material needs are met.

I believe that Luke uses this example because he understands that perhaps the best way to tell if a community is truly united is to look at how they handle their possessions. If a church, in other words, talks a good talk about being united in following Jesus, but doesn’t freely share with one another, particularly when people are in need, it’s probably just talk.

Remember at one point, while teaching his disciples about money and material things, Jesus himself said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Said another way, if a person has shared his treasure with the community, then his heart and his soul are with that community. And by contrast, if a person has not shared his treasure with the community, his heart and soul are not with that community.

The church in Acts 4, at least for a time, had given their hearts to the community.

Now understand what was happening in the church in Acts.

First, we are not told that these people sold everything. In fact, it seems clear that they did not. This was not communism. Personal property was still allowed. But the text does suggest that as people had needs, sacrifices were made to meet those needs. Sometimes, great sacrifices.

Second, this sharing was voluntary. People were not forced to give. All through scripture, in fact, it’s clear that forced giving is not pleasing to God. II Corinthians 9:7, for instance, says, “Each person should give what he has decided to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” There was a joyful willingness, then, in the generosity of the people of the early church.

What seems, then, to have taken place in this community – and this is truly extraordinary – is that this community had gotten to a place where it no longer believed two of the greatest lies most everyone else believes in this world.

First, they no longer believed the lie that says, “Everything you possess belongs to you.” Instead, they rightly understood that their fields, and their homes, and their sacks of silver and gold belonged, ultimately, to God.

As a father, few things grieve me more than when my children selfishly cling to the things I have given to them, refusing to share with one another. You give one of your kids a video game, for instance. You go to the store and pick it out. You pay for it. Technically, it still belongs to you and you could take it back at any point. And yet your kid refuses to share that video game with your other children. Tell me ours isn’t the only family where this happens!

This Acts community had come to a place where they understood that they were all brothers and sisters in Christ, and that everything they possessed had been given to them by their Father in heaven, belonged to their Father in heaven, and would, in fact, need to be one day returned to their Father in heaven. And so, understanding this, they could do little else but hold these things in common and make certain that the needs of every one in the family were taken care of. The Father would have it no other way.

The second lie which they no longer believed said this: “A person’s security is ultimately in the material things they possess.” They didn’t believe that lie either. Instead, they rightly understood that their security was not in their stuff, but in their Savior.

I find it interesting that right in the middle of Luke’s description of their communal sharing here we find verse 33, which at first seems out of place. He writes, “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

Yet it makes perfect sense. Because this lie, that our security, that our ultimate well-being, depends upon material things is so pervasive, it makes sense that the leaders of that church would constantly remind the people that the one they followed, Jesus Christ, had conquered sin and death, and that there was nothing in the world which could take away the security they had in Christ. Everything else would ultimately fail them. All of the world’s riches weren’t enough. But Jesus Christ was the rock, the foundation, which would endure.⁶

Think about this with me for a moment. What would it be like in our church if all of us, or even most of us, got to the place where we also rejected these two lies?

What would be different about this community if every one of us, or even most of us, truly realized that everything we possess – our homes, our cars, our savings accounts, our stuff – that all of it belonged to our Father in heaven and that we were to use these things the way he wanted them used?

What would it be like if every one of us, or even most of us, realized that there is no true security in material things? That no matter how much insurance you have, or how diverse your portfolio, or how healthy our families are, or how secure our jobs may seem, that in an instant – an instant! – it all could be stripped away? And that the only real security we have is in the grace and the promises of Jesus Christ, which can never, ever be stripped away from us.⁷

Can you imagine? What would it be like if this community, unlike most of the world around us, dismissed those two lies for what they really are? What kind of freedom do you think we would experience? What kind of joy would we discover? What kind of witness might we be to the rest of the world?

Imagine a young couple in our church who, frankly, made some bad decisions with some credit cards and eventually found themselves trapped under a mountain of debt. And they get some financial counseling, and get their priorities squared away, but their still suffocating under this debt because of their past mistakes.

Imagine a middle-aged man in our church who has been providing for his family for many years but suddenly is laid off from his job. And his savings sustains him for a time, but eventually it runs out. And he and his family begin to really struggle to make ends meet.

Imagine a family in our church who has a little girl who gets really, really sick. And though insurance helps with some of the cost, after everything is said and done, there are thousands and thousands of unpaid medical bills and this family has no way to pay them.

Imagine a single mom in our church who works her tail off, day in and day out, but at the end of the day, she never has more than enough to just barely pay the rent and put food on the table. And this goes on month after month after month with no end in sight.

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⁶ This is the way Jesus frames it for us in Matthew 7:24-27. Also see the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21, a great example where all the riches in the world can’t provide security in the end.

⁷ As much as any passage in scripture, Romans 8 passionately reminds us that there is nothing at all that can ever come between us and the love of God for us.
Imagine an older woman in our church who has outlived her husband for many, many years, longer than either of them expected her to live. And now the funds are slowly, but surely running out. And there is no family that can make up the difference.

You can open your eyes again.

Before you’re through imagining, can you imagine that we might become the sort of community that could meet these sorts of needs when they arose in our midst?

I know, I know – we’d have to make sure that whatever assistance we gave was used wisely, and not squandered away – I understand that. But imagine we could insure that our sacrifices really did go to help our brothers and sisters out of holes. Can you imagine that we might become that sort of community? Can you imagine that maybe we already are that sort of community?

I’ve often dreamed of what it would be like to be a part of a church like that, a church like the one we read about in Acts. And I’ve got to tell you, honestly, that after three years of being a part of this church, I don’t think we’re far from that.

I really do believe that the potential exists here – and in some ways is already realized – for this sort of thing to take place here. Because I know so many of you to be people who really do desire to give yourselves fully, heart and soul, to Jesus Christ and to this community of his followers. I know so many of you who want to share what you have been blessed with so that your brothers and sisters, here or even across the world, can have their basic needs met.

Now, I don’t have any plans, or programs, or strategies to unveil for you this morning. Nothing in particular to present. In fact, I’m not exactly sure how this sort of thing might work out in practice. I just don’t know.

I just want you ask us to use our imaginations. I just want us to imagine what God might do here if we allowed him to do it.

And who knows…

Amen.

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The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

-Re-read the Acts 4:32-37 passage. What characterizes the Christians in this early church? Do you imagine that you would have fit in well with this group? Why or why not?

-Have you ever been a part of a Christian community (e.g. church, small group, ministry) which experienced, even for a season, a compete unity of soul and heart? What was that like?

-What do you think keeps somebody on the fringes of our church community, unwilling to join heart and soul? Are you a person on the fringes? What keeps you there?

-Jeff suggested that two great lies in our world are that, one, what you possess belongs to you and, two, your possession will bring you ultimate security. Do you believe these are, in fact, lies? How have you personally bought into these lies?

-Would you be willing to tell others (your Life Group, for instance) how much money you make and how much savings you currently have? What does the way you answer this question tell you about how you see your material possessions? Why are we often so private about these things if they’re all truly God’s to begin with?
-Do you think that Faith Presbyterian Church is a community where the basic material needs (e.g. food, housing, medical care, etc.) of all the people are taken care of? Are there ways we could do a better job of this?

-Jeff told about another church which committed, with the help of trained counselors, to working together to get people out of trouble. What do you think about that particular model? Could you ever envision Faith doing something similar?

-What is one way you sense God wants to see you changed through this message?