

Acts 4: 32-35 “Resurrection After-Effects” Rev. Janet Chapman 4/11/21

For those of you who couldn't quite see the screen, this video went viral not too long ago of a litter of 6 golden retriever puppies who at a few weeks old could all fit together in a large plastic bucket to sleep. Now at 12 weeks old, they find it much harder to still fit, but by some maneuvering and shifting 5 fit in with the last one left with no recourse but to make a leap and land on top of them all to secure his spot. I share this with you today not just because puppy videos are a sure thing but because it is National Pet Day. The website for this day established in '06 says today is the day to “hug your hedgehog, bond with your bunny, and cut your kitty some catnip. That critter makes you happy – and that's not all. Over the past couple decades, the National Institute of Health has been a partner in research to determine the physical and mental benefits of having a pet. It turns out that not only can pets steal our hearts, but they also contribute to overall cardiovascular health by lowering cortisol, cholesterol and blood pressure levels.” Unless you are my sister Sharon's cat, Simba – that cat is determined to raise everybody's blood pressure! But I love him anyway!

Seriously, though, I wanted to share that video for another reason and that is from the perspective of our scripture. As I watched those puppies working to resolve the problem of how to accommodate everyone in that bucket, it occurred to me that they are, in some ways, a representation of what the church can be. There was no concerted efforts to remove another, no growling or biting of each other, no complaints of “this is my spot not yours,” just a general consensus to make room and when things got too tight, get ready to carry your brother or sister on your back. My favorite visual is that final puppy taking a leap and climbing aboard. In our scripture, the early church is described as a place where no one yells this is mine or finds themselves in need with

nowhere to turn. The Holy Spirit has created a community which is of “one heart and soul,” and held “everything... in common.” That phrase, “everything in common,” comes out of the Greek tradition and means a “sharing among friends.” Not only did they share their material goods, but scholars note they shared their spiritual goods of faith, love, joy and all those spiritual fruits that guided us on our journey to Easter. The church’s state of being is seen as the after-effects of resurrection. Just as pet lovers realize tangible effects in their emotional, physical and spiritual health due to their relationships with non-human animals, so, on a much grander scale, do the followers of Christ realize measurable after-effects in their lives after experiencing the reality of resurrection.

Such after-effects resulted in a sense of unity despite their diversity. By the time this scripture takes place, Luke tells us the whole group totaled about 5000 believers. Such a group must have included a large variety of ethnic backgrounds, ideological attitudes, and theological viewpoints yet they were able to look past such things to find common ground. I have heard some of you share with me that is what you appreciate about this group – we certainly represent a wide spectrum of views but have decided not to let our differences define or divide us. It is what the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination was founded upon – a dedication to unity not uniformity. We teach in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, love. For some, that perspective is troublesome because people want someone to tell them who is right and who is wrong, who is in and who is out, who are the winners and who are the losers. For those who require such security, our approach to faith doesn’t fit and they find themselves looking elsewhere. There is nothing wrong with that because if we learn anything from our Acts passage, it is that above all else we are to love one

another as God loves us. A story is told of two Desert Fathers, monks, who were living together and decided they should have a quarrel just like ordinary people. Since they had never had a fight before, they were not quite sure how to begin. So one of the monks looked around, found a brick, and placed it squarely between him and his brother in Christ. He explained, "So I will say, 'It is mine,'" and then you say, 'No, it is mine.' This is the sort of thing that leads to a quarrel. Are you ready?" "I am ready," his brother said. "Okay," he said, regarding the brick. "It is mine." "I beg your pardon," his brother said, "but I do believe that it is mine." "No it's not, it's mine." The first monk said. "Well, if it's yours, then take it," his brother said. Thus, the two failed to get into a quarrel after all. At the heart of this approach is practicing unconditional love and intentionally not becoming self-absorbed. These are the after-effects of resurrection.

Another after-effect is generosity in the midst of poverty. We have all heard the stats concerning the widening chasm between the rich and the poor – one of the most serious problems of our generation. In a nation where one in every 6 children still falls below the poverty line and one in 3 children of color, the scripture dares to challenge our acceptance of such facts without going to work to overturn the tide. As those who have witnessed the power of God to do the impossible, we must ask ourselves does the resurrection of Jesus still have the power to transform? What are the signs that we who follow Christ share not only in his death but also in his victory over death? Acts 4 is a description of living life as God intended it, where no one is in need any longer and the community reaches out to provide the means of sustainable life for all. The after-effects of resurrection were seen in the broken people being restored to life through the work of the church.

Here we find a sticky point in the life of the church. Whenever the church is invited to listen to the Gospel of Luke or Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, the subject of money invariably comes up – blame Luke because he chooses to include a surprisingly large amount of economic issues which arose out of the early church. Apparently, he was enough of a realist to know that there is a good chance where our possessions lie, there will be our hearts as well. For Luke, wealth is not a sign of God's approval, but it is a danger. I served a church where one of the members complained to me, "Why are we always talking about money in the church? All we do is talk about money, giving, and the budget. I wish we could get beyond this and talk about the spiritual things that are really important for a church." His was an understandable but misguided wish for the church. Ernest Becker has noted that as belief in God and other traditional sources of immortality eroded in Western culture, money assumed a god-like quality in our lives – it became our ticket to having lasting significance in the face of death. Only Luke addresses this temptation with stories like the parables of the Good Samaritan, the rich man & Lazarus, and the shrewd manager – all about money. Only Luke tells the story of the rich fool, the one who assumed that his possessions gave him god-like security against the invasions of death. Society undergirded the rich fool's beliefs because the first banks were temples and the earliest coins were stamped with images of gods. In the face of such pressure from inside and outside the church, Luke reminds us that generosity is a fruit of the Holy Spirit which grows out of resurrection, out of being transformed by God's victory over death.

Our text today is not just a nostalgic look at the good old days of the church; it is an invitation to see where such victories are being lived out today. Where, by the grace

of God, has fear been buried in that Easter tomb and resurrection been lived out? Who has chosen to free themselves from death and not build their security on the backs of their neighbors? Who freely offers up their backs to carry their neighbors when things are tight and space to rest from the burdens of living has now become a premium? These are the places where we see the church alive today. Karen Grant shares a story of living in an urban Christian community that had been ministering to the homeless for over 20 years. An attorney next door was often enraged by the homeless men. For years, he waged war against his neighbors, calling police, fire inspectors, the health department and trying every bureaucratic means to shut the ministry down or push it out. By the community endured these assaults, and eventually there was a cease-fire. Relations were still tense until the day a letter arrived from this man. It contained a large check and a letter of deep regret. The neighbor asked for the community's forgiveness and closed with "Peace be with you." There was no explanation given for this dramatic change, but one can't help but think it was the cumulative effect of so many years squeezed up right next to one of God's buckets of peace, unity and generosity. There is room for more, so take a leap and climb aboard.