"Everything in Common"

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[0:00] Good morning, church. It's good to be with you all today. Would you turn with me to the book of Acts?! Acts chapter 4. Our sermon text is Acts chapter 4, verse 32, through chapter 5, verse 11.

Let me pray, and then I will read for us. Let's pray together. Lord, thank you for the great privilege it is to gather this morning.
To come together and sing your praise, to pour out our requests to you, to unburden our hearts and our souls and our minds before you in intercession, knowing that you hear and respond to each of our prayers. And thank you most of all that we can come to your living word, and that we can read and that we can understand more and more about who you are and what you've done. And thank you that through your word, your spirit works to make us more and more like Christ, to grant us faith, perseverance, and to make us more and more like Jesus.
Glorify yourself now as we come to this time. And Lord, would the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.
All right, let's read Acts chapter 4, starting in verse 32.
Now, the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus, Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. But a man named Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.
[2:19] But Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?

And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man, but to God. When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, Tell me whether you sold the land for so much? And she said, Yes, for so much. But Peter said to her, How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in, they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.
And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. So, does Christianity make any real difference in the world? Does it produce lasting change?
At times in history, Christianity has been criticized as simply offering otherworldly comfort, but offering no real power to change the material conditions of people's lives now.
That sort of thinking was behind Karl Marx's famous line that religion is the opiate of the masses, right? Religion can give comfort in the face of hardship, so the thinking goes. But in numbing our pain, it sedates us and prevents us from working for real social transformation.
[4:18] But of course, history has a way of proving such criticisms wrong. Whether it be the monastery hospitals and schools of the medieval era or the civil rights marches of the 20th century,

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genuine Christianity has always been a force of deep, lasting change.

After all, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And our passage this morning shows us this transformative power at work.
As the gospel takes root and starts changing people's lives, it starts to create communities that are marked by two things. First, they become communities of unbounded generosity.
And second, they become communities of unflinching integrity. So let's spend some time and take a look at these two things.
First, let's consider the unbounded generosity. Look again at chapter 4, verse 32. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.
[5:34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Wow.

Now this isn't the first time that Luke describes the early church as radically united and radically generous, right? At the end of chapter 2, Luke writes, we saw this a couple weeks ago, all the believers were together and had everything in common, selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need.
So there was something that these men and women had experienced that completely revolutionized how they considered their material possessions. Something happened to them such that they would voluntarily sell a piece of land or a house or some other possessions in order to give it to those in their midst who were in need.
And this happened to such an extent that Luke could say, there were no needy persons among them. It seems hard for us to imagine to have a church where there are no needy persons.
But just think what that must have been like. Everyone was taken care of. No one fell through the cracks. And when we understand Jerusalem's economic situation in the first century, we see all the more how powerful this must have been.
[7:01] Historians tell us that political unrest, food shortages, famines, all took their toll on the city. And in addition, many residents in Jerusalem were transplants from other parts of the Jewish diaspora of the time.

And they found it difficult to find work and earn a living. And what's more, a lot of elderly Jews would come to Jerusalem to live out their latter years. And they were very dependent on others for material support.
We see a glimpse of this a little later in Acts 6 where a number of widows are dependent on the church for food. But even in the midst of these conditions, something unlocked a movement of radical solidarity and generosity among the early Christians.
And when we read this in light of the whole Bible, we see that this is exactly what God promised would happen when His people experienced the fullness of His covenant blessing.
We read a little earlier, Deuteronomy 15.4. Deuteronomy 15.4 says of Old Testament Israel that they were to be a community where there were no needy persons. In fact, Luke seems to be deliberately calling this passage to mind in Acts 4.34 as if to say that the promise of Deuteronomy was now finally finding its fulfillment.
[8:18] God's people were at last living in the freedom and generosity that God had all along said they would. But what had changed? What made this group of men and women so free to share their possessions with each other?

Seemingly nothing like this had ever happened in Israel before. What made the difference now? Well, we can begin by confidently saying what it was not.
It wasn't that God was now giving them whatever they sort of named and claimed, right? There wasn't a hint of prosperity gospel here. No, this was sacrificial giving.
People's needs were met because others were willing to sell what they owned. They were willing to bear the cost of others' needs. But we also see that this radical elimination of need was not made possible through some sort of enforced community rule, right?
There seems to be no compulsion to give here. No one is obligated to act in this way. There's no pressure to do it. In fact, Peter tells Ananias in chapter 5, right, didn't the land belong to you before it was sold and after it sold wasn't the money at your disposal?

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[9:28] In other words, Peter is saying, Ananias, you didn't have to sell your land and even after you did, you didn't have to give any of the money to the church. It's not as if the early church kind of enforced some form of like proto-communism.

Rather, the giving was completely voluntary. But they were so struck by a new reality that look at how Luke says it. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.
Although they owned it, they didn't claim or consider it merely theirs to use for their own sake. Their mindset had totally changed. And what would cause such a deep change?
Well, Luke points it out in verse 33, Acts 4.33, And with great power, the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.
You see, the heartbeat pulsing through these early chapter of Acts, the heartbeat pushing blood through the veins of the early church, pounding in the chest of these men and women like they had danced through the streets, like they had run through the fields, is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.
[10:39] We see in verses 33 and 34 how the resurrection of Jesus sets off this like unstoppable sequence. First, the apostles testify to Jesus' resurrection. Second, they experience God's grace pouring down upon them.

And third, they start meeting one another's needs through sacrificial giving. It's like a train that can't be stopped. Jesus' resurrection, God's grace, and our self-giving. So let's take just a few minutes to tease this out.
And I think we can see how it all connects if we move kind of backwards through those three elements, starting with their incredible generosity. What would free you to be generous like this?
What would make you utterly free to view your money and your assets not as something to just be hoarded for yourself, but as gifts to be shared with others in need as need arose?
What would do that? What if you had found a source of pleasure deeper and lasting than anything that money could buy? Something that made a vacation to Hawaii seem nothing more than a drive through Missouri.
If you've ever driven through Missouri, you know what I'm talking about. What if you had found a source of security more stable and sure than anything money could buy?
[11:57] Something that made the most successful 401k look like a children's piggy bank. What if you found a source of favor more meaningful than all the status and respect that money can get you, right?

What if you had found the favor of God Himself, the source of all good things, the creator and sustainer of the universe? What if you knew that God smiled upon you and promised you that not a hair would fall from your head without His total loving care?
What if He poured His very Spirit into you, filling you with the delight of His presence and sealing you for an inheritance and glory in the glory of the world to come?
You see, if we really knew God's grace then, it would have to make us generous. We wouldn't need money to make us happy or secure or important.
Rather, we would see money simply as a gift to be used to bless others and glorify God. So, God's grace makes us generous.
[13:06] But what of God's grace, this second element in the chain reaction? How do we know if His favor rests upon us? How can we be sure? After all, we haven't been generous, have we?

Instead, when we look at our lives, we've taken the gifts that He's given us and we've used them mostly for ourselves. We've sought our pleasure and security and what money can buy and we've held God at bay.
We haven't thanked Him as we ought. We haven't loved Him as we ought. And behind it all is the troubling fact that one day, we will all die. I mean, without a doubt, God is the source and fountain of life and yet no matter how much money we have, we are all headed for death.
And doesn't that prove the inevitability of death that we are disconnected from God? If God is life and we are destined to die, doesn't that prove that we're separated from Him and need to be reconciled to Him?
It seems then that we're not living under God's grace and favor, but under His curse. But what if God came to us?
[14:18] What if He took the curse of death in our place? What if God emptied Himself of all His wealth and became poor so that we in our spiritual poverty could become rich?

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What if in His death, we saw the debt of our sin being paid and in His resurrection, we saw the power of God saying, I'm making all things new.
And that brings us to the third element of Acts 4.33, Jesus' resurrection. If we see Jesus as our crucified and risen Lord, if we entrust ourselves to Him, then we can know that despite our sin and death, the riches of God's grace are lavished upon us.
Our risen King stands at the Father's right hand, not just to rule and to reign, but to ensure that we too will stand before God forgiven and free. And now having received such lavish grace from our King Jesus, how could we not in turn be generous?
Having been secured a place in His everlasting kingdom, how could we not be generous with what we own here and now? And Barnabas is an example of what happens when the reality of Jesus' resurrection and God's grace takes root in someone's life.
[15:38] We're told here that Barnabas' original name is Joseph. He's a Levite from Cyprus. And the apostles are so impressed by his love for others that they give him a new name, Son of Encouragement, Barnabas.

He sells a field, brings the money, puts it at the apostles' feet. Now this is just the beginning of Barnabas' story in Acts. We'll see as the story unfolds that Barnabas placed an ongoing important role in the life of the early church.
But what are some of the lessons we learned from Barnabas here in Acts 4? Well, we see first that his giving is voluntary, right? He voluntarily does this out of the overflow of God's grace in his life.
So for us today, when we give, we give because God puts it in our heart to give. Don't give out of guilt or to impress the person sitting next to you.
If that's how you feel, give your money. Instead, give with a heart of gratitude for God's grace. Give with a heart of joy because God has promised you a place in his kingdom.
[16:43] And give because you want to love other people and meet their needs. So we see from the example of Barnabas that giving is voluntary. And we see that Barnabas is giving to the need of others.

Second, it's through the apostles. Isn't that interesting? Instead of giving money directly to the people in need, he gives the money to the apostles so they can distribute it to those who are in need.
And that seems to be the common practice that we see here in Acts. In other words, Barnabas gives to a central fund that is then distributed. Now here at Trinity, we have what's called a deacon's benevolence fund that does just that.
It's a way for us as a church community to pool our resources to help those who are in need in our midst. Right? Now why is this a helpful lesson to learn from these verses?
Well, there's a lot of good wisdom in a church having a central fund. Here are two reasons from a theologian and missionary named Ajith Fernando.
[17:42] He says first, having a central fund, it avoids the unhealthy sense of obligation that a receiver can develop toward a donor. In the Christian family, you see, we shouldn't regard wealthy brothers or sisters as more worthy of honor than those who aren't wealthy.

Right? The epistle of James has a lot to say about that. But when you receive direct help, that's hard to maintain. Often, healthy gratitude can slip into unhealthy inferiority.
And a central fund helps to waylay this problem and maintain a healthy sense of equality in the church. Second, Fernando says this, he says, if the administrators of the common fund are faithful and wise stewards of God's money, they will ensure that the money is used responsibly.
Luke tells us at the end of verse 34 that the money was distributed to anyone as he had need. It often takes time and wisdom to discern what the real needs are in a situation, doesn't it?
That's why experienced deacons and church leaders are such a blessing to the church. They can make sure that our financial help is going to meet the appropriate financial needs, but also that we're caring for whole people as well, right?
[19:05] So using a centralized fund as a church like our Deacons Benevolous Fund helps us to be the most effective in truly making sure that the physical needs of the congregation are met with as much wisdom and insight as possible.

Now, all this doesn't mean that we should never give individually to help each other out. Of course we should, right? In our relationships, in our friendships, in our small groups, we should constantly be praying, Lord, how can I use the gifts you've given me to bless and meet the needs of those

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you've put in my path?
The DBF, the Deacons Benevolence Fund, is one important way for us to do that, but it's certainly not the only way, right? So, from Barnabas, we learn the importance of voluntary giving and the value of giving to a central fund, right?
But also, in these two short verses, we see the right kind of humility that ought to be expressed in our giving. Humility. These are short, unassuming little verses, aren't they?
We don't get the impression that Barnabas made a big deal out of his generosity. In fact, there isn't much for Luke to really tell us about Barnabas at this stage, and that's a good thing.
[20:15] His giving's generous, but it's also discreet. There's no big show involved. But for Barnabas, this is just the beginning. He gets a new name, and in the chapters to come, we'll see that God has an important role for him to play in the life of the early church.

So, the gospel of grace creates communities, then, of unbounded generosity, and that reconfiguring of our lives around the grace of God begins to produce communities of lasting social change and reorganization.
But it's not just that. In this story, we learn not just about the generosity of the early church, but also its unflinching integrity. As the gospel takes root, it also creates communities of integrity.
The story moves seamlessly from the account of Barnabas to the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5. Barnabas gets a new name, and his story takes a new turn, but when we turn to Ananias and Sapphira, we see just the opposite.
God's judgment falls on this couple, and their story comes to an end. And at the heart of it all is integrity. After all, the problem with Ananias and Sapphira isn't that they didn't give all of the money to the apostles, but that they lied about it.
[21:35] They said they were giving all of it, when in fact they were only giving a part. And the lie that they told was not merely to the church, but, Peter says in verse 3, you've lied to the Holy Spirit.

Or as he puts it in verse 4, you have not lied to men, but to God. As an aside, these verses point us to the personhood and the deity of the Holy Spirit.
In Peter's mind, to lie to the Holy Spirit and to lie to God are one and the same. And of course, lying to a holy God is serious business. Now, what in the world must have been going through Ananias' mind to think of such a thing?
Why would he want to give some of the money and lie and say that he was giving all of it? Well, the best I can tell is that he wanted to make a name for himself.
He wanted to make a name for himself and for Sapphira. He wanted to have a reputation of being a really generous guy without actually paying the cost for his generosity. So, this episode then is a test of the church's integrity.
[22:47] Will it be a place of honesty and openness or will it succumb to the pressure of greed and lies? It's quite amazing how honest Luke is being here, I think.

You know, he didn't have to include this episode about Ananias and Sapphira in his account. He could have sort of just skipped over it, whitewashed the whole thing. But instead, not wanting to sacrifice historical accuracy, he puts it in.
He's not afraid to show the early church warts and all. And he included this episode as a reminder and a warning for us down through the ages. And what we see then here is that hypocrisy was the earliest internal spiritual battle that the New Testament church faced.
We've seen up until this point in Acts, right, there's a lot of external pressure growing, a lot of persecution from without. But here we see that there's this internal challenge, this internal battle as well.
And it's still with us today. Satan wants to make the church a beehive swarming with hypocrisy for then he knows that the gospel will lose its credibility in the world because then no matter how sweet we tell people the honey is, they'll only think that they're going to get stung, right?
[24:11] And God's judgment falls on Ananias and Sapphira in such a decisive way because God wants to make it abundantly clear right from the start that nothing but death will result from their actions.

Hypocrisy is the road to death individually and corporately. Corporately, just imagine if Ananias and Sapphira had been given a pass on their deception.
Imagine if Peter had just let them slide. They were giving money to the church after all, right? Well, the church would have quickly lost its unity, lost its credibility, and it would have been torn apart

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from the inside out.
You know, perhaps you've been hurt by a church experience in the past. Perhaps the sting of hypocrisy is still a sore wound in your soul. I want you to see from this passage that God is utterly opposed to whatever wrong you experienced.
What you experienced was not authentic Christianity, but a counterfeit. So let me encourage you. Don't abandon Christian community. No, it's not perfect.
[25:30] You won't find a perfect church. Trinity certainly isn't a perfect place. I can assure you of that. Because I know that at least one person here isn't perfect. And that's me.

And I'm sure I'm not the only one. And that's why we need to be a part of a community that values honesty and integrity as much as the early church did.
As much as we see it in action here. We need people in our lives who will lovingly point out our sins so that we can repent and walk more and more in line with the freedom that we have in Christ. Now this doesn't mean that we should always be looking to jump all over each other, right?
Jesus tells us to remove the beam from our own eye before removing the speck from our brother's eye. And speaking of all this John Stott writes it's a good general rule that secret sins should be dealt with secretly private sins privately and only public sins publicly.
Then he says Christians are also wise if they follow the successive stages taught by Jesus in Matthew 18. In that passage Matthew 18 Jesus gives us a healthy procedure for approaching a wayward brother or sister.
[26:43] He says first go one on one and lovingly raise the issue. If that doesn't bring about repentance go with one other person and if that fails then bring the matter to the elders of the church. But the goal in all of that isn't shame or judgment but it's repentance and restoration.

When we speak to one another in love when we gently and lovingly correct one another the hope is that we'll all draw nearer to Christ. Even church discipline removing someone from membership has its ultimate aim as its ultimate aim the restoration of the offender.
It's hopefully meant to wake them up bring them to see the seriousness of their sin. And in fact it's a way of maintaining loving integrity in the church.
If our life doesn't match our confession if our life doesn't match what we profess about Jesus then the most spiritually healthy thing for us is that this be pointed out.
I wonder does anyone know you close enough to really be able to speak into your life this way? Do you have a trusted brother or sister in the faith who would tell you when you're wrong?
[27:58] This is part of what Christian community is for to point out the blind spots in our spiritual life to tell us when we have spiritual spinach in our teeth as it were. And this passage also presses us to ask are you bold enough to be this kind of friend that after prayer and more prayer in the proper way and in the proper time are you willing to lovingly and patiently bring a brother or sister's sin to light?

That's the kind of authenticity the kind of integrity that Acts 5 is pointing us toward. Of course some will read Acts 5 and think that Peter was being judgmental that he was being harsh but actually just the opposite is true.
You see Peter was pointing out the truth. Luke doesn't say how Peter knew Ananias was lying maybe God told him maybe he figured it out some other way but either way Peter was holding up the truth before him and the truth was Ananias wasn't just pulling one over on the church he was lying to God publicly and that put him in a very dangerous place.
Was it right for Peter to expose Ananias' sin in such a public way? I think we need to trust the apostles discernment that Ananias' very public sin called for a very public rebuke.
But what about the fact that Ananias wasn't given a chance to repent? Was that unfair of God? God? Well no it was not unjust or unfair.
[29:35] You see friends if we could get just a glimpse of God's utter holiness we would see how serious human sin truly is. God is perfectly within his rights to judge sin as decisively as God chooses and that rightly brings great fear upon the whole church.

You see God loves the church so much that he will act to maintain its purity. But today even though God in his kindness often relents from such swift judgment we still see from this passage what God thinks of hypocrisy.
It is death. but what's the remedy? What's the cure for our spiritual hypocrisy? What will allow us to abandon our deceptive attempts to make a name for ourselves?

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What will enable us to be spiritually honest? Ananias and Sapphira were seeking a reputation for themselves. They wanted to look good in the eyes of others but of course we can never look as good as we want to.
Our reputation will never be blameless so we try to cover it up right? We try to devise schemes like the one Ananias and Sapphira tried. we sew lies together like fig leaves and try to come across as more spiritual and more upright than we truly are.
[31:18] But as long as we try to get a name for ourselves we stand in danger of the same judgment. But how do we get a new name?

How do we get a new reputation? Right? How do we get a reputation that isn't our own but that can be ours nonetheless. We need to have a new name given to us but that can only happen when we look to the reputation of the one in whom there was no guile and no deceit.
You see friends there was one who always spoke the truth and there is one whose actions always matched his words and yet that same one was crucified as a liar and a blasphemer and he was crucified so that hypocrites like you and me could be rescued.
All of this Jesus has done so that if we turn to him he will give us a new name. He'll give us his reputation his record as our own.
A reputation that will free us not just from judgment but from the need to be deceptive as well. will no longer need to look good or devise schemes.
[32:37] Will no longer need to impress or lie but now we can be honest not just with one another but with God.

We can rest in Christ's reputation and know that we are accepted by God. To conclude then Luke is showing us here nothing less than that the message of Christ creates nothing short of a counterculture.
A counterculture a community where generosity and integrity finally overcome greed and deception.
A community where the love of money gives way to genuine love for one another.
A community where hypocrisy gives way to genuine openness to God and one another. What about you friend? As you look at your life do you see generosity?
Do you see integrity? Turn to Christ receive his grace and he will forgive you and he will make you a part of this movement that he calls his body his church and then you too will be part of the deep and lasting change that God is bringing to the world.
[33:58] Let's pray. Father thank you for what the reformers call the alien righteousness of Christ granted to us.

That our reputation can be covered by the reputation of Jesus so that we no longer need to sew fig leaves together to look good. we can come out into the open and be people of integrity and be people of generosity.
Lord help us to do just that by the power of your spirit we pray. Amen.

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