**Acts 4:32-35 April 11, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our First Reading, Acts chapter 4 here re-reading these words. “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.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 Alleluia! Christ is Risen! And with that Easter Greeting, and in that same Easter joy and celebration I invite you to sell all of your possessions, empty out your bank accounts, and give everything to the church. At the very least I expect every cent that you have on you today to go into the offering plates in the narthex, because according to Acts chapter 4, that’s what it means to be a Christian. You don’t need a house of your own, you have the church, you can sleep in the fellowship hall, or if things get too crowded you can sleep up here on the very pew you are sitting on now. We’ve got bathrooms downstairs, we have a kitchen and some frozen donuts from last week, you’ll be fine, and God will take care of you. And we’ll have your money….and everything will be…alright.

 What an Easter gift that would be for churches all around the world! And if this section of Holy Scripture was only focusing on the money, and your stuff, then you could be tempted to see this as an invitation to simply give everything you have away to the church, in order to fulfill the same harmony that we find here in Acts chapter 4, a congregation that is described this way, “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belong to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” This is the fulfillment of John Lennon’s classic hit, “Imagine” “Imagine, no possessions.” It would be heaven on Earth wouldn’t it? The Bible gives us many depictions of paradise. At first we see paradise as the Garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve didn’t have any possessions did they? They didn’t even have clothes! They were created and placed in the Garden and didn’t have a care in the world. Food was provided, water was provided, they had each other for love and companionship, it was never about stuff. Heaven is depicted in the book of Revelation as worship focused on the Lamb of God, the Lamb on the throne, and all creatures bowing down and worshipping God. There’s no money, or possessions in heaven. It’s not about the stuff. The Easter season is a time of celebration over our eternal life, or what we will experience in heaven, after all if Jesus hadn’t risen from the dead we would not have this eternal life to look forward to. So what is paradise?

 How do we define it? How do you picture heaven in your minds? What are you doing? What are you wearing? Where are you living? Is heaven a place where you live in a golden palace? Where you have unlimited amounts of money? Is heaven a place where you get to do all of the stuff that makes you happy? Where you can fish, or golf, or drive the boat all day, every day in perfect weather and without a care in the world? Well…what kind of equipment are you using to fish? What kind of clubs are you golfing with? Are you driving in a cart? What kind of cart? What kind of boat are you driving? If heaven is all about…stuff…then it must be the nicest stuff right? But if heaven is all about stuff….where is God? And doesn’t the stuff get old after a while? I don’t mean in terms of depreciation or things breaking down like here on Earth, I’m simply asking for you to consider the question of how could heaven just be a better version of what we experience here on Earth? Wouldn’t we get bored with it? We’re talking about eternity here. It doesn’t really make sense.

 But if heaven could be achieved on Earth, wouldn’t this be it? “There was not a needy person among them.” Oh, how wonderful that would be. Imagine even in our own community if we could eradicate poverty or need just here in Onekama. No one would go without food, no one would go without a roof over their head or clothes on their back. It would be heaven on earth. But how could we do it? Raise taxes? Force people to give if they have extra for the needs of others? Force people with large houses to open up rooms for those who don’t have a place to stay? Is that the impression we get here in Acts chapter 4? That this is something that these people were forced to do? Absolutely not! No one is making anyone, do anything. They chose to sacrifice of their own wealth and possessions for the needs of others.

 Which radically changes our own views on stuff, money, and possessions. Why would they do that? What were they thinking? Look at these words of our text. “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” Remember if you want to boil down the message of the resurrection of Jesus, of the Easter joy of the Gospel to one simple fact it is this, “Because He lives, you live.” He died, you will die. He rose, you will rise again. That message and truth, preached from the mouths of the men who saw it, who were eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, brought great grace upon all the people. And suddenly, for them in their lives, it wasn’t about the stuff anymore. Who cares about the stuff, the land, the money, the power or influence that such things may bring in a temporal, finite, or earthly way. They sold it all and gave it for the benefit of others.

 This is not something that naturally comes to us, because the stuff we have is ours and therefore it is for….us. It’s ours. It’s for us. We need it. If we have some leftover stuff that we are willing to part with, then perhaps we will donate it, sell it, let someone else have it, but only the leftovers. We are naturally inclined to being hoarders of stuff. We are naturally against the idea of giving more than we have to, because we cling to the stuff we have for our lives. We give only under coercion or we give only what we have been blessed with in abundance, not that which we feel we need. We give when others eyes are on us, when we feel like someone is watching, or will know how much we gave in comparison to how much we have. It reminds me of an experience I had recently out in a restaurant when my wife and I were able to dine out in Traverse City. We were able to go out just the two of us and enjoyed a meal together. When it was time to pay I took the bill up to the cash register, where a few people were waiting, socially distanced, in line, and usually when you pay you hand them the bill, and can pay with cash or a card. If you want to tip you can just put the amount on the card reader and it’s between you and the server, no different then if you had put cash on a table, what you give in that moment or in those instances is between just the two of you. But something was wrong with the card reader and so the cashier would take your bill and read out loud how much the bill was. So you hand them the bill and they say, “How was everything? Great….your bill is 20 dollars, would you like to leave a tip?” And if you said yes they then would say, out loud, in front of everyone, after they had said how much your bill cost, “And how much would you like me to put on your card for a tip?” Suddenly, this private moment is public, the people who are waiting behind you have heard the whole thing! The cashier is looking you right in your face to see how cheap or close fisted you really are! So of course, you sheepishly tip more, out of obligation, because you don’t want to be embarrassed in front of others. Them knowing, causes you to give more, not out of the kindness of your heart or your natural inclination to give, but because someone is watching and knows.

 That’s how we give when confronted, it becomes an obligation, when we are stopped at a light and someone knocks on our window, we feel we have to, it’s not a free gift it’s something we feel we have to do, which is why giving becomes a chore. It’s not something we seek out doing it’s more something that we are tasked to do if someone calls us on the phone, or gets in our face. But that’s not the example we find here in Acts chapter 4, giving is done freely and willingly, and joyfully after hearing the message of eternal life. It’s not something they are forced to do, it’s something they are happy to do. I jokingly said at the beginning of this message that in your Easter joy I expect you to give everything to the church, and I don’t want you to take this particular section of Scripture to mean that you have to liquidate all of your earthly resources and income and give to Trinity Lutheran Church, instead I challenge you to see a biblical example of money, income, possessions, really just what we could define as “stuff” and ask yourself if you are hoarding it, or see it as a means of helping your neighbor in need. Because all that you truly need in your spiritual life, in the care of your soul, and the strengthening of your faith, is here in God’s house and it’s completely and totally free. There is no obligation to give here. You don’t have to. There are no monthly subscription fees. There is no premium subscription service to being a member here where if you give more than others you get the best seats or the places of prominence or authority. We are equals here. We all receive the same here, the same body and blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. Same body, same cup. Same Christ. Same Savior. Same Word, preached, taught, and heard for the benefit of our souls. And while we can’t honestly say that we meet the standard that we hear about here, of a full number of people believing of one heart and one soul, it’s what we strive for. Unity is what we work towards as brothers and sisters in Christ, as members of God’s family, who receive from the Lord everything we need, especially eternal life through his glorious resurrection and victory over death.

 Paradise isn’t about stuff, boats, equipment, houses…money…anything that brings earthly joy. Paradise is about a sole focus on Jesus, your Savior, who died and rose to save you. That paradise is yours, not on account of anything you can do, or buy, or give, but only because of the love of Jesus Christ and how he gives that love to you in the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life. So see your stuff differently, especially in the light of the empty tomb.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.