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Acts 4:32, ESV.

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.

Giving to the Holy Spirit.

The chapter breaks were not added to the Bible until the early 13th century and verse breaks were not standardized until the mid-16th century. What's interesting is that even given all the time it took to do this, the chapter boundaries were in many cases poorly chosen. Today we will look at one of these cases, where a chapter boundary, the one that separates Chapters 4 and 5 in the Book of Acts, breaks the flow of logic in a way that, for many readers, muddles a very important point that is being made.

Before we get to that I'd like to talk about a common situation that I come across as a chaplain. The older a person is the more likely they are to be in the medical system. Most young patients have either mental health patients, have alcohol or drug related problems, or have suffered a trauma in a skiing, climbing, biking, electric scooter, or motorcycle accident. But the closer a patient is to being a hundred years-old, the more likely they are to be near the end of life due to a long-standing medical problem. Often,

they have been living a meaningful, joyous life, surrounded by loved ones. When I go into their rooms to see them, even though they may not have long to live, they might pull out their phones and show me pictures of grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great grandchildren. Sometimes, this is the only reason they have a smart phone, so they can receive photographs of descendants. While some very elderly people do die alone, and this is very sad, most of them have family with them before they pass in the hospital. It's often a beautiful thing to be part of.

I once got to know a woman who was close to a hundred years old. The only thing that could have kept her alive was a surgery that she was unlikely to survive. So, after talking to the medical folks and her adult children, and one granddaughter whom she was particularly close to, she went into Comfort Care. That meant that she was kept comfortable, given pain and anxiety meds, and that was all. The goal was to discharge her to Hospice if she was strong enough to survive transportation. But she was judged too fragile to be put into a vehicle. She ended up on a list the Chaplains keep of patients we try to see at least once a day. Let's call her Therese, and the granddaughter Samantha. I happened to talk to Therese once when there was no one else in the room.

Acts is about the Holy Spirit in action in people. This is how Acts begins:

1 In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ²until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

Before we get to the odd chapter break between 4 and 5, consider the beginning of the story that continues into Chapters 4 and 5. Here is the end of Chapter 2:

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Unlike many of the faithful who will soon come to Christ in Gentile communities in the greater Roman Empire, these folks in Jerusalem are only surviving day by day. This passage gives us the earliest description of the emerging new church. The people being described are Jews who have accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Note the words: “*And day by day, attending the temple together* “. Even though we know that a new religion is being born, they do not know it. Remember that the Book of Acts shows the Holy Spirit inspiring people. What binds them together more strongly than their Judaism, more strongly than their poverty, is the Holy Spirit. That is why they give to their fellow poor.

At the end of Chapter 4 of Acts, we read this:

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. 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. 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 ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Note what the Holy Spirit has done: they now are of “one heart and one soul”.

This community is part of the expanding church that we just read about in Chapter 2. They are Jews but are not all from Jerusalem. Many of them have come from surrounding areas to honor their obligation to celebrate the Pentecost holiday. The part that trips up modern readers in the U.S. is this:

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 ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

This is not saying that this mysterious new faith is supposed to be socialist in nature. It simply reflects the fact that they don't have any government sponsored safety nets. At this time, poor people often ended up totally destitute or begging. But these folks are filled with the Holy Spirit. The story of the Book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit, planted first in the Apostles, acting upon wave after wave of new believers. The folks who are selling what little they own are simply helping their fellow faithful who have even less. They have discovered the value of living in the Kingdom of God and not for the things of this world. They know that they

have only each other to lean on. The suggestion here is that they are sharing not just financial assets, and are contributing necessities, like food and clothing.

Now, we move from Chapter 4 to 5. It seems, since it's a new chapter, that a new story is beginning. But this tale of Ananias and his wife Sapphira needs to be read in the context of the end of Chapter 4. Here is the story:

5 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² 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. ³ 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? ⁴ 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." ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

This passage seems to suggest that because Ananias and his wife Sapphira own a piece of property, and the implication is that they own more than this, they are obliged to sell it and give the proceeds in full to the church as part of their duty as believers. After all, when Ananias and then Sapphira independently lie about how much they sold the property for, God strikes them dead. But this is a

continuation of what we read in Chapter 4, and what we first see in Chapter 2: they are giving because the Holy Spirit has formed them into *“one heart and soul”*. Faith, not duty, binds them. Remember the words of Peter to Sapphira:

“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.”

Peter is saying that this couple lied to the Holy Spirit, that is, to God. Don't forget what the Book of Acts is all about. The Holy Spirit is in charge of the spread of the emerging faith. This couple didn't learn one of the most fundamental truths about the new faith. It's not like their old faith, where the appearance of giving, of being viewed by their fellow believers as being generous and thus honoring the command by God to be generous, is what is sufficient. They answer only to God now. Yes, their fellow believers are poor. That should have been the only reason for them to donate their assets. Importantly, this couple was not obligated to sell their land and give the money away. What they did was fully voluntary. The problem was trying somehow to fool God in the same way that corrupt, hypocritical leaders of their old faith used to promote themselves as godly. They were pretending to live their new faith but were just trying to look like they were. These words of Jesus were directed to the religious leaders of the day in the Gospel of Matthew:

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

Jesus also advised us of this in the Gospel of Matthew:

***6** “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*

² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.

There is another subtle point in this passage about Ananias and Sapphira. They die at the feet of Peter. We see that Peter has inherited the leadership of the new Church. Even he is not aware of what is happening. He is a Jew. He sees Jesus as the Messiah, and that is all. But God is making it clear that something big is happening - and Peter is in charge. Everyone present becomes aware of his status.

When I walked into Therese’s room, her family had just left. Normally, there is a limit to how many people can visit a patient at the same time, but if someone is on Comfort Care or Hospice, or if they are otherwise likely to die, the rule is typically dropped. So, she had routinely had perhaps a half dozen or more people in her room at a given time. They had all just gone to dinner. I sat down. She thanked me for coming again. She reached out for my hand, and I took hers. It was a little hard to understand what she was saying. I had to lean close. She

said that she should have done more in her life as a Christian. I told her that her family had told me many stories about how kind and giving she was, all the many things she had volunteered for, how she had taught Sunday School for twenty years, organized all sorts of efforts to raise clothing and food and Christmas toys for people in need. I said I could tell myself that she was extremely generous and gracious. I told her that while I had been busy trying to comfort her, she was telling me how nice of a man I was and how kind I was. I told her that sometimes Christians can become compulsive about giving, about feeling that they need to give their assets. I said that giving is important, but the most important thing to give is our heart to the Holy Spirit. In fact, it all starts with that. If we do just that one thing, everything else will flow from there – and we won't need to worry about whether we are giving enough or giving the right things. That's all God wants: for us to embrace God by handing our faith to the Holy Spirit. I told her that I knew she had done that. Everything else in her life had turned out great as a result. She smiled and squeezed my hand. Therese's granddaughter Samantha arrived a little later, and that night, after I had gone home, Therese passed away.

Later in the Book of Acts, in Chapter 9, a woman named Tabitha, a new believer, lives in Joppa, which today is Jaffa and is on the coast of the Mediterranean. Her name means Gazelle. She becomes ill and dies. She is taken

to an upper room, which was traditional, as an upper room was more ventilated. There are several women who gather, and they are wearing clothing that Tabitha had made for them. Peter arrives. He asks everyone to leave the room. Alone with Tabitha's body, Peter takes her hand and raises her from the dead. The miracle inspires more believers, as we see over and over in the Book of Acts.

I made a follow-up call to Therese's primary family contact, which turned out to be the granddaughter, Samantha. I asked her how she and her family were doing. She said they were fine, but that her friends couldn't believe that she was upset about the death of a grandmother who was almost a hundred. I told her that it doesn't matter how old someone is. You love them, and you will miss them. In fact, her grandmother had been part of her life since she was born. Of course there was a hole in her heart. Samantha said that right up until the end she had been wishing that her grandmother Therese would make a miraculous recovery and live another five years. I told her that Therese had been a deeply good person, and she would always be alive. Samantha, who was in her mid-thirties, told me that she had been raised Christian but she had trouble believing. She said that she could imagine her grandmother being alive somewhere forever, and yes, now that Therese was dead, an afterlife felt more real to her. We chatted for a couple more minutes. She thanked me for calling and for

understanding that the death of a person who is close to a hundred years-old is still a great loss.

The Church is a place of giving, but the first and primary gift we hand over is our hearts to the Holy Spirit. We have been filled with God's grace ever since we were born, and that grace compels us to accept the Holy Spirit. Believing is a very natural thing. We don't know how many of the stories in the Bible are fully accurate. If we discount the vague remarks of miraculous events in the Book of Acts, like the "*many wonders and signs*" performed by the Apostles and mentioned in Chapter 2, there are twenty solid miracles in Acts. They consist of healings of devastating medical conditions and an earthquake that frees prisoners. There are two people, including Tabatha, who are brought back from the dead. If we broaden our criteria and accept the vaguer descriptions, we could count forty miracles. These supernatural phenomena are an important factor in these early believers becoming followers of Christ. Today, our faith comes from within. We are more mature spiritually. We can feel and accept the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. We also have 2,000 years of faithful generations which we can draw on. We do not witness Tabatha being raised and then we follow Christ. Rather, we give ourselves over to the Holy Spirit. That is how faith is ignited today.

Maybe 2,000 years ago Therese would have climbed out of her bed and said let's go for a hike in the foothills. But she had been raised from the dead, spiritually, a long, long time before I met her. The miracle had already happened.