One summer I was blessed to take a group of high school sophomores and juniors on a pilgrimage to Rome. We stayed in a convent guest house on a busy side street across the street from a gelato shop. Crossing the street in Rome is a different cultural experience from here in the United States. In a big city here, you walk to the corner, press a button, wait for the walk light and then proceed across the street. This just isn’t part of the culture in Rome. In Rome you just to make sure the car isn’t so close to you that it’s impossible to stop, and then you cross, praying that the car will, in fact, stop for you. And, of course, it’s much safer if several of you cross together at the same time matching each other’s speed. We encouraged the teens to cross the street en masse every time they went to the gelato shop. To go your own way was to put yourself, and perhaps others, at greater risk. No matter whether you were naturally slower or faster, you stuck with the pack. Unity was critical to accomplish the mission, which in this case was to get a bowl or cone of gelato.

The early Christian church, which we read about in Acts, suffered persecution from Roman authorities as well as from the Jewish synagogues. Economic times were tough for everyone, but often more so for Christians because they had gone against the status quo. Luke, the author of Acts, describes a community united in one purpose, in which people possess nothing, but share everything for the good of others and for the good of the mission of the community. In the context of the early church, unity, especially economic unity, was critical to that mission of spreading the word about the Risen Christ.

It would be easy for us to discount this almost idlyllic vignette in Acts by seeing it only in its historical context -- the need to share in common material possessions in times of severe persecution. But I think the Holy Spirit urges us to see the passage with a wider lens. In using the phrase “of one heart and one soul” Luke draws upon Greek images of solidarity that would have been familiar his audience including the moral and ethical virtues of communities grounded in friendships that prize what is best for all -- over what is merely self- satisfying.[[1]](#endnote-1) I believe we are called to see the phrase “of one heart and one soul” within our contemporary society as meaning being united around the mission of spreading the love of Jesus Christ throughout the world, starting, of course, within our Christian community. I believe we are called to prize what is best for all so the world will want to join us because of our love for and unity with each other.

The early Christian community laid no claim to material possessions because in that historical context the individual owning of material possessions would have prevented the mission of spreading the Gospel. Certainly some sharing of material possessions is important for the mission of the church within our modern culture. But more often it’s other types of “possessions” that divide us and circumvent the church’s mission. For example, if we see a certain pew or a certain program within the church as belonging to us as individuals, then that possession circumvents the mission of the church. If we see the church itself as being our own possession, rather than being held in trust by our whole community for its owner Christ, then our possession of the church circumvents its mission. If we see our viewpoint as being the only one that is right, then our possession of that viewpoint hurts the church’s mission. If we hold on to hurt feelings from something a fellow parishioner might have said or done years ago, our possession of that hurt circumvents the church’s mission.

The passage in Acts also speaks of selling property and laying the proceeds at the apostle’s feet. In laying these gifts at the apostle’s feet, members of the early church were offering them freely for the mission of the church– they weren’t going to take their gifts back if the apostles did something with them that perhaps the giver didn’t agree with; for example, if the apostles gave the money to their least favorite but needy parishioner.

In today’s church, some of us are called by the Holy Spirit to sell material possessions, even property, and to give the proceeds to the church. But I believe we are called to interpret this more widely. We all have gifts such as teaching, or administration, or healing or fellowship or great faith that we are called to lay at the feet of the apostles – that we are called to offer toward the mission of spreading the Gospel of Christ without restriction, even when we don’t agree with everything that might be done within that community or with our gifts.

We know that the Early Church grew rapidly, both in numbers and in depth of understanding of who Christ is. Unity was critical to this growth because it was critical to their mission of spreading the Gospel. It’s the same of us today. We also are called to move forward in unity -- “with one heart and one soul” toward the mission of God’s church, offering our chrisms freely without being possessive. And, as we do this, we also will grow in numbers and depth of understanding of our Lord.

1. Samuel Balentine, professor of Old Testament, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Va., quoting, Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics VII, IX in “Easter 2”, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Lent through Eastertide*; David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Westminster-Knox Press, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)