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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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Singleness of Heart
(Sixth in Series, *The Treasures of the Church*)

Ministry Group Recognized: *Koinonia* Groups

In the second chapter of Acts there is described what has become known as the *Koinonia Fellowship*. In order to be inclusive, we might more accurately refer to it as the *Koinonia Friendship*. The *Koinonia* Friendship was the community of mutual love and support that the first Christians formed. The New Testament was originally written in ancient Greek and *koinonia* is an ancient Greek word. As for many foreign language words, there may not be one single English word that means exactly what *koinonia* meant in ancient Greek. The issue becomes further complicated, as all biblical translation work is always complicated, by the fact that some words can carry unusual subtleties depending upon their context. When the early church began to describe the Christian faith it had no jargon of its own. Attempt could be made to explain it only by borrowing words that were up until then used to describe other things. As Christianity adopted the common language for its own use some words took on additional implications and nuances. When fundamentalists talk about taking the Bible literally or saying that we need to have a literal translation of the original texts, which texts we don't have anyway, they really are talking nonsense.

So what did the first generation church mean by the word *koinonia*? The New Testament first uses the word in the book of Acts where we read this morning; they (*the first followers of Jesus*) *devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)* *Koinonia* is translated into the word 'fellowship' in that passage. They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and *koinonia*, or 'fellowship'... Other translations simply render the term as sharing. They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and *sharing*... The ancient Greek lexicon or dictionary says that *koinonia* means *partnership* as well as that particularly churchy word *communion*. So we have fellowship or *friendship, sharing, partnership, and communion*. Immediately following the word *koinonia* in the passage is the prepositional phrase, *to the breaking of bread and the prayers*. Now, the phrase the breaking of bread may refer to the Lord's Supper but we are not sure how often that was celebrated in the early church. What we do know is that it was almost always celebrated within the context of a full meal. So the full passage tells us that the first Christians spent much of their time discussing the apostle's teaching, praying together, and eating together.

The next few lines of the passage then tell us that the first Christians also shared all their possessions together, spent time in the Temple together, had each other over for meals at each other's homes, and that when they did that they ate with glad and generous hearts. The old King James Version renders that last phrase in this wonderful way, *they ate together with singleness of heart*, not singleness of mind, singleness of heart. We know that it was not long before that first church would have disagreements within itself, and as Christianity spread into different areas many disagreements between the churches would also arise. The early Christians did not agree in mind, my goodness they may have disagreed in mind even more than people in churches do today. Rather, the case was that they developed a singleness of heart. They all loved Jesus and wanted to serve the risen Christ and they all loved each other and wanted what was best for each other. They enjoyed a unity of heart, a sameness of feeling and will. To use other New Testament phrases, they shared one another's burdens. They wept with those who wept and laughed with those who laughed. What united the church then and what must unite the church now is that we all truly love God and each other; a singleness of heart, not a singleness of mind. Our ideas about things need not always be in concert. In other words, what united the church then and what must unite the church now is *koinonia* – the joining of hearts; a trusting intimacy which happens as we break bread together – sometimes in each other's homes, discuss together the apostle's teaching (this might be practiced often as Bible Study today), pray together, worship together, and see to it that everyone's basic physical needs are met.

We may begin to have an understanding now of what this idea of *koinonia* meant to the early church, and if we do, we may begin to see how truly radical the idea is. It is not just any old friendship as friendship might generally be construed. *Koinonia* includes an openness with each other and to each other that might be rare in the church today and even rarer still anywhere else. It is an end of falsehood, of posing, of posturing and all pretention. It does not value cunning. It is the opposite of politics. It is that sharing of feelings, of personal stories, of affirming the value of each other even while very aware of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of each other. *Koinonia* Friendship is when we are free to be our true selves, express our fears and anxieties as well as our hopes and dreams, and share our honest opinions because we trust that even if others know our real thoughts and feelings we will still be loved. That's a radical kind of friendship. That's a rare kind of friendship, and that's part of the salvation that we all need.

How blessed are those who have friendships in the church!