

The Need to be Devoted

Acts 2:42-47

We are continuing to study through the book of Acts this morning and we are asking God to give us his vision for East Lincoln – to help us see a picture of who we are and who he wants us to be as a church family here in rural Wisconsin in the 21st century. We've seen in previous weeks that he wants us to be Christ's witnesses who are devoted to prayer, humbly asking God for the power of the Holy Spirit to do what he has called us to do. This morning we continue to seek God's vision together.

God reminded me of something through our conversation at small group this week. I was reminded of how difficult it can be to share your faith with the people you work with or go to school with because most of them aren't interested; they don't want to hear it. In fact, if you start talking about God and Jesus, people get irritated and try to avoid you. Those who are willing to talk are often defensive or argumentative and quick to disagree with what you believe. It's like a spiritual desert – the ground is hard; it's spiritually dry; and the conditions can be harsh. Even when it rains, the ground is so hard and dry the water just runs off and doesn't soak in. Many of the people you face are hard hearted and don't want to receive what you've been called to give.

And the general attitude in society isn't getting better; it's getting worse. Between fraudulent TV Evangelists, sexual abuse scandals in the church, the condemnation of soap box preachers, and the bad reputation of door-to-door Bible toting Jehovah's Witnesses, the reputation of Christianity is getting worse and the openness to hearing someone talk about God is disappearing. People don't want to hear what we have to say. They think Christians are close-minded hypocrites who are stubbornly frozen in an archaic religion and need to catch up with the times. So being a witness for Christ isn't exactly a fun or easy thing to do.

The problem is that we've still been called to do it and it's at the heart of what God has called his church to do. So we've been called to do something that's really uncomfortable and difficult and despite our best efforts will be met with opposition. And what happens is we get tempted to quit trying. I know that's happened to me in my neighborhood. I have to admit that I've been discouraged about what seems to be a total lack of interest in God among the unbelievers in

our neighborhood. I've gotten tired of what feels like a futile effort and I've been less outgoing, less relational, less intentional about building relationships with the hope of making an influence for Christ.

I know that many of you feel the same way about your workplace, neighborhood, or school. And yet, for me and for you, giving up isn't an option. We've been called to do it because there are still people out there who will listen and turn to Christ, and we must continue to let our light shine. Where are we going to find the strength to persevere? How are we going to be refueled with hope and courage? That's the part of our vision I want us to see in our passage for today.

In my last sermon we saw that as the disciples gathered to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, the promise of the Holy Spirit was poured out for witnessing and 3,000 souls were added to the church on that day. So it's obvious that the power of the Holy Spirit was and is critical to the success of the church, but that's not all we need. There's something more, and that's what we see in our passage for today. After the Day of Pentecost this is what happened...

Read Acts 2:42-47.

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.

That first church in Jerusalem sounds like quite a church family – like a euphoric Christian community. It would be easy to read these verses and think “This is it! This is God’s vision for our church!” We often think we need to do exactly the same things they were doing, and certainly there are many things we should try to and are imitating, but we have to remember that we are not that church. We are a unique church in a unique location, culture, and time in history. And if we try to become that church it isn't going to work. There isn't a “one size fits all” vision for every church. God’s vision for us is different than his vision for them. So

let's think about this a little further to see what I think God wants us to see in these verses.

To me this passage seems to be organized in a fairly simple way. Luke begins by writing about the things they were doing in verse 42, and then the rest seems to be what was happening, or the results. They were doing certain things and as they were doing those things, other things were happening. What were they doing? Luke says they devoted themselves to 4 things: the apostles' teaching, the fellowship (or community of believers), the breaking of bread (or the Lord's Supper), and the prayers. So they were doing these things and all kinds of amazing things were happening – signs and wonders, joyful unity, generous giving, powerful worship, and more and more people were being saved.

It would have been amazing to have been there at the beginning to see and experience what was going on. But we're not there. We're here – October 7, 2018, two miles east of Amery on County Road J... Things are much, much different now. What does God want us to see today as we look at this church from so long ago?

There's one phrase that has popped out to me throughout this week. It's the first four words in this passage: "And they devoted themselves..." In many ways things were much different for those early Christians, but in many ways they were the same. We're going to begin to see next week that the society they were in wasn't all that excited about the things they were saying. They were going out into the public and telling people about Jesus – like we are supposed to do – and though there were some who wanted to hear it, there were many who did not.

Jerusalem was the center of Judaism and home to powerful Jewish religious groups. These groups didn't want to have anything to do with Jesus and they definitely didn't want people to begin to follow him. So as time went on, and the new believers told others about Jesus, they began to face more and more opposition – just like you do when you get into your work environment, school, or neighborhood. But, not only did they have to deal with discouragement and alienation, they had to deal with fear. People began to be arrested and beaten and even executed for being witnesses of Jesus. What would they do? How would they continue to share their faith in the face of such opposition? God had given

them the Holy Spirit to empower them for the task, but that wasn't all they needed. He gave them something more.

He gave them what we read about this morning. He gave them a new community they could go to for the support and encouragement they needed to continue to do what Christ had called them to do. As you saw in the verses we read, they connected with the people in their church family for various things every day. And because of that they had the joy, the focus, the prayer support, the encouragement, and the accountability they needed to go out into the world and speak the name of Jesus in the spiritual desert around them. They devoted themselves to the life of the church family and to each other.

I looked up the word for devoted and here's the definitions I found:

- "consistently showing strength which *prevails* (in spite of difficulties); to *endure* (remain firm), *staying* in a *fixed direction*."
- "to continue to do something with intense effort, with the possible implication of despite difficulty – 'to devote oneself to, to keep on, to persist in'"

This describes their devotion to their new church family.

I looked up the 10 times this word is used in the New Testament and one that stuck out to me was Acts 10:7 where the word is used for the personal attendant of a centurion named Cornelius. We don't have centurions today, but we do have personal attendants. Most often we think about a personal attendant to the bride at a wedding. What does she do? She devotes herself fully to the bride. She pays close attention to whatever she needs. She follows the bride's every move and is vigilant about making her happy on her big day.

That's the kind of devotion Luke found out that the people in the early church had to the life of their new church family. That's the kind of devotion they needed to find the strength, support, and encouragement to continue to share Jesus in a hostile environment.

I think what God wants us to see today is that we too need that kind of devotion to the life of our church family. Where else will you get the support and encouragement you need for when you go to work and school and in your neighborhood and share your faith? I think most of us know that there's a

correlation between our devotion to the church family and the strength of our Christian walk and witness. The closer we are, the more strength we have. The more we get disconnected, the more difficult it is to live as people of faith in a secular world that doesn't want to hear about Christ.

We need to be devoted. And the more we devote ourselves to the life of the church, the more we will experience the joy of Christian friendship and the support and encouragement that it brings. We are not in this alone. We have the Holy Spirit and we have our church family and that is what we need to keep up the good fight of faith and the calling we have received.

So as I think about God's vision for East Lincoln, not only do I see a people who are committed to prayer, asking God for the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can be effective witnesses for Christ, I also see a people who are committed to each other for the mutual encouragement and support we need every day. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

I encourage you to evaluate your devotion to your church family. Does your level of devotion meet your need? Are you plugged in to the people in this church family for the mutual strength and support we need from each other? Or are there some ways that you can grow in this area? Are there some steps you can take to get more connected? Are you committed to the weekly gathering on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights, or do things keep getting in the way? Are you plugged in to a small group, or have you been holding back? Are you getting together with Christian friends on a regular basis outside the ministry programs of the church? Are you doing things to build relationships with one another? We are God's gift to one another. With all our flaws and shortcomings, we need one another to be able to do what Christ has called us to do.