

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 16, 2014**

BEING THE CHURCH (5)

Acts 2:41-47

AFTER AND BEFORE

Last Sunday we began to look together at these verses in which Luke describes what it was like in the church at Jerusalem during its “honeymoon” in the period immediately following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus on Pentecost. This honeymoon, as I said last week, did not last forever. It really did not last long at all. We reviewed some of the occasions of opposition the believers in Jerusalem encountered *after* this honeymoon period, from the arrest of Peter and John by the temple police in Acts 4, to the stoning death of Stephen in Acts 7, and the commencement, in Acts 8, of a great wave of persecution against the church, causing the church to be scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. But wherever they went, they took the gospel with them.

Today I want to take a brief look back at what took place in the days and weeks leading up to the honeymoon snapshot Luke gives us of the church here at the end of Acts 2.

The Bible tells us that following His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus spent time with His followers on numerous occasions over a period of 40 days, giving them “many convincing proofs” that He really, truly was alive (Acts 1:3).

The disciples of Jesus must have been convinced of His resurrection. They must have been convinced that He had died and was now alive again. Not just beyond a reasonable doubt, which is the standard in a court of law today, but beyond the tiniest shadow of a doubt. How else can you account for the dramatic transformation that took place in their lives after Easter? At the arrest, suffering, and death of Jesus on the cross, they were distraught. They were defeated. They feared for their lives. But after seeing the resurrected Christ and subsequently being filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, they were fearless, tireless, and on fire for the Lord Jesus Christ, willing to risk their lives to spread the gospel wherever and to whomever God sent them. Would they have willingly endured imprisonment, beatings, rejection, and even martyrdom for something they knew was a lie? I think not. They knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that He is really and truly alive, because they saw Him with their own eyes. They heard Him with their own ears. They ate and drank with Him *after* His resurrection. These post-resurrection encounters with Him radically changed their lives.

During the 40 days Jesus appeared to the disciples, He continued to teach them about the kingdom of God, which is not a geographic entity but the royal reign of God in the hearts, lives, home, and fellowships of believers who embrace the message of the gospel – the life-giving, life-changing message of Jesus and His saving love for sinners who are helpless to do anything to save ourselves or even to contribute anything to it. The kingdom of God is God’s gracious and sovereign rule in all things and over all things, lived out in the lives of His

people. And in the context of a fellowship of His followers where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts. A place, a people, a message, and a ministry of grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like us.

The kingdom of God is made manifest in this world in the lives and witness of individual Christians, and in the life and witness of the church, which, to paraphrase Eugene Peterson, is placed in the world – in this fallen, rebellious world where sin and darkness abound – to be an outpost of heaven, a mission outpost whose purpose is to bear witness to the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and to demonstrate in our words and actions what life is like in the kingdom of God. To be a living, breathing model of the grace, mercy, peace, and love of God right here where God has planted us.

Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus was taken up into heaven while His disciples watched (1:9). They saw Him go with their own eyes. With their own ears they heard the promise, delivered by two angel-messengers from God, that Jesus will one day return from heaven in the same way they saw Him go (1:10-11). He will come again – personally, visibly, bodily. *When* He will come, no one knows. *That* He will come is a promise you can count on.

As Jesus had instructed them (1:4), the disciples went back into Jerusalem and waited. What were they waiting for? They were waiting for the gift promised by God the Father, the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would come not only to be *with* the followers of Jesus, including us, from now to eternity, but to actually take up residence *in* us, living in us and in all who truly trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Jesus told His small band of followers – there were about 120 of them (1:15) – to wait for the Holy Spirit to come. As they waited, they prayed. They prayed a lot. Luke says in Acts 1:14 that they were constantly in prayer – all of them, both men and women. While they were waiting, they also held a congregational meeting to choose another apostle to replace Judas (1:15-26). They nominated two men who had the qualifications. Then they prayed and cast lots (which was like drawing straws or tossing a coin) to determine which of them was the Lord's choice. The winner was a disciple named Matthias who, as it turns out, is not mentioned again by name in the rest of the New Testament.

Then, ten days after Jesus' ascension into heaven, 50 days after His resurrection from the dead, on the day of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, with Jews from throughout North Africa, Arabia, Asia Minor, and Europe – from as far west as Rome itself – crowding into Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit came with wind and fire, filling the band of believers with His presence and power, and giving them the ability to speak of the greatness of God's glory and grace in the languages of all these visitors to Jerusalem, who were astounded by what was taking place (2:1-14). What happened that day, as John Stott has written, is that “the remnant of God's people became the Spirit-filled body of Christ “ (Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, 81).

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter seized the moment and proceeded to preach the very first Christian sermon (2:14-40) given by anyone other than Jesus. The power of the gospel was

evident in his preaching. The Holy Spirit was obviously at work. As we are told in Acts 2:41, the church grew that day from 120 to about 3,120. That is real church growth!

This is the context in which Luke gives this beautiful description of the church's life at the end of Acts 2. In the words of the late Dick Halverson, Chaplain of the U.S. Senate and, before that, longtime pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, it is "a picture of the church Christ is building."

Notice what Luke says in verse 42: All the believers who were now part of the church in Jerusalem "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and in the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." The Greek word translated "devoted" refers to a single-minded commitment or a rock-solid, unwavering, unshakeable resolve to pursue a particular course of action. We might use the word "devoted" to refer to a wife's commitment to her husband, a husband to his wife, the commitment of parents to their children, or the dedication of military service members to their mission and their country. To say that the believers in Jerusalem were "devoted" is to say that they were not casual about their faith or their participation in the life of the church. They didn't show up only when it was convenient. They didn't come just to get their own needs met. They weren't content to sit on the sidelines and let others do all the work. They were all in. They were fully devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the church He is building.

Their devotion to Christ was expressed in several ways that I think we can point to as distinctive marks of a healthy, living church.

THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES

We see first that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Here is how John Stott describes the situation: "One might say that the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem (on Pentecost). Its teachers were the apostles whom Jesus had appointed. And already there were 3,000 students in the kindergarten" (Stott, 82).

These new believers sat at the feet of the apostles, figuratively and perhaps literally, just as the apostles had sat at the feet of Jesus. They were hungry for instruction in the Word of God. They had a burning desire to learn and to grow in their faith and life as followers of Jesus. They were "devoted" to the Word of God. Without question this is one of the distinctive marks of a healthy, growing church.

"The apostles' teaching" to which they devoted themselves was the central message of the gospel – the message of the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus – along with the teaching the apostles had received from Jesus Himself. That teaching, of course, has come down to us in definitive form in the New Testament.

For us today, to be devoted to the teaching of the apostles is to be actively committed to the Word of God given to us in the Old and New Testaments. The Holy Spirit, who is our Immanuel, "God with us" in the world today, leads us to understand and willingly submit to the inspired, infallible, unerring, authoritative, and totally trustworthy Word of God.

Let me ask you: Are you “devoted” to the Word of God? Are you a diligent student of God’s Word? Do you actively, intentionally seek to grow in your knowledge and understanding of the things of God? Would you say the study of God’s Word is one of the distinctive qualities of your life? Is it a distinguishing mark of our church? Are we devoted to growing in our knowledge, understanding, and application of God’s Word in our lives? In our life and ministry together? It is one of the indispensable characteristics of the church at its best.

THE FELLOWSHIP

In addition to the teaching of the apostles, the believers in the Acts 2 church “devoted themselves ... to the fellowship” (2:42). They placed high value on *koinonia*, which is the word Luke uses here. *Koinonia* refers to their shared life, their commitment to live in community with one another. Another way to say it is that they were devoted to one another in Christian love. They were open-hearted with each other. They were generous, and beyond generous, in expressing their commitment to love and care for each other in tangible, practical ways. They willingly shared what they had. They willingly shared their hearts. They understood that because they belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ and were part of His church, they also belonged to each other. They understood that faith in Christ and shared fellowship in the church go together.

They also understood something that we too often, too easily forget, which is that *love* is a verb. It is an action word. It is something you do. So, they put their love into action and did whatever they could to help a brother or sister in need. They did it willingly. Voluntarily. Not because they had to. Not because they were pressured to do it. But because they could. Because of their loving concern for each other. Which is an expression of the love of God.

The church in Jerusalem embodied in its life what Paul urges us all to aspire to in Romans 12:10-13:

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.
Honor one another above yourselves.
Never be lacking in zeal,
but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.
Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
Share with God’s people who are in need.
Practice hospitality.

Similarly, Paul urges the Christians in Galatia to “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). What is the law of Christ? “Love one another,” says Jesus, “as I have loved you” (John 13:34). That is the law of Christ. And there is no one among us who does not need to know that we are loved and cared for. The longing of my heart for our church is that every person who is part of our church family – and this is not limited to official church members and your children, but includes regular attenders who consider Faith your church home, even if you’re not officially a member of Faith – will be loved and cared for with the love of Jesus, and will know that you are loved and cared for through the *koinonia*, the shared life of being there for one another and caring for one

another's needs. If you don't know that you are loved and cared for here, if you haven't felt the love and care of your church family, then we haven't done our job as a church. Or maybe you have kept your brothers and sisters in Christ at a distance, and haven't let us get close enough to really care for you.

People of Faith Church, we need each other. Sometimes you may be the one who needs others to come along side and care for you in some way. Sometimes you may be the one who is needed to come along side another member of the family of Faith. Whatever the case: *We. Need. Each. Other.* I need you. You need one another.

You are not meant to be a lone ranger Christian. You are not meant to go it alone in your life as a Christian. You are not meant to keep all your burdens or struggles or needs to yourself. This is not a place where you should have to wear a mask and pretend that everything is okay when it is not. This is meant to be a place of grace where we care about each other, where we pray with each other and for each other, where we laugh with each other and cry with each other, where we share with each other whenever anyone has a need. It is what the church in Jerusalem was and did. And it is what we are meant to be and do.

Are you "devoted" to the fellowship here at Faith? Are you devoted to your brothers and sisters in Christ in this church family? Or is your involvement more a matter of personal convenience? I'm just asking.

* * * * *

The believers in Jerusalem were devoted to the apostles' teaching. They were devoted to God's Word. They were eager to learn and grow spiritually. And they were devoted to each other in love. They were devoted to the fellowship. They cared about each other and willingly shared with anyone who was in need. It is the way it is supposed to be in the church.

We're not finished yet. There is more for us to glean from this passage. So we will return to it next Sunday.

Until then, even more, until Jesus returns or the Lord calls us home, may we, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, devote ourselves to the gospel, to the teachings of God's Word, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. And may God, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, do great things in and through us, to the glory of His name. Lord, let it be so. Amen.