



ACTS 2:42 | To What Are We Devoted?

Sunday, April 26, 2015 — The 4th Sunday of Easter

⁴² *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

The apostles faced a tough world. Shortly after Jesus' ascension into heaven, the work of spreading the Gospel began. It was a daunting task. They faced a government which wanted nothing but the demise of this "new" religion that threatened its power and prestige. They faced the same torturous death as their founder and leader had faced. Ahead of them loomed large a world that was filled with people perfectly happy with their own religions and their own ways of life. It was a world that would scoff at such a message of sacrificial love, grace, and forgiveness. They would face fellow believers as they struggled with the doctrines and concepts that were forming within the church. Heresies and false teachings would invade the lives of the church. And it would turn out to be difficult work.

The dictionary defines the word, "devote," as "to apply or dedicate [oneself, time, money, etc.] to some pursuit, cause, etc." You could imagine that the devoted early church would have hired some sort of guru, a marketing genius, to manage the public relations department of their tiny church body. You can imagine that they would find the most relatable stock images on image sites on the internet, that they would craft nifty and catchy phrases to define who they were. You can imagine that they would consult with a church consultant on how best to "structure" their congregations and what "focus groups" would work best in a small-group Bible study setting. They would make every effort to make their church successful.

You could imagine that the early church would devote their time to knocking on doors, canvassing, community events, and purpose-driven campaigns in order to "reach the lost." They might hire a pastor that is collegial and friendly, wearing shorts and flip-flops as he teaches and preaches in order to "relate" to the people that he is serving. They'd create a cool and ironic logo for their congregations, plastering it everywhere so that people can relate this image to the "brand" that they want to push. They would do a lot of good things. These efforts and campaigns would be a great and worthy way to use their time and talents and treasures. But through all these efforts they would fail miserably.

You could imagine these things...and you'd be wrong. I know it probably seems like a strange sermon to be preaching on Good Shepherd Sunday. Perhaps you were looking for a homily on Psalm 23, or a short discussion about how our Lord provides for all of our daily needs and "leads

us to green pastures.” Perhaps you would like to hear about how we can follow the Good Shepherd in our lives and how he is there to keep us from trouble. Maybe next year...

But this is an entirely appropriate topic to be discussing this morning. So important is it that the church decided to include it in the lectionary—the set of readings that are used every year on specific Sundays of the Church Year. For decades, this text has been assigned to this Sunday. And rightly so. As appropriate as those other topics for sermons might be for Good Shepherd Sunday, it’s more than appropriate for a congregation named after the Good Shepherd to consider for a moment the very question that is posed this morning: “To what are we, as a congregation, devoted?”

It seems like a difficult question. It’s a question that I asked some of you as I deliberated the call last spring and many of you as I made every-member visits last fall. And the answers varied greatly. But one answer, or maybe non-answer, stood out. Very few, if any, answered the way our text encourages us. What does Good Shepherd stand for? What does it represent? To what, if anything, are we as a congregation devoted? Some have answered, “reaching out to the lost.” Others answered, “Providing a quality time and place for people to worship God.” And still others answered, “You know, I’ve never really thought of that before.”

Do you find that troublesome? Is this an issue worth exploring? Our Lord believes it is. And perhaps we should begin with a comparison: Does our church differ from the early church? It certainly does in time and place. We live in a time when technology affords us some luxuries that the early church didn’t have. We have the capability to reach far-off places in a matter of hours or days rather than weeks or months. We have the ability to communicate via cell phone or internet in a matter of seconds—even by video—rather than by letter in a matter of weeks or months. We live in a country that affords us freedoms unlike the world has ever seen. We are free to worship how we want when we want where we want—without fear of death or persecution. We live in a culture where Christianity is not a “new” religion, but something established and recognized as having stood the test of time. And for all of these amazing marvels that our Lord has blessed us with, we give thanks!

But many things have not changed. Satan still works hard at making the church fall. False teachers and heresies still continue to bombard our church. Teachings of “tolerance” and “universalism,” where everyone can go to heaven plague the churches of our world. Being “spiritual” is considered greater than being “religious.” The belief systems of our society infiltrate the minds and lives all of us.

And that could certainly effect the way we see our congregation going. Satan can certainly tempt us to think that we should be devoting our time and our talents to make us more “relatable” to society. He certainly makes it appealing to find ways to perhaps “hide” the “tough” portions of God’s Word that might offend or “turn people off.” He makes it easy to try and find ways to make our church a church full of busy-bodies—doing a lot of what seems to be “work” so that we can say that we are “doing our part” for God. He makes it easy to be unhappy with the pastor

you called because “he doesn’t focus on reaching the lost,” or “doesn’t make an effort to get into the community so that we can be relatable and relevant.” He tries to convince us to make ourselves look like the “successful” churches in town, packing hundreds, maybe even thousands into our services every week; but that would not get us anywhere. If we follow Satan and his suggestions, we would be anything but “successful” in the eyes of the Lord.

But that’s not all. It’s not just Satan that plagues the church. So do sinful people. Like the times of the prophets and the apostles, sinful people still populate the pews. Sitting here today are people who are jealous of others. People who covet what God has blessed others with. There are people who habitually break the 8th commandment, constantly whirring the mill of rumors. There are people who are bad parents, poor spouses, disobedient children, and lazy workers. There are people here today who despised coming this morning, thinking it was their “duty” or their “responsibility” to show up here today. There are people here who will put an offering in the plate this morning knowing full well they could have given more, who are holding back because their trust in their Lord is lacking or their greed supersedes that trust. To put it bluntly, there are sinners here today deserving death and punishment—and that includes every single one of us.

And so, because of that sinfulness, we have an issue. Like the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 7, there is a spiritual battle taking place in each one of us every day. We know what God wants of us, and we may desperately want to do it. But we fail miserably because of our sinful nature. And no postcard or program, no small-group focus or evangelism tool can assuage that shortcoming. There is only one place that we can find the salve to heal our gushing wounds—through Christ, our Good Shepherd.

This is what the early church recognized. They could have put forth the largest marketing campaign the world had ever seen. They could have listened to Satan, that wolf in sheep’s clothing. But they didn’t. Instead, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” They recognized the gifts God had given them through the Word and the Sacraments. They understood that fellowship and communion with God would create fellowship and communion with each other which would create opportunities to speak about the fellowship and communion which they had with God and with each other.

You see, dear Christians, it’s simple. It’s so simple that marketing and evangelism gurus don’t want you know about it because they’d be out of business. Christ died for you. He rose again for you. He has ascended to heaven for you. And he comes to you through his Word and his Sacrament. At the font he washes you clean. He makes you his own. The Good Shepherd brings you into his sheep-fold and promises to protect you and to save you. At the Holy Table the Good Shepherd lays down his life for you. He reassures you that all has been done to save you. He invites you to trust in the words, “given and poured out for you...” It is in his Word that he invites to you come to him, to place your worries and anxieties on him, and to follow him.

Dear Christians, it can be tempting to find other ways to “reach the lost.” But he already does. It can be appealing to find ways that God can be relatable and relevant. But he already is. He comes to you and brings you back. He speaks to you in terms that are relevant and related to you.

So, members of Good Shepherd, to what are we devoted? We don’t need to search for that answer. May we be devoted to the Word, to those we serve here in our congregation, to the Sacramental life, and to praying for each other. Amen.



Soli Deo Gloria!

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