

They Devoted Themselves

In the name of him who calls us by name and leads us out to green pastures and quiet waters, dear friends in Christ: This morning's first reading from the Book of Acts describes the nearly perfect state of the Christian community in Jerusalem in the days following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost after our Lord's resurrection and ascension. We see the individual members of this community completely united in heart and mind, each one looking out for the good of the others, freely sharing their property and goods, and giving thanks and praise to God with glad and generous hearts. And we are given the reason that this near perfect state existed among them; namely, that "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers."

Since today we're celebrating the Confirmation of three young members of *this* community of the faithful, and in the spirit the catechism with which they've been forced to become so familiar, I'd like to unpack that reason things were going so swimmingly well for those early Christians. So, let's begin by asking that most Lutheran of questions: what does this mean?

First, we ask: what does it mean to devote yourself to something? Simply put, to devote yourself means to commit all or a large part of your time and/or other resources to a person, activity, or cause. If you are married, for example, you are to be devoted to your spouse. Likewise, parents should be devoted to their children. It's possible to be devoted to your occupation; but it would be the difference between simply doing a job to get by and dedicating yourself to excellence in the performance of your work. Elected officials should be devoted to their constituents and to the public good, not to the advancement of themselves. Doctors should be devoted to helping and healing their patients, not simply to taking home a big paycheck.

Devotion has to do with priorities. We devote ourselves to things that we hold to be of highest importance. And what could be more important than the salvation of your own soul? Against the backdrop of eternity, the time we spend in this fallen world is miniscule; and yet what happens here in this time determines where you will spend eternity. Jesus said that even if you gained the whole world, if you lost your soul in the process it would not be worth it. So, it only makes sense to devote yourself to ensuring that your salvation is secure. And next to ensuring your own salvation, it follows that you'd want to ensure the salvation of the souls of those to whom you are otherwise most devoted: your family, friends, and neighbors. Beyond that, in Christian love, it follows that you'd share the Shepherd's concern that none be lost, that all come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved.

In the broadest sense, this describes the devotion of those first Christians in Jerusalem. Through the preaching of the apostles, they had heard the good news of the forgiveness of sins that Jesus earned for them by his passion, death, and resurrection. They had been baptized in the name of the Triune God. And they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit who worked in them to create saving faith in this powerful Gospel. This had become the most important thing in their lives – and rightly so: they understood that their salvation depended on it. It only made sense to devote themselves to it.

But let's ask for details. To what specifically did they devote themselves? We're given the answer: the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Let's examine these one at a time.

First, the apostles' teaching. At this point, Jesus had ascended bodily into heaven. He was no longer available for direct comment. From here on out his word would be proclaimed and his voice heard through the men he had chosen, trained, and commissioned for that task. He told them, "Who hears you, hears me." And look, if you couldn't sit and listen to Jesus in person or walk with him as he traveled throughout Galilee and Judea performing miracles, wouldn't you want to sit and listen to the men who did? To the men whose minds Jesus had opened to understand all of the sacred Scriptures?

Those early Christians understood that faith comes from hearing the Word of God, and that faith itself is a living thing. To sustain it, it needs to be fed. So they devoted themselves to hearing the teaching of those to whom Jesus commanded, "Feed my sheep." Through the apostles, they heard and recognized the voice of their True Shepherd. And they were fed: daily, weekly, as often as they could. They made that a priority.

As they did also with what our text calls the fellowship, which is a word that needs some explanation. What actually appears here is the Greek word "koinonia". It means "that which is shared in common" or "to what we all hold together". In context it refers to the correct confession of the Christian faith: that body of pure biblical doctrine which we say together and that is the foundation of the Church. It isn't enough simply to hear God's Word, the Church as a whole speaks it. Paul wrote to the Romans, "With the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." This also helps the members of the Church to detect and reject the voice of strangers who come trying to deceive and destroy Christ's sheep with their false teachings. If what they're saying doesn't line up with our common confession of truth, we know to flee from them. Those first Christians understood this, and so they devoted themselves to confessing the truth of Christ together.

They devoted themselves also to the breaking of the bread, which doesn't mean simply feeding their faces. Here it means Holy Communion. They took Jesus at his word when he said, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." And they believed him when he said, "This [bread] is my body given for you ... this cup is my blood shed for you." They understood the immense value of the gift of Holy Communion and its power to strengthen faith and comfort sinners with the assurance of Christ's forgiveness. Thus, they committed themselves to regularly and often receiving the gift of Christ's body and blood given under bread and wine.

And finally, they devoted themselves to "the prayers". And here we don't want to think of prayers in general that people offer throughout the day (though those are good and right and should not be neglected), but rather to certain prayers offered in corporate worship. St. Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, had specific prayers in mind when he wrote "the prayers" as opposed to "prayers". Now, we don't have a complete list of them or their precise wording, but from what has been handed down we can make some pretty good assumptions. There's the Lord's Prayer, of course; the one Christ himself gave us. We do have the words for that one. But beyond that we know from the very beginning there are things the Church prayed for whenever people gathered for worship: for a right understanding of God's Word, for the spread of the Gospel, for faithful pastors and teachers, for Christian love and virtue to flourish among them, for good government and honest leaders, for perseverance in times of trial and

temptation, and for the Church's great hope: the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the glorious life of the world to come. The early Christians devoted themselves to offering such prayers with confidence that the Lord is pleased to hear and to answer them.

These are the specific things to which those first Christians in Jerusalem devoted themselves. And we heard what the Lord accomplished in them as a result, how they expressed love for one another: sharing their goods, helping each other, receiving God's blessing together with glad and generous hearts. We heard how even unbelievers looked upon them with favor. It's a funny thing: when Christians actually act like Christians, people on the outside are attracted to them. They want to know what makes them the way they are. And we heard how the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The point to be made is that those first Christians were doing it right. And if we look at this church and don't see what they had going on, it's a safe bet that it's because we are not devoting ourselves to the things we ought or devoting ourselves to them in lesser degrees than we ought. And for that we need to repent – repent and commit ourselves again to getting our priorities where they should be.

This is especially fitting for us to do today. In short order three of our young members will stand before the altar to confess and confirm the faith in Christ that God gave them in Holy Baptism. In the process they'll be asked a number of questions, the overall gist of which is this: will you devote yourself to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers? If you are a confirmed member of this church, you too were asked those questions once upon a time. As the questions are being put to these three, I ask you to consider them being put to you again as well. And may God in his gracious mercy give us all the strength and faith to keep our promises so that we do devote ourselves to these gifts that make and keep us the children of God in Christ and the heirs of eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!