

The Good Shepherd Makes the Good Church

Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Our first Bible reading from the book of Acts picks up where we left off last week. It's the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, 10 days since he had ascended into heaven. The Holy Spirit had come upon the disciples like tongues of fire to speak in languages that they had never learned before. Peter had finished his powerful sermon, warning the people to save themselves from this corrupt generation and instead to repent and be baptized to receive the forgiveness of sins, to be clothed with Jesus' perfection, his flawless victory over sin, death, and the devil. About 3,000 people were added to their number that day. From that explosion of converts, we get our reading for today, a description of how the Church was doing in those days as they were devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Let's break those down a bit to understand better what they were doing.

Being devoted to the apostles' teaching was not that they were getting something never taught before. The apostles taught that the Messiah of the Old Testament had come and had fulfilled what was written about him, how Jesus had lived a complete and perfect life under the law of God for us, in substitution for us, that he, as Peter wrote later, had "committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats... He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:22-24) These are the apostles' teachings that they clung to together in worship and study.

These teachings of what God had done for them also then formed their basis of fellowship with one another, a common faith as they gathered around the Word of God. This also led them to sharing their joys as they "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts..." (verse 46) - not just meeting and eating in their homes, but also as they gathered in the temple courts. Although not explicitly mentioned, it's very likely that they were celebrating the Lord's Supper together, as the apostles would have taught them to do so. They also shared their woes, their trials, as they were busily engaged in prayers – prayers that they had learned and memorized, almost certainly the Lord's prayer that Jesus had taught, as well as prayers for each other in both thanksgiving and in requests. This, of course, led them to sell their "property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." (verse 45) They shared everything in this Church, this body of believers.

And it gets even better. While they were devoted to these things and were praising God together in their fellowship, they were also "enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (verse 47) Wow! Now that's something I want to be a part of! That's a church I want to belong to!

So, do we belong to that kind of a church? Is this portion of Acts chapter 2 a description of Light of the Valley? I mean, we don't have the apostles around us doing all sorts of miracles, but miracles still do happen as we gather around the same Word of God that they had, the same teachings that Jesus is our perfect substitute, this this message miraculously brings people to faith, gives them a new life in Christ, forgiven of all their sins as paid for by Jesus, covered with Jesus' perfection lived for us. That same Word of God brings us into fellowship with one another as we unite around a common confession of faith, that we say that we believe what the Bible teaches. We have the breaking of bread – in meals at church like the Easter breakfast, in the Lord's Supper, and when we invite people over for food or out to eat. We pray for each other – in worship, with the weekly prayer chain email, with each other in private moments. We help people with our church assistance fund and all the unpublicized moments of people helping others with fixing sinks, shoveling walks, giving rides, taking people to doctors appointments, and so much more.

But we could be better, couldn't we? We could do more in all of these areas – more devoted to God's Word, to fellowship, to the breaking of prayer, to prayer, to helping people. If we would just imitate the Church in Acts chapter 2, we too could be a congregation of more than 3000, right? If we just had the right system in place, we would do better. If we follow through on something like that 6 year vision that was briefly presented last week and we will hear about again today, we would enjoy the favor of all people, right?

It's tempting to look at the cheery picture of the Acts chapter 2 Church and think that we got to do something like that to have that happen here, that it's a system problem for us, that because we aren't doing what the early Church did, that's why our church doesn't look as good as the early Church did. But this is just one description of the Church. In our second Bible reading, Peter writes to the same kind of believers and they are being beaten, suffering at times for doing what is good and right. Even as you keep reading in the book of Acts, it's clear that not all the people favored the Christians as they were then later beaten, thrown in prison, persecuted, some killed, most forced to scatter from Jerusalem. It wasn't all sunshine and daisies because they were devoted to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to prayer, to helping each other. It wasn't their system of devotion that made their church good.

What makes our church good? Is it a system? But we have a system. Why aren't things going better? We can look at our congregation as a whole and see what is lacking, pointing at other people that we need more devotion to all these things that they were devoted to in the early Church. Then I look in a mirror, and I see the lacking in me. I have neglected gathering with believers, studying God's Word. I think of the church selfishly, that this is only for what I get out of this, that the other people are not my concern. You do you; I'll do me. I don't hang around after service because I have more important things to do. I don't make invitations to others to break bread nor do I go when those invitations are offered. I fail to pray for others, fail to ask for prayers, fail to pray regularly even. I don't ask what people need help with. I ignore things that I notice need to be done, or I rationalize my lack of help because of my big responsibilities and lack of time for other things. If our church is not good, the problem is not the system really; the problem is people. The problem is me, because I am a sinner.

What makes the Church good is only the Good Shepherd and what he does for us and through us. The early Church in Acts chapter 2 experienced these wonderful blessings because the Good Shepherd and Overseer of our souls, Jesus, is the Lord of the Church. It is and always has been all his efforts which make us good. Knowing that he in fact was raised from the dead declares to us that our sins really are removed, all our lackings, all the ways that we have neglected the things that we are supposed to be devoted to, these are forgiven. With Christ, I'm not just one more broken piece or problem that brings this church down, but I have been made whole and complete as I am covered with his perfection. God has made you and me good. That's why this is a good church, because the Good Shepherd has made us good by his life lived for me, his life sacrificed for me. This is proved to us because Christ is risen; he is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Because the Good Shepherd made us good, this is why we want to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching, to the Word of God, because this is where the Good Shepherd comes to us to make us good by what he has done for us, that we share in the same perfectly substituted life of Christ, that we all have the same value and worth because it is based on what God has done for us. This is why we care about each other, that I don't come to church and think that it's just about me and what I need and what I get out of it. This is why I want to spend time eating with people because the Good Shepherd made us to be a part of a flock, to be gathered together. Because Christ cares so deeply for me and you, I care about others. I want to pray for them knowing that the Good Shepherd is in charge of all things and really can and does answer our prayers for our good.

Knowing that the Good Shepherd makes us good and make our church good, what areas do you want to be more devoted to? Is it to the apostles' teaching, that you want to become a regular Bible class or Sunday School attender, that you want a refresher of that whole picture of God's Word with the Bible Information Class, that you want to make reading the Bible a daily part of your life, to read the daily devotions from WELS or from *Meditations*, because you know that this is where the Good Shepherd comes to you and makes you good? Will you devote more to a prayer life, using the weekly prayer chain, asking people what they need, to pray with them on the spot, to make your own prayer list and use it, to pick up a prayer book to give you prayer ideas? Do you want to devote to more fellowship, that you will reach out to someone and ask them to get together with you, that you will stick around after the blessing just so that you can go and meet someone and get to know them? Will you devote more to breaking bread with people, inviting someone to a restaurant with you after worship or to your home one evening? Will you devote more to helping others in the church and in our community? Will you work with pastor to coordinate service to people in our church and to our community?

The Good Shepherd makes us a good Church. He has suffered for our sins and removed them from us. He has covered us with his perfection. We exist only by his care and attention, his shepherding, just like the early Church did. Because he made us good, we want to be good and devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to prayer, to helping others. Then, no matter the good or the bad days, the Good Shepherd will continue to make us good and continue to add to our number daily those who are being saved, making them good in this good Church. Amen.