

Acts 2:42-47 **They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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.

Dear Christians walking in the footsteps of Jesus and his apostles:

Normally a hospital isn't the best place to go sight-seeing, but if you happen to be on the 6th floor of St. Agnes Hospital, you get a wonderful view of the city of Fond du Lac. What strikes me first are the trees. What a beautiful, green place this is! But then you notice the church steeples dotting the landscape. There's something calming and encouraging when you see that these Christian churches with their crosses on top are still such prominent landmarks in our hometown area. On the other hand, it has become apparent that there are fewer and fewer people worshiping under those steeples these days. Even a cursory look at the obituaries, e.g., tells you that fewer people are even affiliated with churches today: no home church; no Christian funeral. Sad.

Could it be that we are taking our religious freedoms for granted? Could it be that Jesus Christ, our beautiful Savior, and his life-giving Word have become mundane? Could it be that our Christian fellowship and desire to encourage one another has become no big deal?

Let's move this conversation to Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan. If you and I were Christians living in many Middle Eastern nations, we would not take Jesus Christ and his Word for granted. We would be live each day on the brink of destruction. If we had Christian friends, like-minded believers, spiritually-speaking we would grab hold of each other and never let go.

Luke tells us today about the precious fellowship of the early Christian church -- the days just after Jesus' resurrection. There were very few Christians then, but they cherished their faith and fellowship. They also realized that their faith and fellowship weren't primarily about receiving but about giving. On this confirmation weekend let's consider this truth: **Our Christian Faith Means Giving** -- (1) ***Giving ourselves to the Apostles' teachings***, and (2) ***Giving of ourselves to one another***.

1

Luke says that these early Christians "***devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***" Isn't that what Luke would see going on right here, too? Here we are, listening to the apostles' teaching; here we are praying; and next week here we'll be "***breaking bread***" (or at least *taking* bread) in the Lord's Supper. This is what Christians do! Gathering with fellow believers around Word and Sacrament in worship is as natural for Jesus' people as breathing and eating.

Notice Luke says, "***They devoted themselves to***" the apostles' teaching and prayer. We often use that word: "***devoted.***" We admire someone and say, "*Wow! She's such a devoted mother,*" or perhaps, "*She's so dedicated/devoted to her profession.*" The dictionary says "devoted" means "***to give oneself entirely to something.***" If you're a devoted husband, you can't give yourself 85% to your wife and 15% to someone else. That's not devotion. Another example: I once read that it took Noah Webster over 35 years to gather information and write his famous unabridged dictionary! Talk about devotion to a cause. That's an entire career!

Jesus told his Church to "***Go and make disciples of all nations.***" In order to do this, he told his church to **devote** itself to two things: "***baptizing them***" (in the name of the Triune God), and "***teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you.***" Isn't that what a church devoted to Jesus does? Baptize & teach -- from cradle to grave. And notice that Jesus doesn't just say teach some stuff and leave the rest

out. No, he said to teach ***“everything I’ve commanded you.”*** That means that doctrines, the teachings we teach, do matter! In order to be devoted to Jesus we also need to be devoted to the truth he speaks.

That’s why our confirmands have been steadily and methodically learning God’s Word over the past years of their lives. They have carefully studied what Jesus taught the apostles, and what the apostles then recorded in the Holy Bible by inspiration. Those hours during a typical week in confirmation class and in worship and Sunday School or LES have to counterbalance and actually win the day over the countless hours of things they are seeing and hearing each week that do not agree with God’s Word. Much of that false teaching begins with **“humanism,”** the philosophy (worldly religion) that we are just animals, accidents of the universe, masters of our own destinies, and not made by nor are we accountable to any higher being. Our society wonders why selfishness, rudeness, violence, and immorality are so prevalent. It’s every man and woman for him/herself (survival of the fittest): me, me, and more me.

On the other hand, the early Christians were ***“devoted to the apostles’ teachings...”*** It says, ***“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts...”*** Every day they met to study the Word and encourage one another. Every day they got ready to leave earth and go to heaven -- whether by natural causes, disease, or the violence of persecution and crucifixion.

We would be wise to follow their example of devotion to the Word. The Word is available to us every day here or in our homes. The Bible connects (plugs) us to the most Powerful Force in the universe. And that **Power** is not just raw Power. It’s also loving, compassionate Power -- the kind of Power that creates a world filled with trees and allows himself to be nailed to one of them to forgive the Jesus devoted himself to you. He died for you. He loves you. He wants you to be with him forever.

2

These first Christians were devoted to God’s Word, which also led them to be devoted to each other: ***“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”***

A Sunday school teacher asked her students to tell her what the phrase **“loving-kindness”** meant. A little guy raised his hand and said, *“Well, if I were hungry and someone gave me a piece of bread, that would be kindness. But if they put some strawberry jam on that bread, well, that would be loving-kindness!”*

You and I had a need, the hunger to have our sins forgiven and to be saved from hell. God met that need. In loving-kindness he sent his Son to take our curse on himself. ***“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us!”*** John wrote. He spread that love on thick like an extra spoonful of strawberry jam -- lavishly!

Moved by Jesus’ lavish love, the early Christians ***“gave to anyone as they had need.”*** The Lord asks us to do the same. The Bible calls this “agape” love -- Christ-like, self-sacrificing, no-strings-attached, expect-nothing-in-return love. Many here just displayed that love by supporting the area “Food for Thought” program for disadvantaged children. Many show that love by visiting sick or shut-in members, by sending a card or speaking a word of sympathy to the grieving, or by taking meatloaf to the neighbors when mom is ill. Many show that love by eagerly supporting the ministry of our church or synod through generous, regular offerings, or by using their gifts and talents and time in a whole variety of ways to help at home, in the church, or in the community.

Why do this? We give “jam and bread” to others because Jesus has been so good to us. And we do it because of this: ***“The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*** Through actions and words of Christian love, people want to find out more about Jesus. And that’s what God is all about: more believers, more children in heaven with him forever.

Christian faith and fellowship means giving -- giving ourselves to study of his Word and giving of ourselves in love to one another. May God the Great Giver move us by his love always to give!

Amen.