

“A Healthy Devotion”

Introduction: Having arrived last Sunday at the day of Pentecost, the first half of the church calendar is now complete. Beginning in Advent – typically early December – the calendar brings us through the earthly ministry of Jesus, from his birth to his life to his death to his resurrection to his ascension. Now, with the gifting of the Holy Spirit, all of the big holidays and celebrations are over and we transition into the long season of Pentecost, or Ordinary Time, as it is usually called, which runs until Advent begins once again.

I appreciate the name, “ordinary time,” as it gives us a season in which we are encouraged to reflect on the ways in which this Jesus, who has revealed himself to us in Advent through Pentecost, now meets us in our ordinary, everyday lives. This long season gives us a chance to make connections between Jesus’ story and our own, an opportunity to absorb and assimilate the momentous life of Jesus into our lives.

Luke gives us a picture of this in the book of Acts as he has us consider, right after the dramatic events of Pentecost, the “ordinary” community that emerged as a result of these extraordinary events. It wasn’t a community that experienced a spiritual, HS high, and then went back to living the way they had always lived, as can sometime happen after a powerful weekend retreat. Rather, we see a healthy devotion emerge in the midst of their ordinary, everyday lives as the followers of Jesus gathered intentionally and regularly together for learning, fellowship, worship, and prayer.

Let’s hear how Peter links the story of Jesus to the events surrounding Pentecost, and then we’ll consider the devotion that we see emerge. [READ]

So, what kind of community did emerge from the story of Jesus? What kind of devotion began to be a part of their “ordinary” lives?

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (2:42). Let’s unpack each of these.

I. The Apostles’ Teaching

A. This emerging community was a learning community. It’s focus was on the writings and teachings of the apostles. “Apostle” means one who is sent, and, who carries the authority of the one doing the sending. These apostles were uniquely connected to Jesus. Each had personal experience with him, and each had been commissioned by him to teach the world about him. Their teaching, comprising much of our NT, and summarized in a creed we rehearse every communion Sunday, had its foundation in the OT and demonstrated how Jesus had come to bring what is found there to its fulfillment, as the Kingdom of God took shape.

B. Not only did the early church which was formed by the events of Pentecost hold the teaching of the apostles in high regard, so did the church leaders of the early centuries.

1. So, for instance, a leader called Clement, the bishop of Rome, writing at the end of the first century: “The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So, then, Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ.”

2. And Tertullian of N. Africa, an author and apologist, writing a century later: “We Christian are forbidden to introduce anything on our own authority . . . our authorities are the Lord’s apostles . . . they faithfully passed on to the nations the teaching which they had received from Christ.”

If we are to properly learn about, and be properly connected to, Jesus, we must be connected to the teaching of his apostles. It represents the authority of Jesus. It is the mooring, the anchor, the foundation, of our faith.

II. Fellowship

A. Second, the emerging community was a caring community. Fellowship, as it is used in the NT, does not describe a time when we gather downstairs for coffee and donuts (well, maybe just a bit!). Instead, the word, as used by the apostles when they wrote the NT, means to be generous, to share to meet the needs of others. As the apostle Paul describes the over the top generosity of the congregations in Macedonia:

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. . . they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. (2 Cor. 8:2-4)

(Lit. *that they might receive of us the grace and the fellowship of the ministry to the saints*)

B. Something happened to these first Christians. Something, someone, touched them so deeply that when they saw a need among them, they did what they could to meet it, even liquidating an asset if necessary. Time and time again such a spirit of generosity, such fellowship, is one of the indications we see in the Bible that the message of Jesus has hit home. The community that emerges out of the story of Jesus is one devoted to meeting the needs of others.

III. Breaking of Bread

A. A third mark or characteristic of the ordinary community that emerged out of the extraordinary story of Jesus is that it is a worshipping church. At this stage of its life, worship took place in homes and often centered around a meal. At the end of the meal, the Lord’s Supper was celebrated. Doing so probably arose out of the reality that one could quickly forget the importance of what had taken place on the cross, and was a way of bringing that back to mind, intentionally and regularly. It was a way of saying, “Jesus’ death and resurrection is what makes sense of everything we see, and sets a pattern for our lives.” It reminds us of how he gave himself for us and lived, not to be served but to serve.

B. The table was also a place where social barriers were broken down. It was a place where Jesus met, and ministered to, sinners and social outcasts, much to the horror of the Pharisees. It was a place to develop unity, where people from different backgrounds could get to know one another. It certainly seems like we need such tables today. In their book, *The After Party*, authors Curtis Chang and Nancy French note statistics compiled by researchers which reveal, as of June of last year, that an estimated 44 million people supported using violence to coerce lawmakers, roughly 20 million voters believe that America would be better off if large numbers of their

opposition died, and more than 42% of Americans view people in the opposing political party as “downright evil.” How did we get to such an ugly place?!

C. Part of it, at least, Chang and French observe, is the *us versus them* mentality that has become the way we relate to those who disagree with us. Fueling this is what has been dubbed “The Big Sort,” which describes the fact that millions of Americans are increasingly moving to locations where they’re surrounded by people who share their same beliefs, and so are less likely to have to interact with people they disagree with than at any time in recent memory. Now, it’s not a bad thing to want to be with people of like mind, but, due to limited contact with them, it comes with the cost of struggling to understand others who are different than you, and even makes contemplating violence against the “them” an option.

D. A little more table time, where the non-violent love of Jesus is celebrated, sounds like it might be helpful. Notable is the fact that around his table, as his disciples, Jesus had both Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector, men from two very different political parties, divided by the hot button issue of their day – Roman taxation. And yet, while I’m sure it wasn’t easy, in the “Jesus party,” love won the day as those who disagreed learned to live out their life of faith together. “As I have loved you, so you must love one another,” Jesus exhorted (Jn. 13:34). Out of the story of Jesus emerged a group of very different people who broke bread together.

IV. Prayer

A. A fourth characteristic that we see emerge out of the big story of Jesus is that this community of Jesus was a praying community. And the prayer they engaged in was corporate – they gathered together to pray. Such prayer involved waiting for God to move before they acted. This is worth contemplating because these folks had a whole lot more personal experience with Jesus than we do. They had seen more miracles than we’ve ever seen and had been commanded directly by Jesus to be his witnesses. Yet they knew that they didn’t have the power or wisdom to be of use to him unless they spent time, together, waiting on him. Prayer reminds us that we are not powerful enough to make God’s things happen. Prayer gives us time to recognize what God is doing and wants done. Prayer puts the world in God’s hands.

V. Devotion and Awe

A. We’ll think more about prayer, and making space for the Spirit to work next time. For now, as we consider what this emerging community was about, note two words: devotion and awe (vv. 42-43). We read that this community didn’t just try out a few spiritual practices here and there. Rather, it was *devoted* to learning, giving, worshipping and praying. There is certainly much that competes for our devotion – from our relationships, our jobs, our leisure opportunities, our various screens. But the devotion, the intentionality and passion, that these folks put into connecting with God and with one another, led to more than screentime, or time at the gym, or time on the job, can bring. Here, everyone was filled with awe. There was a profound sense of the holy. A new dimension of how the world might be had suddenly become visible. And God moved in miraculous ways which could range from a physical healing to the healing of a broken marriage. And the Lord led more people into this community to experience and take part in the life that was truly life. So may we keep these marks of the healthy church community that emerged out of the story of Jesus in front of us. May awe overtake us as we seek to be led by and keep in step with the Spirit.