

The Journey of Worship, Pt. 4

Devoted

Acts 2: 42-47

**First Presbyterian Church
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Let's start with a wonderful gospel story. Acts 2 gives us the first picture of the early church. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples like a mighty rushing wind. Tongues of fire danced over their heads and they spoke the praises of God in all the languages known to the pilgrims in Jerusalem. Peter preached the story of Jesus to the crowd that had gathered. We often use this episode before baptisms at our church.

Peter wrapped up his message by saying, "Know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." Now there were thousands of people assembled. Peter had no way of knowing that each and every one of them had been present for the crucifixion 52 days earlier. Certainly most of them were without any power to have affected the outcome of a death sentence for Jesus. But Peter was speaking of a deeper connection to the cross. God the Father sent his Son Jesus to save us. We, humanity, ordinary men and women, rejected him. We in our heart of our hearts responded to God's gracious savior with a No so deep it sent him to the cross. Peter himself knew bitterly what it was like to turn against his master. He denied Jesus three times. He also knew what it was to be restored. So he was brave to convict them, "You crucified him."

The people were cut to the quick. Pierced in the heart. They said, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter did not leave them dangling. The gospel had convicted them, and the gospel would forgive them. He summoned them to an act of faith. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord God calls to himself."

We saw the pattern last week. Revelation. Conviction. Forgiveness. Sending. God makes himself known: Peter spoke the story of Jesus. That story of the cross makes us aware our sin: conviction. But Christ's love reveals to us a solution: forgiveness. Then Peter called them, and us, to a concrete response. Sending. Do something. Repent of your sin and yourself. Be baptized as a sign that you have left the old life and now belong to Jesus. You will receive the gift of the Holy

Spirit, the same Spirit who sends us to be witnesses to Jesus in the world. You will have had an experience of Jesus to which you can bear witness. On that day more than 3000 were baptized. Pretty good preaching!

Enthusiasm marked this new community of believers. The work of the Spirit flowed through them in concentrated form. There were healings and conversions all the time. They were so filled with joy in the moment that they could sell all their possessions and share everything together. In this unique period, people did not hate the new believers. They did not feel threatened at first but felt favor toward this glad and generous band of Jesus enthusiasts.

Sadly, the blush of first love calms into the ordinary years of regular discipleship. Internal conflicts would arise. The Jerusalem church would come to know poverty when the results of selling all capital worked out. And persecutions would come from the citizens who once smiled upon them. We can't expect life in Christ and with one another to always be like Acts 2. But there were some practices that would endure. There were four marks of this first church which would carry them through conflict, persecution, hardship and the grind of day to day life. These four marks remain the bedrock foundation of any community of Christ.

Acts 2 tells us the people devoted themselves to these four activities. That word we read as devotion means to go after something intentionally and persistently, even knowing and facing obstacles. It means to pursue. So here are the four.

1) They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. The apostles were originally the 12 disciples in the inner circle of Jesus. Judas, sadly, hung himself after betraying Jesus, and Matthias was elected to take his place. The qualification was that Matthias had been with them from the beginning. He heard the teachings of Jesus. He saw his mighty works. He witnessed Jesus alive from the dead and saw him depart into heaven. Because that's what the apostles did: they told the history of Jesus. They connected the words and deeds of Jesus to the Hebrew Scriptures. They interpreted God's story with his people through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, showing how he fulfilled all the ancient Scriptures. They showed how Jesus was God's plan all along to work through his people to bless the entire world.

The apostolic teaching is still the chief work of the church. I love to think what a living tradition we have. We don't pass along dead teaching. When each

new generation comes to believe in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit and the ancient teachings become living stories to us. They become vital fuel for life in Christ. We call the ancient creed The Apostles' Creed because it encapsulates the story they told. It tells us how to read the Bible. It is the key to rightly interpreting all of Scripture: through the lens of the career of Jesus whom God made both Lord and Christ. When you say the Creed, think of it not a checklist to rattle off, but as a living story that unlocks the whole story of Scripture.

2) They devoted themselves to fellowship. There was a deep sense of connectedness among these first followers. It continues in the church today. At our last new members' class, I asked the attenders to identify what makes a great church and a great church experience. One of the answers we heard so clearly was: *connectedness*. Being part of a group where you can be known and loved, and where you can love and know others. This past winter, we had a special taskforce studying worship in our church. One of the qualities of worship we most highly value is that intangible sense of being connected to one another. The sweetness of fellowship. I always love to tell our new members that what they feel here is real. We see it borne out in times of trial and celebration. If people have given themselves to be here regularly, interacting in openness, they find that when life gets hard, First Presbyterians show up. We swarm the hospitals. We weep together at funerals and feel together the mysterious peace that passes understanding. We make sure people have plenty of food, rides, money and support. It's gorgeous to see us care. We are devoted to the fellowship. All it takes is putting your toe in the water of interacting.

I'm enthused that this fall we will have a renewed focus on fellowship groups. Gathering in homes to study the Word, to pray, to share our lives with each other is essential for a church as large as ours to stay connected and keep us all deepening in Christ.

3) They devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread. Acts 2 seems to talk about the breaking of the bread in two ways. As far as my studies show, most scholars think the first reference is to the Lord's Supper. It's something the gathered church did. The second reference is to sharing meals in homes. The New Testament pattern seems to be that gatherings of Christians included both ordinary table fellowship and the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper. They ate together and they recited the words Jesus said about his body and his blood as they specifically shared bread and wine.

The Last Supper was part of the Passover, a meal of remembering God's mighty deeds of deliverance and redemption. It included very specific words and prayers. It was a feast held once a year. With Jesus' death and resurrection, the earliest Christians realized that Jesus had fulfilled the Passover. By his atoning sacrifice, the wrath of God now passes over Christ's people. And as Jesus passed through the waters of death into resurrection, he opened eternal life to all who are joined to him. The first Christians did not want to wait a year to celebrate Christ our Passover. Every first day of the week was a mini-Easter. Every Sunday they celebrated Jesus resurrection. So every week they also broke the bread and shared the wine, recalling all Jesus had said and done. In the sacred supper his mighty deeds of salvation became present, living realities to them. Of course in the early days the sacrament had not become as formal in each of its parts and prayers as it is today. But from the beginning, Christ's people have rejoiced to enact the sacrament he gave us.

I'm excited that during July, we get to enact communion every Sunday. We'll enact the Lord's Supper with lots of flexibility, sometimes coming forward, sometimes passing trays, and sometimes gathering in groups. But every week that we meet as one church, we will engage the sacrament. We will realize that Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper express our oneness in him. He also gave it to us as his means to create our unity in worship.

4) They devoted themselves to the prayers. This word for intentional, persistent action is used several times in the New Testament specifically about prayer. It takes work to keep praying. It takes focus and sustained effort. It was a hallmark of the early church. They joined their hearts in engaging the many kinds of prayer. The chief act of prayer of course is praising God for who he is, followed by thanksgiving for his great salvation and his many blessings. Only after praise and thanksgiving do we have confidence to confess our sins or grounds for making our requests. It is after we enter blessing our Triune God that we engage the work of interceding for others and the world.

How glad I am that we receive so many prayer cards each week. I love that we get to lift up those needs in gathered worship, but also as elders and in our staff meetings. The staff prays through the church membership rolls, four families a week, and it knits us together with you. I love that people pray before worship begins, every Sunday. And we pray for those with healing needs between the sanctuary services. We open every meeting with prayer, and a faithful group gathers each week to intercede for our city and our world. I love seeing people pausing to pray informally for each other after worship, or taking time at Sunday

school and in small groups. I love that we've been challenged to pray for the Muslim world each day this month. Prayer expands our vision. Prayer enlarges our hearts. And, in some mysterious way, prayer participates in God's great work of redeeming the world through Christ.

When Tears Became Unquenchable Joy

I'd like to close with a story I told you several years ago. It's about a time the power of worship came home to me personally, in a service I experienced from the pew and not the pulpit. Back in January of 2012, I was in charge of the retreat for the pastors in our presbytery. I had invited Dr. Wynn Kenyon to be our speaker. Wynn was for decades Professor of Philosophy at Belhaven University. A brilliant guy and a great defender of the Christian faith, Wynn was also an old family friend. As I prepared my introduction, I realized that whenever my life had gotten really hard, somehow Wynn was there. During the most serious challenge to my ministry, Wynn's wisdom encouragement proved invaluable. I actually teared up when I introduced him.

As Providence would have it, ten days after he brilliantly led our retreat, Wynn Kenyon had a massive heart attack and died a few days later. We could hardly believe it. He was just 64, full of vigor and humor and passion and joy. It seemed like he had a lot more to do in this world. We weren't the only people who loved him. There were two three hour visitations scheduled, one at the college and one at the church. People poured nonstop through the lines. Wynn had touched many lives. The next day, the service had to be held in the largest auditorium at Belhaven. The sanctuary at his church couldn't possibly hold everyone.

Before the funeral, we spent time with the family, tried to be encouraging, then we took our seats and waited. Such strong desire rose in me. I *wanted* that service. I craved the hymns and the Scripture. I required someone to speak the meaning of death and resurrection life. It was like waiting for each course of a magnificent meal. At last it began. Though I vocalized nothing, inside my head was a running commentary: Look, there's the family coming in. Hold close to each other. See how we're all here for you. There's his wife smiling. She won't give in. Look, she's keeping all her chicks together. What a rock! Oh, now here comes the prelude on Psalm 91. Wynn's niece wrote it. Another niece will sing. Can she possibly keep it together? Yes, just listen, 'He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty One, the great I Am!' Yes! Tell me that. Sing me the words: "My God in Him I will trust."

Then came the Call to Worship. From Psalm 61. I silently called to the worship leader, “Just get the words out, that’s all you have to do, the psalm will do the rest”. He spoke, “From the ends of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” Glorious! We’re at the ends of the earth here in the place of this loss. Get me up on the Rock, please!

Then we stood to sing. “In Christ Alone.” The congregation sang out. We all needed so desperately to, declare, “No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me; From life’s first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny.” I couldn’t stop crying; I couldn’t stop rejoicing. I wanted to bang on the chairs. And still it got better. Look! The Scripture is I Corinthians 15! Oh buddy, just read the words to me. And if you can mean them as you speak, that will be even better. “Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep. But we shall all be raised!”

The web of emotions in me was complex. This is the depth of Christian realism. The killing cross can be the tree of life. There can be at the same time grief and triumph, love unquenchable and tears unstoppable. We laughed with the mirth of heaven at the stories they told about Wynn. We squeezed our hands hard as we looked at his family and thought of the days ahead. But through all, in all, above all in that worship there was *joy*. Looking straight at the reality of death. Looking straight in the face of the pompous power that can reach in and steal a good man from his family too soon, by God’s grace we did not crumble or cower. We rejoiced. Because Christ triumphed. Christ is risen, never to die again. Sometimes we have to get on the cross with him and face the void. But as we blessed God, we could see that even Golgotha will bloom. The nail pierced hand is raised in blessing. At the deepest levels of reality, all is well. Truly well! That to me is the deep meaning of worship that arises from being devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, the breaking of the bread and to prayer.