

SERMON: Acts 2:42-47

Devoted

Not even when the words he said were spurned and rejected. He taught basic spiritual truths in everyday language, framing his lessons with agricultural pictures and practical illustrations. But they were met with scorn and scoffing, mockery and ridicule.

Not even when his own followers tried to rein him in and keep him from his mission. He told them what was going to happen, what he came to do. And though they were confused, their default was to tell him that they knew better than he did.

Not even when the religious leaders tried to cloud his message. He spoke openly, taught faithfully, loved consistently. And they saw it as a power play. They heard an attack on their position. And so, they called him a liar and a fraud.

Not even when his hands were bound, his body beaten, and his head stuck with thorns. Not even when his own people called out their hatred and demanded his execution. Not even when he hung on the cross and suffocated.

Not even then did he quit, did he give up, did he throw up his hands in exasperation and figure it just wasn't worth it—that you weren't worth it. Because you always were. You always are. Your Savior, Jesus Christ, is totally devoted to you.

We could pile up another list of “not evens,” couldn't we? Not even when the sins I try to keep hidden suddenly burst forth in astonishing cruelty—harsh words, violent hands, hateful looks. Not even when my ears are shut because I don't want to hear God call out my sin, or because it's so depressing to sift through the consequences and fallout. Not even when I doubt, when I think God can't fix this, can't fix me, when my fear assumes a power greater than God.

Not even then does the Savior stop. He gives himself to you—all of him for all of you. His perfect life of humble obedience, that awful suffering of bloody punishment, that glorious resurrection in unanimous victory—it's all yours. And poured out in his life and death is forgiveness of sin, spiritual peace with God, eternal life in heaven. But not even then does the Savior stop giving. Because he is a Good Shepherd, who relentlessly chases after you, calls you gently back, scoops you up in his arms and says, “I'm right here. I've got you. I will not let you go.” That is his devotion.

And it might tempting, in a way, to end right there. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we've had the opportunity to revisit those familiar words from Psalm 23 that emphasize Jesus' devotion. The Lord is your Shepherd. He restores you. He leads you in righteousness. He protects you from the valleys of sin and death. And he gives you that promise of eternal life forever in heaven. That is true devotion.

But there is another part of your Good Shepherd's devotion that we get to talk about today. It's the part that's hinted at in Psalm 23 with those words, “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life” (v. 6). Your Good Shepherd leads and guides you right now, in this life. For as often as you wander away and he leaves the 99 and chases after you and brings you back to his flock...he also sets you down and says, “Now, go! Live in this goodness and mercy, this grace and love!”

Your devotion follows his devotion to you!

And that's when we come to our sermon text and see this beautiful example of the early Christians—after their Savior had ascended into heaven—living in their faith. So what did that look like for them? And what should that look like for us?

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

How do you start a puzzle? I realize there could be various opinions about this, but I'm guessing that most people start a puzzle by sorting out the edge pieces from the field pieces. The goal is to get the frame or the border of the puzzle in place. Because with that frame, you are better able to understand and recognize and know how and where all the field pieces go.

Perhaps that's a way of thinking about how those early believers structured and organized their lives. They needed a frame. They needed a border to understand how all of God's people would work and fit together in a sometimes confusing and complex world. So what was their frame?

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching...

That's where it starts. That's the frame. That's the foundation. Yes, we get to read about some amazing miracles and wonders happening among these believers, just as we got to read about some amazing miracles and wonders happening in the life of Jesus Christ himself. But the border, the frame, the foundation was always the Word of God, not the miracles. It was always the teachings of the Word of God Incarnate, the instruction that was passed down to Jesus' followers. That was first and foremost. And so...

⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

Every day! I'm sure many—if not most—of them had jobs. I'm sure they had serious responsibilities at home and wonderful opportunities for recreation. But that didn't change their devotion to the Word of God. Every day.

Oh, but things are different now. School and 4-H and FFA and sports leagues demand so much more of us—practices, games, tournaments, conventions. There are cities to explore, lakes to fish, mountains to hike. And besides, we don't have to worship in a building. We can worship wherever!

Are things different now? Or are we simply different? Have we simply tried to make church and worship and Bible study another piece of the puzzle that fits in with everything else...when it really should be the border, the frame which helps us understand and define everything else?

And maybe that's especially important for us to remember going into a vacancy. There is no greater devotion than what our Savior shows to us here, in his Word. Here are amazing wonders and miracles. Here salvation is poured out in the waters of baptism, strength is given in the food of Lord's Supper. Here the Shepherd calls us back with the promise of forgiveness and the joy of his blessings. And so, let our devotion echo his. Be here. In the Word. With God's people.

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common.

These early Christians weren't like billiard balls. They didn't start out together once, and then scatter and smatter and go their separate ways, only to occasionally bump into each other every once in a while. They were together. And they had a common faith that exploded in worship, in prayer, and even in fellowship meals. They were close: connected, fused, and tied together.

Oh, but things are different now. Our churches are different—my church is different. It's stuck in the mud. It's not my style. The pastor's boring. And that's to say nothing about the way I've been hurt by some of these people. We're supposed to be united, but they have different politics, and that guy looks at me funny, and she doesn't know what it's like to struggle at all.

Are things different now? Or are we simply different? Have we simply forgotten what God's church is designed to be: not a magic lamp for my preferences and politics, but a fountain of life for sinners who need a Savior?

Look around for a moment. What do you see? Or better, whom do you see? Because that person in the padded chair beside you is not an enemy or a nuisance or a troglodyte. That person is a soul for whom Christ died. That person is someone who came to hear and to feed on and to rejoice in the Savior that you need, too. That person is your family, and together you are the ones who celebrate your Savior's undying devotion. So pray for each other. Build each other up. Eat together. Be here and encourage each other to remember the unity you have in Christ.

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.

For as often as this family of believers was together, there was another simple, but astounding thing that also defined them as a church. They were "out there." They had to be. They knew the needs in their community, and they met them with a robust generosity. And the people "out there" knew them, respected them, and honored them for it.

Oh, but things are different now. Our world is much more hostile. They hate us. They think we're hypocrites. They mock our faith and undermine our teaching. And meanwhile, they promote their own wicked philosophies and non-Christian theories. And then they wonder why it all falls apart!

Are things different now? Or are we simply different? Are they the hypocrites? Or are we? Have we only gathered here, waiting for them to come and bend to us, without going out to meet them, to discover their needs, and to give them the one thing—the one thing!—they need more than anything?

Sometimes, hack theologians try to guilt the church into change by asking the question: if Jesus were alive and in person today, would he be here on a Sunday morning? Or would he be out in the streets, meeting people, and talking with them? The implication, of course, is that he would be "out there" ...and so we should be, too.

But it's a faulty question. First of all, because Jesus is absolutely alive today—Easter continues! And second, because he is absolutely right here on a Sunday morning, but also with you whenever you go out into the streets. Because he's God! And that's the extent of his devotion! So, let's not use that question to imply that gathering together here is somehow pointless. No! This is where we are fed by our Savior's life and death, his sacrificial devotion that makes us members of God's own family.

But let's also not use that question to excuse our own laziness. The world is dying. And it's dying without hope. But we have the hope that saves. So go out. Figure out what people are struggling and suffering with, and help them. And remember that they need to hear about the Savior's devotion more than anything.

Will we fail at this? Yes. Will we sometimes be a poor, shadowy reflection of that early Christian church? Yes. But do we still have a Good Shepherd that chases after us, forgives us, and equips us to go out in faith? Yes. And that won't change. Not even when we have a vacancy. Not even when we struggle with attendance. Not even when we're tired and confused and sick. We always have a Good Shepherd—a Living Shepherd—who is devoted to us!

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen.