The Robust Church

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
Acts 2:42-47

July 16, 2017
What a thrilling Vacation Bible School week we’ve had, with 260 children and some 160 volunteers under the wonderful leadership of Jennifer Zicht and the amazing Children’s Ministries staff we have here at VPC! These magnificent VBS decorations on the chancel with all of the giant gears and moving parts remind me of when I took an entire college course on designing gears. I learned that every gear is uniquely designed for what it is intended to do and so are you!

Our theme all week has been, “Created by God. Built for a Purpose,” with daily themes to reinforce those great ideas—God made you. God is for you. God is always with you. God will always love you. God made you for a reason. Great ideas to reinforce with kids, grandkids, nieces and nephews! Underneath all of these wonderful messages is the biggest message of them all, “It’s all about Jesus,” connecting children to the Lord who made them and loves them – the greatest message to reinforce in our homes.

This summer, we are looking at some of our favorite Go-To Bible verses, and this morning we look at another of my favorite go-to Bible passages from the Book of Acts. Just listen to the excitement, the power, awe and life of this robust, vibrant Christian fellowship. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by
day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I love the words robust and vibrant when thinking about the church. Robust means to be full of health, to be strong, sturdy and vigorous. To be vibrant is to be pulsing with life and energy. Robust and vibrant are the opposites of weak and feeble. The church of Jesus isn’t meant to be weak and feeble but to be vibrant, vital, really alive—to be robust! There are a lot of indicators that tell if a congregation is robust and vibrant. Although just looking around at all of the kids we saw this week is the best picture imaginable of a robust, vibrant fellowship—and the VBS messages we taught the kids all week are very much a part of the robust message of the church—created by God, built for a purpose!

In this passage, we see four things the robust, vibrant church did in its early years and still does today: And they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching – what the apostle-disciple followers of Jesus taught. Today, we study the whole Bible. They devoted themselves to fellowship, not just having a cup of coffee in church but growing real friendships of the heart, with Jesus at the center. They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread—which can mean two things—eating together like we will do between services –
just enjoying each other—and celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Finally, they devoted themselves to the prayers—prayers for each other, prayers for whatever the Lord laid upon their hearts. We read they were devoted to these four practices. Why is that significant?

When I left for my freshman year at Georgia Tech, I left behind my disconsolate nine-year-old brother. When the Christmas break arrived, I rode the train home from Atlanta to the train station in Alexandria and then caught a taxi to our home in North Arlington. Walking in the front door, I yelled, "I'm home." Immediately, I heard footsteps downstairs running and bounding up the stairs and zooming into view raced my nine-year-old brother Jim, who executed a perfect flying tackle, landing on the floor with both arms wrapped around my right leg. "Hi Jim," I said. No response, he just lay there, holding to me tightly. Up came Mom and Dad, a handshake from Dad, a hug from Mom. Then my two sisters made their appearance. We said, "Hi." Then everybody went back to what they were doing—everyone but my brother. "OK, Jim, you can let go now. I am ready to go to our room now." He didn't let go and so I picked up my suitcase and dragging a nine-year-old, I shuffled through the entry way, down the stairs and to our room. Wherever I was for the next ten days, there was my brother with me. Whatever the word devoted means, that’s devoted! Today he calls me his “brother brother.” Brother in the flesh. Brother in the Lord. I love him dearly. Jim’s arms tightly grabbing my leg is what the concept of “devoted” is all about.
When the early church devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers, they wrapped their arms around those practices and held on for dear life—because when you hold on to those practices you are holding on to Jesus and he is holding on to you! For VPC, our congregation, to continue to be robust and vibrant, it means you and I are invited to do the same thing: regular time in Bible reading, real time with other Christians—perhaps in a VPC small group, eating with other believers and regularly praying for the people and issues on your heart. And more than that, since our focus is on kids today, are you doing these things with the children in your life (of any age)? Church programs, even wonderful ones like VBS, can never replace you. Reading the Bible to or with your kids. Eating with Christian friends with your kids and their kids if you or they have children. Praying with your children. I loved to read the Bible and pray with our kids at bedtime. Find what works for you and be devoted to being devoted to the Lord who loves you!

In the early years of the church of Jesus, those Christians were devoted to Jesus and to each other through their devotion to the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. And what happened? The robust, vibrant, super exciting vital church began to grow. They had a sense of awe about them as God was doing things among them. They shared their belongings, they worshipped together, ate together with generous hearts. I love this phrase, “they had the goodwill of all the people.” People outside of the church were drawn to Jesus. “Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” It wasn’t a church program that drew people to Jesus, it was the spirit of the people.

I was once in Fairhope, Alabama, talking with a delightful lady about church life and I asked her, “Carol, how is your
“church doing?” She replied, “We’re bubbling!” I said, “You’re bubbling? What do you mean?” She said, “While we love our pastor Julian, there is so much more. It doesn’t make any difference whether you are in worship or at a Bible study group or a mission group or bump into each other in the grocery there is this shared sense that something great is happening, that our Lord is doing something among us; we are going somewhere and it is good. We’re bubbling!” Bubbling is a great image of a robust, vibrant church!

I can give you another picture of what a bubbling church looks like. I recently flew through San Francisco to a gathering in Los Angeles. On the way home, Ann Marie encouraged me to stop off in San Francisco to visit our son’s family. So, I texted our daughter-in-law who said she’d meet me at the airport. Sophia picked up their kids from day-camp on what was build-a-bear day and drove them to the airport but she didn’t tell them why. As the mini-van pulled up, I could see the three kids see me and react with all kinds of joyous screaming and loving. Whatever is meant by “bubbling,” that’s bubbling!

Now, while the Bible never describes the church of Jesus with the word bubbling, I know enough to know that you and I want to be a part of a church that is bubbling, that is robust and vibrant. God has blessed our church, VPC, to be a robust, vibrant, bubbling church! So how do we become even more bubbling than we are? By devoting ourselves and our children specifically to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers! Teaching them they are created by God and built for a purpose.

David Jordan-Haas and I were talking about this morning and the enthusiasm of all of the kids and their families and he said, “You know, it might be good to end talking about the Children’s Blessing you use on Sunday mornings,” and I
realized he was absolutely right. On the Sundays that we don’t have a children’s message we pronounce a blessing on the kids before they head off to Sunday school. However, while blessing kids here is wonderful, it is even more significant when you do it at home. So, let’s end our time with a few thoughts about blessing your children or grandchildren or any child you may be in relationship with.

We discover in the Bible that God and God’s people have always practiced the blessing of our children as Abraham blessed Isaac, who blessed Jacob, who blessed his children. When our son, Lee, graduated from high school, I started thinking that the father of the prodigal son waited until the son came home before bringing out the fatted calf. I thought, "Why wait? Why not bless and send Lee that same way now?" I went to a butcher and asked for five T-bone steaks. He asked, "How thick?" All my life I had gone to a super-market where you pick cut meat up in the meat department. I said, "What do you mean how thick? Don't they come in standard thicknesses!" He just rolled his eyes. So, I brought home five thick juicy steaks and we had a feast. Then our family gathered around Lee and laid hands on him. Ann Marie prayed over him as did his sisters. I prayed:

Lord, May Lee know who he is and Whose he is. May he know wherever he goes You are sending him, that you have a purpose in his being there, May he remain true to the Lord with steadfast purpose. And now, bless Lee and keep him; make Your face to shine upon him and be gracious to him. The Lord turn his face toward him and give him peace.

It was an emotional wonderful moment, and Lee knew he wasn’t leaving home. He was being blessed and sent! We shared similar meals and blessings with each of our children as they were sent to pursue their lives. I just adapted the
blessing for our children from the famous and familiar blessing known as the Aaronic Blessing, the blessing Aaron, the brother of Moses, pronounced over the people of Israel: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace* (Numbers 6:24-26).

So, here at VPC, when we began to offer a blessing to our children before they left for Sunday School, here is just another variation and simplification of Aaron’s marvelous blessing:

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\text{The Lord who loves you blesses you and holds you tight.} \quad \text{(The Lord bless you and keep you)}
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\text{The Lord who loves you smiles upon you and gives you joy.} \quad \text{(The Lord make his face to shine upon you)}
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\text{The Lord who loves you looks you in the face and is always with you.} \quad \text{(The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you his peace).}
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Make this blessing your own. These words are at the bottom of your bulletin but you can change them to fit; you must put your hand on your child’s head, look her or him in the eye and say what comes to your heart concerning their future well-being and God’s love upon them!

The Lord who loves you blesses you and holds you tight.

The Lord who loves you smiles upon you and gives you joy.

The Lord who loves you looks you in the face and is always with you.