Fully Devoted

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Acts 2:42-47

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The first followers of Jesus were devoted. You could say they were All-In.

When I think of this word devoted, dogs come to mind. With a show of hands, how many of you have a dog living in your home? Half of all American households have a dog. Some 300 years ago, Frederick the Great was the first to call dogs man’s best friend. I like what Mark Twain said about dogs: “The more I learn about people, the more I love my dog.” Dogs bond with humans and become devoted for life.

Let me tell you about a dog named Hachiko, who lived in Japan in the 1920s. Hachiko walked with his owner, a college professor, every morning to the train station. After the professor boarded the train, Hachiko walked home, only to return every afternoon to meet the professor for the 3:00 train.

The professor suffered a fatal stroke one day in class. Hachiko showed up for the 3:00 train but the professor was not on board. Get this: Hachiko returned for the same 3:00 train every day for nine years, nine months and fifteen days. People at the subway station took notice and began to call Hachiko “the faithful dog.”

Can I tell you one more dog story? Bobbie was a collie who lived with a family, in the same era as Hachiko, in Silverton, Oregon. Bobbie travelled on a family vacation to Indiana, some 2500 miles away from home. Bobbie was lost on vacation and never found. The family returned to Oregon sadly without their beloved dog. Six months later, who
shows up at the front door? You guessed it, Bobbie. He had walked 2500 miles home. Like I said, dogs are devoted.

Luke describes Jesus’ first followers this way: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers” (Acts 2:42). Devoted is a compound Greek work consisting of the prefix pros meaning toward and the root katereo meaning persist. Devoted connotes perseverance and endurance. Their devotion was not short lived. It was a long obedience in the same direction.

Luke identifies four practices to which Jesus’ first followers were devoted.

First, they were devoted to the Apostles’ teaching. Jesus chose twelve people to accompany him on his mission. We call them apostles. It’s a word meaning “the sent ones.” When Jesus ended his three-year ministry, he commissioned these sent ones to carry forward his mission. Their teaching carried considerable weight and authority in the early church. Later, their teaching took written shape in the New Testament.

Second, they were devoted to fellowship. The Greek word for fellowship, koinonia, means to hold in common. These first followers share a common allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Messiah.
A few verses later, we read, “All the believers were together and held everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (2:44-45). The Greek word for common, koina, derives from koinonia. Literally, the verse reads, “They held everything in fellowship.” Their fellowship expressed itself in tangible acts of generosity.

This text challenges western capitalists who bristle at the idea that these verses seem to support communism. The first followers of Jesus gave up their rights to private ownership. They formed a cooperative to meet human need.

Yet, the decision to pool their resources was strictly voluntary. The apostles did not impose this practice on the community. Apart from one other reference to this same practice in Acts 4:34-35, this forsaking of private property occurs only once in the New Testament. Elsewhere in Acts and the New Testament, believers retained their private property and basic possessions.

That said, I would not write this passage off. It is a much-needed antidote in a materialistic society like ours. A word used to describe our materialism in America is affluenza, the melding of two words, affluence and influenza. It is an apt word to describe our conspicuous consumption.

Third, they were devoted to the breaking of bread. Breaking bread has a double meaning in Scripture. It can refer to a common table meal or the Lord’s Supper. In Paul’s letter to the
Corinthians, the early church observed the Lord’s Supper as part of a larger table meal called an agape or love feast.

In the early church, rich and poor alike shared common meals. Breaking bread with people outside of your socio-economic group was unimaginable back in the day. Rich people ate with rich people; poor people ate with poor people. No wonder we read in verse 47 that these early believers “enjoyed the favor of all the people.” Their distinctive unity and philanthropy elicits admiration from a watching world.

Fourth, they were devoted to prayers. Prayers is plural, meaning they were devoted to prayer of all kinds. They observed fixed hours for prayer. They prayed the Psalms. They recited the Lord’s Prayer. They are characterized several times in Acts as people devoted to prayer (1:14; 6:4).

When the 3000 new converts repent and submit to baptism, they do not attempt to recreate the Pentecost moment. Let’s see if we can whip ourselves up into a spiritual frenzy so we can speak in tongues like we did on Pentecost. They arrange their lives in ways that make them open to God’s leading in the future. They devote themselves to four practices: learn, share, pray and worship.

We come to the so-what moment in this sermon. I have four applications to offer you, based on these four practices.

First, that we devote ourselves to the Apostles’ teaching or reading the Word. We do not read the Bible merely for information. We read it for formation. The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to form Christ in us.

Reading the Word will upset you at times. The Bible does not flatter us or curry our favor. It tells us the unvarnished truth. If you take this book seriously, it will confound you. I recall something that Gilbert Highet, professor of humanities at Columbia University, said about the Bible: “Anyone who reads the Bible and isn’t puzzled half the time doesn’t have his mind on what he is doing.”

We are starting ten new small groups this fall at VPC—men’s groups, women’s groups, coed groups, parent and senior citizen groups. We will offer groups during the weekday, weeknight and weekend. Why are we going to so much trouble? Reading the Bible with other people is one of the best ways to grow your faith.

Second, that we devote ourselves to share life with fellow believers. Sadly, we dumb fellowship down in our day to coffee and donuts, campfires and s’mores. Fellowship in the biblical sense is a shared allegiance
to the person, body and work of Christ. Our allegiance is not to race, income level, political party or social cause. I long for our church to become more multiethnic in the future.

When it comes to fellowship, I must forewarn you. Eventually, somebody will say something you will not like or will hurt your feelings. You can pretty much count on it. I say this, not because we are mean, nasty people. I say this because the Bible identifies us as flawed people called into union with Christ with other flawed people.

It is not lost on me how generous these first believers were with each other. They pooled their resources to meet human need. We can do this, folks. We can pool our resources more than we are doing now. We can practice radical generosity.

Third, that we devote ourselves to worship. We are asking you to commit or recommit to worship this fall. Our goal is not merely to woo you back here next Sunday. It is our deeply held conviction that we can be better Christians together than we can be on our own.

In American church culture, there is a growing phenomenon for people to attend worship less often. On your screen are six reasons why Christians in America attend worship less regularly. 1. We are more mobile. 2. We are more affluent. 3. We have more options. 4. We consider church optional. 5. We have not been challenged. 6. We are not likely to be active in a small group.

So many choices compete for our Sunday morning time. Yes, we are more mobile and affluent. We have so many more choices for
what we do with our Sunday morning time. A recreational mindset has taken hold in American life. The lack of challenge in worship is on us as preachers. The last reason for attending less is instructive. If we don’t know people on a personal level in the church, we are less apt to attend worship.

Fourth, that we are devoted to prayer. In the opening chapter of Acts, the first thing Jesus’ followers did after Christ’s ascension to the right hand of God was to gather for prayer in the upper room. They devoted themselves to prayer.

There was a time earlier in my ministry when I was more nonchalant about prayer. Sure, we need to pray. It almost goes without saying. Yet, if truth be told, I was more eager to do something for God than be with God. I am coming to appreciate how my being with God in prayer informs my doing for God.

I participate in a weekly prayer group each Monday with people in our church. It is hard on Monday to break free for prayer, yet I have come to rely on this prayer gathering. Praying with other people settles me. It helps me loosen my grip on this church. I cease my striving. It moves me to hear other people pray about the same things that matter to me also.

John Calvin said God orders prayer not so much for God’s sake but for ours. I ask God to change my circumstances. Instead, God uses my circumstances to change me. Prayer has a way of clarifying what matters. It puts me in the place of greatest spiritual potential.

Be All-In this fall. Devoted to learn the Word. Devoted to share life with each other. Devoted to worship. Devoted to prayer.