

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Devoted”**

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*“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts. 2:42).*

If you would, please have a look at the graphs on the back side of the bulletin. In 1998 the University of Chicago asked a thousand Americans 18 and over what was very important to them. Then they asked the same questions twenty-five years later. Clearly, the values that helped define our national character for generations are receding in importance. 25 years ago, 70% of Americans said patriotism was “very important” to them. Today, 38% say it is “very important.” 25 years ago, 62% of Americans said religion was very important to them. Today, 39% say religion is very important. And look what happened to volunteerism in the community.

I think we can all sense these changes. We’ve known for a long time it’s becoming much more difficult for the non-profits to find volunteers, at the hospital, driving our school bus, serving meals. We’ve witnessed fewer people showing up in the Veteran’s Park for the patriotic speeches on Memorial Day. And Watertown, it seems, can no longer sustain two Catholic churches; the other churches in town are also sagging in attendance.

Notice, the only value that *has* grown in importance is making money!

What does it all mean? I think we are witnessing the dramatic decline of our country, our culture, our values. Sometimes you can even smell the decay. In Chicago, wherever you go now, you can smell pot, even on Michigan Ave or the Dan Ryan Expressway. To me it’s the stench of a city and nation in rapid decline, not necessarily causal, just indicative.

How are we as Christians to live in this decaying environment? I believe our text can help us because those early Christians in Jerusalem were also living in a nation in decline.

This is a continuation of last week’s text where Peter says to the crowd, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins” (Acts 2:38). *“Save yourselves from this crooked generation”* Peter says. About 3000 were baptized that day.

Is it fair to say we live in a “crooked generation”? I think so. It makes me think of what the Lord said in Isaiah, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil!” (5:20).

Well, how did the early church live faithfully within their crooked generation? This is what they did. Nothing fancy here. No gimmicks or gizmos. It’s very simple: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer.”

Those early Christians knew that if they were to remain faithful, they could not go about casually. They were the minority population. As Christians we are also among the minority. So, this ancient wisdom is for us, for the minority, the remnant of those who are left, for the stump. This is our road map for living in our crooked generation.

They devoted themselves. In the Greek, that word “devoted” means to persist, to hold fast to something even when you don’t feel like it, even when it’s inconvenient or unpopular or dangerous. Nonetheless, they devoted themselves to it.

To what? To the apostles’ teaching. That’s doctrine, a dirty little word today. It’s so rigid and unbending. It’s seen as something that divides us. But the early church devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.

Remember, this text is speaking of those 3000 in Jerusalem who had just been baptized. It’s not as if they miraculously received a deposit of theology in their hearts and minds. They knew the contents of their faith was incomplete. There was some learning to be done. They wanted to widen the diameter of their knowledge. Otherwise, they would go in 3000 different directions and quickly be reabsorbed into the unbelieving and crooked culture around them. So, they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to those who were eyewitness of what Jesus said and did. That’s what would hold them together, a common profession of faith. That’s what would make them one. As individuals they were weak. Holding on to the apostolic teaching, however, was like raking the glowing embers together. We are thus closer to one another in the faith than we may be with those nearest us who do not share the Christian faith.

39% of our population feels religion is “very important”. Remember, of those 39%, a good percentage are Muslims or Hindus or Jews or members of cults, or spiritualists.

Of those 39%, some are Christian, but many of them are no longer devoted to the apostles’ teaching. They may have beautiful churches and endowed music programs, but what is proclaimed within has little to do with the apostles’ teaching. In many churches today, what is proclaimed and taught is little more than a pale ecclesiastical reflection of our culture’s zeitgeist. In other words, many churches have manipulated their doctrine to merely reflect the ideas and beliefs and values of this particular time, in this particular culture, where right is wrong and wrong is right, where there are no hard biblical truths that

the church robustly affirms, where anything goes. You name it . . . it's okay: abortion, LGBTQ, gender transitioning, euthanasia. It's as if the Bible no longer has anything to say about morality. In fact, the mission of some churches seems to be to correct what they assume are mistakes in the Bible and the teaching authority of the church over two millennia. These churches seem to know better than God what makes for human flourishing, human happiness and ultimately, human blessedness.

The early church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. The text says they also devoted themselves to the fellowship. They put a higher premium on the unity of the body of Christ over personal preferences.

These days Christians will jump from congregation to congregation because nothing is quite right. It's like Goldilocks testing the temperature of the porridge. And they get angry if the Church's preaching of the Word gets a little too truthful. We want pastors to preach faithfully, so long as they don't meddle in our own lives. They can preach about the world "out there," but best not preach about the sin "in here." You know, the easiest thing in the world is to leave a church with a huff and a puff, or just disappear into the ether. It takes the devotion of the ancient Christians to stay with a church even when you don't get what you want.

They devoted themselves to the fellowship. We recognize no race, no wealth, no class, no status, no demographic. We have no political parties. Leave all that darkness and division behind. Leave all that partisanship behind. In baptism we are made one, despite our wallet, waistline, pigmentation, or place. We are united by the apostles' teaching, by baptism, by the Lord's Supper. We are not united by political allegiances to the Democrats, or the Republicans. They are not the hope of the world. They do not liberate or save. Jesus is Lord. Jesus saves. Our hope, our present, and our future is in Him. They devoted themselves to unity within Him.

They devoted themselves to the breaking of bread. That's code language for the Lord's Supper. For those earliest Christians it was not okay to neglect receiving the Lord's Supper. It was not okay to have a take it or leave it attitude toward the Lord's Supper. They knew they sinned every day. They knew the Lord's Supper delivered forgiveness. Therefore, they yearned for it whenever they could get it. Don't you also sin every day? Don't you also crave His forgiveness?

Finally, they devoted themselves to prayer. Our crooked generation is squeamish about prayer. For example, football coaches are disciplined for offering to pray with their players after the game. News commentators now like to say, "our thoughts" go out to the victims, not our "thoughts and prayers". When Gail was contending with cancer, many from her circles in Madison said they were "sending positive thoughts" our way. That's nice, but how does one even do that? And what good can it possibly do? I am very confident, however, that praying can change circumstances, because our prayers are heard and answered every time by the Lord our God who loves us and desires our good and is wise and all-powerful.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. This is how we can faithfully navigate our crooked generation.

They devoted themselves to it. C.S. Lewis wrote, "If Christianity is not true, it is of no importance whatsoever. If it is true, it is of infinite importance. What it cannot be is moderately important." They devoted themselves to it. They were passionate about it. Their passion reflected just a bit of the passion Jesus has shown us.

Our Shepherd laid down His life for the flock. Who would do such a thing? Only a Shepherd who loves His sheep. Only a Shepherd who is more passionate about our welfare than His own. Only a Shepherd who does not put a limit on His love. Only Jesus.

William Barclay wrote, "If He had refused the cross or, if in the end, He had come down from the cross, it would have meant there was a limit to God's love, that there was something which that love was not prepared to suffer for men, that there was a line beyond which it would not go. But, Jesus went the whole way and died on the cross and this means that there is literally no limit to God's love, that there is nothing in all the universe which that love is not prepared to suffer for men, that there is nothing, not even death on a cross, which it will refuse to bear for men" (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 422).

However important, or not, He is to you, He loves you, and has suffered all to save you from sin, death, and the devil. Even if you devote yourself entirely to Him, you are not going the length He has gone for you, nor could you. There are limits to our devotion. I'm not thinking about some future persecution where our very lives just might hang in the balance; I'm thinking about how I failed Him in what I said or did last week, when the stakes were much, much lower. So, there are limits to our devotion to Jesus. But Jesus has suffered all the way for us, for our forgiveness, for your salvation and mine. He did not forcefully come down from the cross. Men had to pry the nails out of the wood and remove His corpse from the cross.

We live in a crooked generation. God can change that, and we pray that He does. But for the moment we live in a country that is in rapid decline, also reflected by the shrinking number of Christians for whom their faith is "very important". Our own devotion to God may also be inconsistent. But know this: nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, because it's His devotion to us that matters the most. Thanks be to God. Amen.