

“What A Church Does”

Acts 2:37-47

October 21, 2007

When Peter exclaimed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus said, “On this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.”

The resurrected Jesus said, “All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded.”

So, after we have gone, after we have shared the good news and people are excited about being baptized – well, what then?

Acts 2:37-47.

As we look to the earliest of the early church – where Peter has preached and many in the congregation come to him to ask, “Brothers, what should we do?” – we see consistency in the approach. Look at Peter’s response, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.”

What then? Look at verses 41 and 42, “So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Then in verses 43 through 45, the people were awed by what God was doing and they gave.

Devoting Themselves: Personally

This morning, we are talking about devotion. The church is a gathering of people devoted to serving and following Jesus Christ. That’s what we are: a gathering of people devoted to serving and following Jesus Christ.

Devotion involves urgency; it is a disciplined urgency. Devotion has an object, a focus. Meaning is found in the object of devotion – for Christians, meaning is found in our relationship with Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Devotion involves intentional participation in the disciplines of following Jesus.

Look again at what Scripture says, “The devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” These are the same disciplines we follow today:

We devote ourselves to the **apostles’ teaching**; that is, we preach from the Word of God. It is why the vast majority of time in the service is dedicated to reading Scripture and expounding on Scripture. If you look at the order of worship in your bulletin, you will see

the ways that Scripture dominates our time here: the call to worship is a responsive reading; 95 percent of the time from the Psalms, occasionally from somewhere else in Scripture. The prayer of confession is unique to us, but the assurance of pardon is straight from Scripture. We take an offering in response to the command of God (more on that later), and we read texts from the Old and New Testaments. Then, you get an ever-so-brief sermon which is designed to draw out the meaning of the text and apply it to our current situation.

We devote ourselves to **fellowship**. If there is one thing this congregation can do, it is fellowship. Look at the Bazaar yesterday, consider the Adoracion celebration in September, look at your calendar in December, check the patio after service. The fellowship here is a consistent strength; it is remarkable the number of people who have said to me – long-time members who have been devoted to the ministry of this congregation since before I was here – I found a family that cares for me here.

We devote ourselves to the **breaking of bread**. Here, we can read into it a little bit and talk about celebrating the sacraments: the Lord's Supper and baptism. In the Lord's Supper, communion, we follow Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me." We are spiritually fed and encouraged, and we participate in a tangible witness to the Lordship of Christ.

We devote ourselves to the **prayers**. In prayer, we are presenting ourselves before God. Prayer includes praise, it includes confession, it includes thanksgiving, it includes petitions, it includes listening. Prayer is something we do individually and together. When we do the pastoral prayer, it is a time when the entire community lifts up our hearts before God.

Devotion involves intentional participation in the disciplines of following Jesus.

Let me explain it in a different way.

In our house, we have four pets: two dogs and two cats. Their potential as disciples is very different. With the dogs, we call them by their names and have the expectation that they will respond by coming to us. When we say, "Sit," we expect them to sit. When we say, "Down," we expect them to lie down. When we come home, they are delighted to see us; glad that we are there and joyous that we get to spend time together. They are not perfect, but their basic desire and attitude is one of seeking to please us.

Now, the cats are different. They do not respond when we call their names. They do not sit when we say, "sit." They run away when we want them to come near. They come when they want to; when it is convenient for them or they want something. Yesterday, as I was going through this sermon in preparation for this morning, I was sitting at the computer looking at the screen. Roxie, the younger of our two cats, jumped up onto the chair on which I was sitting, then onto my shoulders and she draped herself around me like a big boa constrictor. I was able to glimpse the computer screen between swishes of her tail in front of my eyes like a windshield wiper. Then, she crawled around, digging her

back claws into my shoulder, and climbed down into my lap where she parked herself and began purring. “Oh,” I think to myself, “she wants to be petted.” So, I begin petting her. While she is purring, she turns around and attacks my hand, biting several of my fingers, my forearm and my shirt.

Dogs recognize their dependence on your grace and focus their attention on you. Cats presume your grace and come when the mood strikes them.

Which describes you as a disciple? Do you wait expectantly for God, rejoicing when he is near; or, do you come to God on your own time and in your own terms? Now, this is not to say God loves dogs and does not love cats – I believe God loves both – but which describes devotion and discipleship better?

Devoting Themselves: Gifts, Tithes and Offerings

The second part of this passage talks about giving. Money and giving money: this, more than any other topic, causes people to get angry and leave the church. Why do preachers always have to talk about money?

Well, preachers talk about money because Jesus talked about money. Preachers talk about giving money because God commanded us to give and it is a sign of the devotion of the church – those gathered to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It is something the church does.

We give because God commanded us to give. The Malachi text is very clear that God expects his commands to be obeyed. There, in the sacrificial system, the people and the priests were offering up a pittance, offering up lame and blind animals and keeping the best for themselves. In other words, they were trying to pretend to obey God but were cheating. God is not fooled. Consider carefully God’s words here, “Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor?” Says the LORD of hosts.

Imagine you were invited to a potluck at the White House. The invitation instructs you to “bring something special.” Would you bring last Wednesday’s leftovers or would you go out of your way to bring your best?

Friends, you and I need to hear that – God takes it seriously when we disobey his command. Hear again this from the Malachi text,

From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and the food for it may be despised. “What a weariness this is,” you say, and you sniff at me, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand, says the LORD.

Our giving is a testimony to God of our devotion to God. Listen, God does not need our money; it is the reflection of the status of our heart that is the big deal. If our hearts are cold towards God; God knows it. If our hearts are stingy for ourselves; God knows it.

Devotion to God is real no matter how much money you make or earn during the year. Jesus celebrated the widow who gave her last pennies. Her devotion was real.

We are devoted to God in our giving because God cares what you give. Your giving is between you, God, and perhaps the IRS. So, if you are wondering whether I am singling some of you out – perhaps, yes, I am; though I do not know whom. I do not know what any of you give. However, if the story about the widow’s mite makes you cringe a little bit and think that you should do more, pay attention. That cringe is God tweaking your heart, looking for a little more devotion from you.

We are sending out stewardship letters this week with an invitation to prayerfully consider your pledge for next year. For some of you, this is something you have done for years. For others, this may be new. We are encouraging you to take time over the next several weeks to pray – specifically to pray – and to consider how you are going to present your gifts, tithes and offerings to God throughout the next year.

Look at it this way: the news reports have been full of statistics about how much the candidates for president in the Republican and Democratic parties have raised. Why? Because it shows how much support and “devotion” they have been able to develop as leaders. Entire groups have been formed for the purpose of raising money to get across the message of the candidate. There are ads on television, there are telephone calls during dinner, there are solicitations in the mail – each asking for your support *and* money.

All of that effort is devoted for the opportunity for a four year position. You and I have the opportunity to be devoted to a cause that is longer – much longer – eternally longer – than four years. The promises we have to offer are true. They are promises that God has made, that God has already fulfilled, and that we look forward in expectation to seeing God fulfill. No presidential candidate can even come close to delivering on the promises like the ones God has already kept.

The Church’s worship includes receiving the gifts, tithes and offering in response to God’s faithfulness. We give because we trust God for our salvation, because we trust God for our daily bread, because we trust that God is the one who is able to provide for us. We give to honor and respect Him. We give in response to the joy of our redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ.

The criticism of the people in both the time of the prophets and in the time of Jesus was that the people had forgotten God's goodness. God had brought them up out of the house of slavery. God had provided for them and delivered unto them the promised land. The people forgot, turned away, and took God for granted. Jesus came to the people, he declared that the time was fulfilled, the kingdom of God was near; he commanded the people to repent and believe the good news. They did not. Scripture reveals time and time again how God remains faithful despite the unfaithfulness of the people, calling them to return to Him, until such time as His patience is worn out and the full judgment against unrighteousness is revealed.

Even with those examples, we find ourselves in the situation where many Christians take God for granted. He has become a buddy, a friend, a servant, the great cosmic Santa Claus.

Nuh-uh. Do not be fooled. No. It is not that way. God will not be mocked that way. God is good, but God is God and we are not. God did judge, God does judge, God will judge.

We are devoted to God in our giving because God has been faithful to us. God has given us so much – so much that much is expected from us. The joy of our salvation, the following of his commands, the sharing of his good news, the going forward to find and bring back the lost; these are all things that God expects from us. He expects that from us because it is what he does. We are created in his image and this is what he does. Giving is what he does; therefore, giving is what we do.

The Church gives because it is a witness to those outside. Cora told you about the witness and the worship she experienced going for a second time to help Katrina victims. The generosity of the church is presumed by society, but it makes a huge difference in the life of individuals. What do I mean? In American society, we expect that the church will do good things, we expect the church to show up at disasters – therefore, it is not really news. Yet, for those that are individually touched and whose lives are transformed, they will never forget. They will tell of how God reached out through the efforts of people they did not know, underwritten by the financial gifts of those they will never meet, and sustained by the prayers of those they cannot even imagine exist.

Giving is a way we “go” and make disciples of all nations. It is a mark of our devotion to God. It is what the church does.

God blesses the church for its devotion. You do not know and you may never know whom God is going to bless with your giving. In his book, “Giving”, former President Bill Clinton lifts up the Samaritan's Purse program headed by Franklin Graham and notes how those shoeboxes of school supplies are transforming real lives of the children who receive them. We give to glorify God, but God lets us enjoy it, too.

Does that sound familiar?

Conclusion

The church does what the church is supposed to do: glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We glorify God by our devotion: studying Scripture, fellowship, worship, prayer, and giving out of the blessings God has given us. That's what a church does, and when a church does that, it finds that it is "going" and making disciples of all nations.

"Day by day," Scripture says, "as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 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."

May those words describe the ministry of Chula Vista Presbyterian Church. Amen? Amen.

8:45 prayer and offering

10:00 offering