

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson
“Devoted to the Apostles’ Teaching”

Acts 2: 42
June 20, 2004

Do you know what the symbol for the Holy Spirit is in the Celtic tradition? It’s a Wild Goose! No soft and cooing dove, there. But a loud, boisterous, unmanageable, honking-till-your-ears-hurt... goose.

And when you read Jesus’ words about the Spirit, it’s not hard to see why they would choose a goose. **“The wind... the spirit... blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound (plenty of honking) but you can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going.”**

Don’t think you can chart this... Plan for it...

Certainly don’t get any ideas about managing this.

It does as it pleases.

And he’s talking to Nicodemus, this religious leader who is so stuck in his head... with a need to know and control and slice and dice eternal mysteries. Nailing things down, is the basic agenda...

And Jesus shrugs... **“You can never really tell, Nicodemus, where this goose comes from or where it’s going. Just forget your cages and your pens... This goose is loose.”**

I’m trying to remember that in these days of transition. We’re in this “Season after Pentecost” as some in the church call it. A season, which is suppose to serve as a reminder that the Spirit of God got things going and still does... and empowered the church and still does. And it’s the wild goose of the spirit that animated the church and still does... And we’re mainly along for the ride.

We’re riding a wild goose. So even in these days as I try to preach to where we are as a community it might be important for you to hear in your imagination a goose honking in the background. Or maybe we should chime the hour with a duck call... eleven, loud, obnoxious honks that say to us... **“don’t forget who’s running things around here.”** The goose is loose.

Having said that, I want to return to Luke’s little line after Pentecost, which describes (in a very nailed down, tidy kind of way) how the early church was functioning. **“They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teachings, to fellowship, and to prayer.”**

I’m going to preach from this line for three Sundays... and it’s very important... vitally important... that you hear me say this in the beginning... This is really one sermon. The sermon is simply this, that a community of faith will be healthy and vibrant as they are devoted to all three of these things...

to the Apostle’s teachings... to fellowship... and to prayer.

to core belief...

to community...

and to the inner life.

This is what Luke's line is going to tell us in our days of transition. Commitment to, involvement in, and balance between these three things, these three poles... is what it takes. If one is forgotten or if one is raised above the others the church won't be healthy. (Honk, Honk)

“They devoted themselves...” Devoted, as in tending to... committed to... make a fuss over... give time to... sacrifice for. Our word comes from the Latin word which means “to vow.” It's like childhood friends pinky-swearing a promise that they'll be there forever. The church all pinky swore to some things... devoted themselves...

Like newly weds tending to every nuance of their relationship and their partners every need... the church had devoted themselves to some things.

Like new parents, just staring at their baby and noticing every little thing... hearing every noise... the church had devoted themselves to some things.

Like a fan, that can remember plays from seasons gone by, knows every name and number, doesn't miss a game and never leaves till the game is over... and always applauds the team... rising to sing the Alma Mater proudly, even during a dismal season. Like that... the early church was devoted to some things.

To the apostles' teaching. The apostles, a.k.a., the twelve disciples and their teaching.

Those who sat as students at the feet of their master, Jesus.

Those who'd heard and seen it all.

“Been there and done that” with Jesus.

And even more importantly, those who were sent by Jesus (the word “apostle” means “sent”) to preach the gospel and teach his commandments... and make disciples of Jesus... more folks who are sitting at the feet of their master, Jesus... via the apostles.

So... after Pentecost, you had this community of new believers... some of them, no doubt, had followed Jesus and were familiar with his ministry, his teachings. Some of them, not... some of them were brand spanking new to this movement.

And as we've said for a few weeks now, a very diverse group.

Who were... devoted... attending to, listening to, committed to, the apostles' teaching as if they were listening to Christ. They'd get together, I suspect in smaller groups. Some would circle up around Andrew... other's around Bartholomew.

Thaddueas who was very quiet, attracted the introverts.

Peter, of course, had a big class. Some of the older folks liked Peter's teaching because he yelled a lot and they could hear him.

John, on the other hand,

was speaking in hushed,

mystical sounding tones.

I'm sure, even from early on, there were plenty of perspectives being shared. Matthew, seemed to be able to grasp so clearly how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy and great vision.

Philip... mostly loved to tell the story about the loaves and fishes and seemed to be always giving lessons on how we ought to just bring whatever we have and put it in the hands of Jesus.

Thomas, had a circle of folks gathered around him that loved playing the devil's advocate. They weren't "ameners" really... more the "how comers?"

So there certainly were unique perspectives from each apostle, but also they were, these apostles, friends in a community and they had witnessed some things together. And while, each had his perspective and unique memories... and each told the story with a certain flare... **THERE WAS THIS CONCENSUS.** There was a basic sermon preached. A kerygma... the Apostles' Teaching, singular.

"We believe Jesus is the anointed one, the Messiah. He taught us a new way of understanding things and seeing life. And this Jesus died and was resurrected. And this entire story, birth to death to life, was God's great, one-of-a-kind, redemptive work among us."

Now to be sure... these apostles and the church around them had much work to do in understanding that... It would be wrong to say, for instance, that the day after Pentecost, the church got into their small groups around the various apostles, that they all heard a lesson on the Trinity. That's not how it was.

Something had happened... something had been revealed in Jesus... been accomplished in Jesus, and the Spirit's presence (as Jesus promised) was helping them to know and see it. And there were always flavors to their knowings...

John saw and said it one way...

Peter another...

And Paul, yet another...

But there was this central, core, belief as Paul came to say it that, **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."**

And the people, were devoted to that. There was a trust, even as I suspect there were a million questions... and constant dialogue. It was a conversation but a conversation anchored by this pillar that God was in Christ. And even as different groups emerged around different teachers and different themes, this was the settling truth they were proclaiming and trusting in.

Now, why in the world am I preaching a sermon on this one little part of this one line, 2000 years later. It's because I believe our devotion to this apostolic teaching is one of the pillars of our life together. We must have a core we trust in to be a community... a kind of consensus we're at ease with and that we lean on.

I know some of you as old Baptists or as thinking people are a bit nervous as you hear me talk. Does it sound like I'm heading down some "creedal road?" ... some path where conformity to orthodoxy is the whole game?

Well set your reactions aside for just a moment... and just walk along with me. And that's the image I want you to see... walking along. And as we walk, the great confession of the church, is the path we're walking.

Last week I was out in the woods with a small group studying, praying, and working. I was sleeping in a hermitage, this little cottage way off the beaten path. And what path there was hadn't been tended.

The first night, it was pitch black and I stepped in muddy holes... and ran into branches. I just barely found my way back down there, so the next day as we were discussing work projects I suggested that we work on the path.

I'd seen a pile of old white bricks and further suggested that we line the path with the white bricks so that at night you would be able to see the path... **AND WE DID THAT AND THE NEXT NIGHT I WALKED MUCH MORE COMFORTABLY TO MY LITTLE HOUSE.**

That's what our core beliefs do for us. We're on a journey towards the ultimate, the infinite and our doctrines are just white bricks laid down for us so we'll head in the right direction. So we can see where we're heading.

And the path really is pretty wide... you can stop... weave here and there, walk on the right side of it or the left... and still be on it. And the truth is, the bricks aren't laid end to end and plenty of folks wander off the path and lots of them still head towards the destination... knowing the divine.

But our "devotion" to the Apostle's teachings, means that we walk and tend this path.

And we place the bricks back when they're kicked.

We fill in the holes here and there

and move big limbs as they fall.

The point is, to make the walk easier and to be sure, the church has in it's anxiety forgotten what the path was all about... That it was taking us to God. We built a grand path, lit it up, spray painted it gold and said, "**There, that's your destination.**" But it wasn't.

And lots of us left the path because it wasn't enough...

And we ended up out in the woods.

Wandering... lost.

Or sometimes stomping about in very prideful boots. Arrogantly hacking our way through the woods of life's mystery. Blazing our own trail.

And something in us wants to cheer... something American and democratic and enlightened, says... "**Amen.**"

But at this point in my life... while I can still affirm the need at times for that courage and autonomy and even standing alone... I'm also learning the great wisdom of surrender and obedience to what is beyond me.

Obedience, in the spiritual tradition, rightly understood... is a way of knowing. There are some things, some mysteries you can't get to any other way. Some seeing that happens only as you relinquish your need to be in the center of life and to be above all and become obedient to what is above you.

And the truth is, you'll always be in obedience to something. The questions are (1) to what and (2) are you even aware you're being obedient. There are all sorts of "doctrines" out there, that we have sworn allegiance to unconsciously more often than not.

Materialism... consumerism... rationalism... Americanism.

The doctrine of self-indulgence... that's a biggie.

Or the doctrine of self-pity... "I'm a victim."

Things that we're devoted to... you're going to be devoted to something. What is it? Some of us get devoted to the ladder of success and all its teachings and tenets.

Others of us follow the apostles of suspicion and doubt... where the whole point of the journey is nay saying.

Others have adopted the doctrinal belief that nothing matters and that your life and your world, aren't holy.

There are a lot of paths you can walk... some of them are only going to take you in circles.

And in the end, that's why we as Christians devote ourselves to a set of core beliefs. Because they tell us who God is and tell us what life is all about and who we're called to be as human beings.

So for instance, if I say (as the Creeds do) that God is the Creator of all things, then this world is holy and it matters very much the way I treat it. Doctrines matter very much. The people who throw their trash out under the highway six twin bridges, have a bad doctrine of God.

Doctrines matter... If as a Christian I believe God is revealed most fully in Jesus then what I see is a God who suffers with us. I see, in fact, a God who is vulnerable to us. (Jesus is the vulnerable name for God). And if God is suffering with us and exposed to us vulnerably... how can I live my life differently. Because Jesus is not only who God is but who I'm to be.

So make no mistake about it... our devotions to a core aren't a sociological strategy for having a successful church.

They are a path to great mysteries, ways of understanding the Divine that lead us to salvation... to wholeness.

Over the years, as I've sat with folks, prospects, over coffee... I've said of our church... **"These are folks who are comfortable with orthodoxy... while at the same time, not really being doctrinal"** I probably said it that way intuitively before I actually thought about the choice of words. But, now that I've thought about it, I still like it.

This is a place where folks feel a great sense of trust in the basics of the Christian confession. **God was in Christ reconciling the world. Jesus was God in the flesh... and is our Redeemer."** Now there's great room in talking about what that means... enormous room for understanding its implication. It's wide but there are boundaries.

So, on the one hand, we don't come here to pick at the consensus... but nor do we on the other hand... role it up into a club and beat folks to death with it. We're comfortable in our confession... in our orthodoxy. Which means literally, "right praise." We gather and we worship the God revealed to us in Jesus. Not to force feed a creed but to worship, rightly.

And on any given day, any one of us (including the preacher) can have an arm load of questions about that. Maybe you just woke up doubting. That's okay.

Or maybe life's beaten us up so, we're having trouble believing in a loving God at all. That's okay, too.

Or maybe we're in one of those seasons of life that just forces us to stutter when we say the creed. You're getting some needed distance, maybe... that's okay.

Still you come here to this gracious place, and you're not wacked over the head with some pharisaical doctrinal club. But what you encounter are friends who are singing boldly to God the Creator... following Christ as our teacher... and paying attention to the Spirit within who is breathing life into us. And honking us all the way home.

You find folks who have submitted themselves to a sacred Tradition.

You find folks walking a path...
a particular path... comfortably.

Remember, this is Luke's line about the church. This isn't something you can do alone... You can't even believe alone. And that's where we'll pick this sermon back up next week.

For now... I invite you to do what those first followers did... Devote yourselves to this core. Be here and tend it with us. Be in Sunday School, read something, talk with others... devote yourself to learning what your master taught.

Learn it... tend to it... take it deep and deeper still... and even deeper. The problem has never been the tenets of our faith but that we have not taken them deep enough. That is what I invite you to. Get devoted and go deep with us, why don't you. Amen.

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