

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:41-47; I Peter 2:19-25 and John 10:1-10

Without devotion to the teachings of the apostles, our life as individuals and our life as a church, cannot succeed, because without devotion to the things God has given us, we end up separated from our Lord, the shepherd of our souls, and swept away by the false teachings of our world. We lose the strength and the hope that we are supposed to have, and our joy, our health, and our strength, quickly disappears. We become a people who are lifeless and unattractive and, unless we change our ways, unless, by the grace of God, we are once again found, we stumble and fall.

Satan tries to tell us that devotion, that the dedication of one's time and energy to the teachings of the apostles, and to the fellowship of the church, and to the breaking of bread and to prayer, is not really all that important. He tries to tell us that we can get by with an occasional prayer, and that it will not hurt all that much if we don't read and learn about the bible, and that a person doesn't really have to attend church, or get involved, to be a follower of Christ. This is Satan's greatest lie.

The secret of every growing church, and the basis of every healthy spiritual life, is an overriding commitment to hearing the word of God and applying it to one's life. It is a dedication to the spiritual and physical well being, of one's fellow believers, and the desire to invoke the presence of God within that community, and within one's own private prayer life. We are the family of God and unless we pray together, unless we study and

seek the will of God in the word of God together, and unless we share good times and bad times together, we will suffer the fate that comes upon those who stay apart, we will be alone, and ultimately we will lose our sense of direction; our sense of purpose; our faith.

That is what is happening in those places where individual happiness is prized more than righteousness, where pursuing material success is held to be more important than spending time in community, where anything and everything else is deemed more important than sharing with one's brothers and sisters, the joys and the concerns that we have, and praying together, and sharing together, those things which have helped us in God's word. Separate a person from the Christian community, take them away from the place in which the word is proclaimed, bread is broken, and prayers uttered, and soon the light of their faith grows dull, and the warmth within their souls begins to diminish.

We can't be effective Christians, fully alive Christians, who, as Jesus says in today's reading, "has life and that abundantly", if we do not listen to the voice of the shepherd who calls us by name, or if we flee from the sheepfold that he would lead us to for our own safety. How can we expect to do what is right, how can we expect to experience the blessings of God, how can we hope to minister to one another the love of Christ, and feel that love return to us thirty, or sixty or a hundredfold, if we do not turn to Christ and listen to his voice, if we do not enter the sheepfold with our brothers and sisters, if we do not pray together and work together and love each other with the love of Christ? We can't! And the evidence of that is all around us. It is in the people we meet day by day who claim to believe in and love God, and yet have none of the signs of the abundant life

that Christ promises to all who hear his voice and enter his sheepfold.

Devotion, Dedication, Commitment, this is the secret of success in all endeavors, and in all endeavors that devotion, that dedication, that commitment is focused on specific things. To experience life, and that abundantly, as Christ says we can, our focus must be on the teachings of the apostles, which are the teachings of our Lord, on the fellowship of the believers, on the breaking of bread, the inviting of Christ's presence in community, and on prayer.

The early church was totally focused on these things and the results were tremendous, as day by day, God added to their number. The early church survived and prospered, because the people within it committed themselves to one another, and to the Lord who brought them together. The early church grew and spread because those who believed, sought God's presence, and prayed for his will to be done in their midst, not just one day a week, but each and every day.

How many of us pray each and every day, let alone seek out the fellowship of fellow believers and pray with them, and eat with them, on a regular and consistent basis? How many of us read the scriptures each day, or even think about what it is God has said in the past to us, let alone seek to hear what it is he may be trying to say to us now, in the midst of our busy routines?

We can only thrive in the midst of an insane world, as long as we remain attached to our vine, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. When we follow him, he will lead us by the still waters, and to the green pastures, and he will keep us safe as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, his rod and his staff will comfort us. And the opposite is also true. When we fail to follow him, when we fail to listen to his voice and join

ourselves with the rest of the flock, the waters will not be stilled, we will experience terror in the valley of the shadow of death, and our cups will not overflow in the presence of our enemies. All we who claim to believe in God, need to truly commit ourselves to our Lord and his teachings, and to one another as brothers and sisters in him, if we are to be as alive as was the church in Jerusalem after the day of Pentecost. As we do this, as we pray and break bread together, Christ our Lord will do the rest. He will make sure our souls are restored, he will set a table before us in the presence of our enemies, and ensure that we dwell in the house of God forever. He will do this, for he is the bread of life and the good shepherd, the way and the door, the resurrection and the life, the one in whom God was pleased to fully dwell within, the one in whom God is even now fully revealed for those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Praise be to God, and to our Lord Jesus Christ, now and always.

AMEN.