

SERMON ACTS 2 RETURNING TO OUR ROOTS

February 26, 2023

I have always been interested in the history of the Early Church as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. The Church was basically born at Pentecost when God released the Holy Spirit and the world has not been the same since. At Pentecost following Peter's inspiring sermon, 3,000 people accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and joined the church. Then the church grew rapidly and spread all over the known world at that time. One of the best descriptions of the Early Church is found in the second chapter of the Acts, verses 42-47.

Read Acts 2:42-47

When I was still working for the Federal government, Judy and I had the opportunity to attend a highway conference in Sun Valley, Idaho. If you have ever visited this part of the country, you know how beautiful it is. We enjoyed taking the back roads and driving through the small towns. But one thing caught my attention and disturbed me. We saw lots of beautiful little churches; however, they were no longer churches, but had become museums and tourist shops. Doesn't it break your heart to see a church that is dying and closing its doors, no longer in service to God? I bet it breaks God's heart also.

In the last few years, several churches have closed in the New Mexico Annual Conference. Those congregations can give you many reasons for closing their doors, but I believe one of the main reasons is that we as the church collectively have not lived up to what God wants us to do. Let's face it, we have gotten complacent, lazy and lost our focus on serving God and following Jesus Christ. We have turned inward and become a social club and not fulfilled the Great Commission. We have lost our focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ, letting social and political issues distract us. We need to return to Jesus Christ. Remember Jesus' command in Matthew 6:33 – "Seek first his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." In other words, if you put God first, everything else will fall into place.

I have long believed that we need to return to the roots of the Early Church. We can learn a lot from the Early Church as described by the Apostle Luke in our scripture text for this morning. During Lent and starting this morning, I want us to look at the characteristics of the Early Church, a church that was alive and growing, and see what we can learn and apply here at High Desert so that we can continue to grow and serve the Lord.

This morning let's start by looking at the first characteristic of the Early Church. It was a learning church; they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles which included all that Jesus Christ Himself taught; the gospel centered on Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I love the way that Luke puts it; they "devoted" themselves to the study of God's Word. "Devote" is defined in the dictionary as "to give or apply one's time, attention or self to a particular activity or cause." The *Message* says that they "committed themselves to the

teachings of the apostles.” In other words, they focused on the Word of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ. As a church are we so devoted? How much time do we commit daily and weekly to reading the Bible and participating in a Bible study?

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the Apostle Paul tells his young protégé Timothy: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God can be proficient, equipped for every good work.” In the preceding chapter, Paul says: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved; a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” God has given us the Bible to help us grow in faith and to live the life He wants for us.

While it is not necessary to have a graduate degree from a school of theology before we can effectively serve God, it remains true that God places no premium on being uninformed. Lack of knowledge of the Bible is also a lack of knowledge of Jesus Christ. Paul is pointing out to Timothy and to us today the importance of presenting ourselves to God as competent workers who are skilled in doing His work; who know the subject matter and are ready to serve Him.

Paul emphasizes maturity and skill in the service of the Lord. Paul appeals to Timothy’s sense of pride by encouraging him to be “a worker who does not need to be ashamed.” Have you ever seen a carpenter who was ashamed of his craftsmanship? Have you ever known a bricklayer who laid a crooked wall of brick? Paul is encouraging Timothy and us to do whatever is necessary to become a skilled worker who “rightly handles the word of truth.”

So how do we become a skilled worker for God, equipped for His service. First, we need to establish a habit of reading the Bible daily. Following along as I read the scripture each Sunday morning is not enough. We should spend time alone every day listening to God as He speaks to us through the Scriptures. It’s amazing how many of us can’t start the day without first checking the news, our smartphone or the internet, but never take time to sit down with God’s Word. Which one of these do you think has the most truth in it, and will make you feel better about the day ahead? Which one better prepares you to face the challenges of each day?

Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher, said that a Bible which is falling apart usually belongs to someone who is not. Another great preacher, Dwight L. Moody, said that when he prayed he was talking to God, but when he read the Bible God was talking to him; and it was more important that God spoke to him than he to God.

Second, we need to read the Bible with an open mind. There are two ways to read the Bible: read it with your mind already made up or read it to let it make your mind up. We should come to God’s Word prayerfully and with expectations. God can and will speak to us through His Word if we will only listen to Him. The psalmist said it best in Psalm 119:105 – “Thy Word is a

lamp unto my feet.” The Bible is a roadmap for life and a tool for getting through each day; those that are joyful and those that are disasters.

A small-town newspaper in Texas ran this quote: “Read the Bible to know what people ought to do. Read this paper to know what they actually do.” A man was seated on a park bench when a little boy about five years old sat down next to him and began winding what appeared to be his most prized possession – a watch. “My, what a pretty watch,” the man said, “Does it tell time?” “No, sir,” replied the boy, “you gotta look at it.” God’s truth is everywhere, but we must look for it and at it to see it. An open Bible with an open mind leads to truth in life.

Next, we need to study the Bible; not just read through it quickly like a newspaper or a novel. While it is important to read the Bible regularly, until you study it, it doesn’t come alive to you. One Sunday when I was in Socorro, a family drove up. Drizzten jumped out of the car and came running up to me and said: “I got a question.” I said: “Okay, what is it?” He said: “Who created God?” I looked at his mother and she replied: “That’s your department!” I thought what an insightful and theological question. The best reply that I could give him was that God has always been; thus, no one created Him. Now these are the kind of questions that we all should be asking ourselves as we study God’s Word.

As we study the Bible, we need to ask: what is this passage saying to me; what was happening at the time it was written; who are the main characters; what’s the lesson; and how can I apply this to my daily life. For accurate interpretation, we must take into account the context in which it was written: the history, the culture, the people, and what the author wrote in the preceding and following verses. Many people today try to justify their position or opinion by misquoting certain Bible verses. John Wesley said that a text taken out of context is a pretext. A working knowledge of the Bible helps us discern what the truth really is.

And then there are preachers and churches that tell you that you must take them at their word and believe everything they say, without question. Now to me that’s a cult. The Apostle John advises us in 1 John 4:1 to not believe everything, but to test it to see if it is from God. One of the things that I like about the Methodist Church is that you don’t leave your mind at the door; you are encouraged to think for yourself and to interpret the scriptures as they apply to your personal life. We believe that the Bible is inspired by God and is to be interpreted based on our own tradition, experience, and common sense. Because we each come from different religious backgrounds and experiences in life, we can all read the same passage and yet have different interpretations. And that’s the beauty of the Bible; it’s a living document. It speaks to each of us differently depending on where we are in our spiritual growth and what we are facing at that particular time in life.

We study the Bible so that we can learn about God, ourselves and others. The Bible was given to us not only to increase our knowledge, but to change our lives. Other books are given for our information; but the Bible is given for our transformation; to help us grow closer to Jesus Christ. We went to school to get an education so that we could make a living, but we go to the Bible to really live. Martin Luther, the Great Reformer, said: "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me." As Christians we should always be learning more and more about God and His Son Jesus Christ. A closed mind is the end of spiritual growth and our relationship with the Lord.

John Wesley believed that the Bible was twice inspired; once when written and again when read. He referred to the Bible as "plain truth for plain people." The Bible is the complete Word of God. We cannot pick and choose passages that we agree with and ignore those passages that challenge our character, behavior and beliefs; it must be taken as a whole. Unfortunately, that's one of the reason some people don't read the Bible; it cramps their lifestyle.

Charles Spurgeon said that nobody ever outgrows the Bible; as a matter of fact it widens and deepens as we grow older. And that is one thing that has fascinated me over the years. You know, you can read a book and the subject matter, characters and ending will always stay the same. But not so with the Bible; it changes and evolves as we go through the experiences and situations of life; as I said before, it's a living document. I can read a scripture passage today that I have read many times over the years, and I will continue to find new meanings and applications to my daily life. As things happen in my life, God opens the Bible up to me in new and different ways to help me navigate this journey through life.

Finally, the ultimate result of our devoted study of the Bible should be to enable us to take what we have learned and apply it to our daily lives; to use what we have learned in dealing with the problems, demands and temptations of daily life. Someone said that we should "study the Bible to be wise; believe it to be safe; and practice it to be holy." In the first chapter of James, we are told: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." In other words what the Bible tells us should not go in one ear and out the other. Instead we must let the Bible be our instruction manual for life. If we do, James says that we will be blessed.

A mother was startled to discover her five-year-old daughter going through her new storybook Bible and circling the word *God* wherever it appeared on a page. Stifling her first reaction to reprimand the child for defacing her new book, the mother asked: "Why are you doing that?" To which the little girl replied: "So I that will know where to find God when I need Him." Wouldn't it be nice to have her confidence that all we have to do is open a storybook and find God waiting for us? The truth is we have such a book – the Bible.

The Early Church realized that if it was going to grow spiritually and be the church that God wanted and needed, then it had to be devoted to reading and studying God's Word. Are we willing to follow the example of the Early Church and return to our roots? It is my hope and prayer that High Desert will always be a Biblically based church where the Word of God dwells, and that each and every one of us will make it a habit to read the Bible each day. It is also my hope and prayer that every one of you will get involved in a Bible Study. There's an insert of our current studies in the bulletin. If you can't find a class you like, let me know and we will get one started. Make the Bible your best friend; read it daily; study it often; let it be a lamp unto your feet. Amen