

Sermon Draft

Text: Acts 2:42–47

Sermon: “Devotion”

As beautiful as the scene of our text is, it almost has a “Once upon a time” feel to it. Especially as we look at the world and even the church today. I’m not saying Luke is idealizing things or that he doesn’t have his facts straight. I’m simply saying that the scene he describes is like nothing I’ve ever experienced. And this can cause us to wonder what help Luke’s words have to offer.

But we should not extrapolate these conditions of the early church perpetually into the church’s future. Luke lets us peer through a small window into life in the early church. What we get to see through that window is by no means a full-length feature film, but it is also much more than a mere snapshot.

The church our text describes is bustling with activity a vibrant life of worship and an avalanche of generosity toward the needy, a beautiful camaraderie that no snapshot could capture. It’s like the flurry of activity we see when an ants’ nest has been stirred up. Every single member of the body seems to be busy with something.

Perhaps to us, the problem with this beautiful scene is that it (almost) lacks any problems. We almost have to read between the lines to find anything less than ideal. Apparently, not everyone in Jerusalem had yet come to faith in Christ. Verse 43, for example, speaks of “every soul” in the city, including those not yet converted. And yet, “the Lord [was adding] to [the church’s] number day by day those who were being saved” (v 47). Yes, some people were in need (v 45), but those needs seemed to be met as soon as they came to light. So, if there is any problem with this beautiful scene, it’s that it seems too beautiful. We have a hard time relating to it. After all, we live in what we have cynically come to refer to as the “real world,” right?

We may live in the “real world,” but for that “real world,” God in his grace has provided a real Savior, the risen Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd. You don’t need me to tell you that the church today is living in the “real world,” a world where sin seems out of control, where it’s often hard to distinguish the church from the world it’s supposed to be witnessing to.

Today's church faces growing opposition from the world around it. Now, this is nothing new for many Christians around the world, but for the church in North America, this is not something we are accustomed to. Then we hear, far more often than we would like, of scandals within the church—embezzlements, sexual misconduct, misappropriated funds, things that give the church a real black eye and have the world telling the church to clean up its own act before it dares to preach to others. We know the world is living in darkness but for that to infiltrate the church. Say it's not so!

Individually, we all have our own battles against sin—not big, public scandals, maybe, but private problems that only we and maybe a close friend or two know about. But they are still battles, and they leave us bruised and wounded. Then there are wounds we're nursing from others' sins against us, and our struggle to forgive as we have been forgiven. Add these all together, and it seems our world bears no resemblance to the world Luke describes in our text.

But remember as beautiful as it is, the scene Luke describes is just a small window into the early church. It teaches us some wonderful things, but Luke is not suggesting that the early church faced no real problems.

Keep reading! In chapter 4, real hostility arises against the church as Peter and John are arrested for proclaiming the Gospel. In chapter 5, the church faces scandal. Ananias and Sapphira apparently wanted to see their names on a big wall plaque, announcing what generous people they were. They pretended to make a big donation to the poor, but it was all for show; and to pull this off, they lied to the church, to the apostles, but ultimately to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). Moving on to chapter 6, we hear the Greek-speaking widows complaining that they were being discriminated against.

We could go on and on, but you get the point. Whatever else Luke is teaching us, it is not that the early church faced no real problems. The world of those early Christians was every bit as “real” as ours is.

But for people (then and now) who find themselves in the “real world,” our text proclaims the life that comes from the very real (and risen) Savior. Jesus lives! The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed.

Alleluia!

Luke’s description of life in the early church is beautiful, not because those Christians faced no real problems, but because they were learning to face real problems with a real and living Savior! And because he lives, we shall live also in him! Our Good Shepherd is leading his flock to life. With David, we pray, ***“I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”*** (Psalm 23:6), right?

But the Scriptures also make it clear: eternal life does not eventually begin when you die in faith. Eternal life has already begun from the moment God joined you in faith to Christ, your Good Shepherd.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

The Good Shepherd is leading his flock through this “*valley of the shadow of death*” (Psalm 23:4) to where we will “ *dwell in the house of the Lord forever*” (Psalm 23:6). No doubt, we look forward to that glorious day. But that life is already now being manifested in his church.

That’s what makes our text so exciting. It’s not that the early church had no real problems. It’s that they knew they had a real Savior, and that glorious truth could not help but show itself in how they lived out their faith. That life manifested itself in their devotion to the Lord’s Word and Sacrament. “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (v 42). Luke is speaking of the three thousand or so who had come to faith in Jesus on Pentecost. They were steadfastly devoted “to the apostles’ teaching” because that is where they heard their Good Shepherd’s voice.

They were devoted to “the fellowship,” their sharing together in Christ and all his gifts, including the gift of the family of faith.

They were devoted to “the breaking of bread,” which may have included the Agape meals that were part of the early church, but it especially involved the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

And they were devoted to “the prayers.” God had made them “*a kingdom of priests*” (Exodus 19:6), and they earnestly took up their priestly work of interceding for others. The early church lived from a rich, vibrant life of worship!

Because they were so strongly connected to their Good Shepherd’s voice his word took root in them and made them agents through whom the Good Shepherd extended his care to others. “*They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need*” (v 45). No one told them they had to do this. It was simply the natural care and concern they had for one another as part of the Good Shepherd’s flock.

Yes, the church today has problems. But what better time to manifest the life and love of Christ? The same God of love, the same risen Savior, the same Holy Spirit, are still at work in the church today!

The church of Jesus continues to be fed and strengthened by our Lord's Word and Sacrament. We gather every week around the Good Shepherd's voice, devoted to the apostolic teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.

Strengthened by these gifts of grace, the church of Jesus continues to serve as the agent through whom the Good Shepherd extends his care to others in their various needs.

First among those needs is the proclamation of the Gospel. Everyone still needs to hear that Jesus has died for her or his salvation! But lots of other activities bear witness to that Gospel: food pantries, grief counseling, care for the sick and dying—these and countless other expressions of care are a natural outgrowth of the church's life, and they all happen because our real and living Savior lives in and through his church.

Life in the early church as Luke describes it might seem too good to be true, like it's not part of the "real world." Just remember: our text is not the church's whole history.

Other parts of that history testify to sin's ongoing presence, and to the church's ongoing need for a very real Savior.

But the church has just such a Savior; and while our text is not the church's whole history, it is a very real part of that history, and it demonstrates the very real life which our very real Savior has imparted to his beloved, forgiven flock. And we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever!

Amen