

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost- October 28, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18 & I Corinthians 4:9-18

FOOLS FOR CHRIST

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:42-45).

This fall in reflecting on the heart of Jesus’ message of the coming near of God’s reign, we’ve turned several times to this passage from Acts, chapter 2. It tells of the early church in Jerusalem shortly after the first Pentecost. It’s worth turning to repeatedly because it shows what life is like when we welcome God’s reign.

Today, we’ll focus on one of the key words in it- *devoted*. “They *devoted* themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” When a word is central to the meaning of a passage, we have to make sure we understand it correctly. Misunderstanding a key word can cause all sorts of trouble, as it does in this goofy, but helpful story.

A young, enterprising college student wants to drum up some extra cash. He goes to an upscale neighborhood near his campus to sell his services as a handyman. He sees a fellow in the large front yard of the first house he comes to and learns that the man’s the owner. The collegian asks if there are any odd jobs around the property he can do. The owner gestures up the driveway towards the house and says: “Well, I could use somebody to paint my porch. How much would you charge for that?”

The young man answers, “Seventy-five bucks.” The owner agrees to it and tells him the paint and other equipment he’ll need for the job are in the garage. The owner heads back up to go inside while the student goes to the garage to get started. The student works hard, finishes the job, and is ready to collect his pay. The owner asks, “You’re all done?” He replies, “I am.” The owner hands over the seventy-five dollars. The young man pockets it. As he’s ready to leave, he says, “Oh, by the way- it’s not a Porsche, it’s a Lexus.” He misunderstood a key word . . . and made a big mistake.

The key word in our passage from Acts, chapter 2, is *devoted*. It’s a word that we easily get wrong because we frequently miss its intensity. Missing its intensity, we also forget its proper object. For example, I could say that I’m devoted to the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. You come to my house and see Cardinal pennants, caps, t-shirts, cups, glasses, stickers, books, and newspaper clippings. You talk with me in ordinary conversation from early February through early November and likely hear me make some reference to the Redbirds. You see me preach from this pulpit and, no matter what time of year it is, you have a real chance being annoyed by hearing me use them to make some point about the Christian life.

There’s no doubt that I have a strong interest in and attachment to the St. Louis Cardinals, BUT . . . I’m not devoted to them- not in the sense in which Acts 2 uses the word. To be devoted, as the first Christians were, is to center ourselves in, bind ourselves loyally with, give ourselves over to that which gives us primal connection to who we really are, what really matters, and how we, therefore, can best live. To be devoted carries with it that sense of ultimate significance. Its meaning is that intense.

So I’m *not* devoted to the St. Louis Cardinals, yet I *could* be. I could be, but only if I become hopelessly lost. I’d have to be wildly lost to believe that the baseball team I root for could give me the root connection I need to life’s most important truths.

Yet the possibility of being so far off in my devotion raises the question of who or what I should, in fact, be devoted to. I can't avoid making a choice about that. I can pretend that I don't have to choose and I can stay ignorant of the choice I'm making, but life in this world *is* structured so that I have to decide, whether implicitly or explicitly, on someone or something I believe will connect me to who I really am, what really matters, and how I therefore can best live. Who or what should that be?

The answer of the Acts 2 church is clear- the God made known in Jesus Christ. God in Christ is the One who connects us to these most important truths. The first Christians strengthened their devotion to this God by immersing themselves in "the apostles' teaching and fellowship . . . (to) the breaking of bread and the prayers". In doing that, they learned that Jesus frequently warned against a whole host of false gods. He had plenty to say about things to which people of his day and ours were and are wrongly prone to give our first allegiance. He identified four of these in particular- family, wealth, honor, and religion. Some of his most powerful and even shocking sayings were attacks against devotion to any of these things.

In his time, as in ours, family was the god to which many people gave themselves. But Jesus called for a break with blood family and with any false sense of family obligation. He minimized the significance of his own natural kin. He said, "Whoever *does the will of God* is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33-35). He said that following him would require "hatred" of spouse and children, parents and siblings (Luke 14:26). He said that his ministry would bring division within families (Matthew 10:34-36).

A prospective follower once said to him, "Master, let me first go and bury my father." The obligation to properly bury one's dead was among the most hallowed of family obligations in Jesus' time. But Jesus replied, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead" (Luke 9:59-60).

In Jesus' day as in ours, wealth was the god to whom many people gave their prime allegiance. Not only did wealth offer material comfort, but its possession was commonly taken as a sign that the person who had it must be living righteously. But Jesus regularly attacked the pursuit of wealth. He pronounced woes upon the rich and blessings upon the poor. He called on some people to renounce *all* wealth, and said, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23).

Jesus didn't oppose wealth in principle for there were wealthy people among his followers. Yet he emphatically denounced wealth as a false god. He saw the greed that often motivates its pursuit as among the most consuming and blinding of all human passions.

In Jesus' time as in ours, honor was also a god to which many people gave themselves. Honor involved what we today usually call social status. Those devoted to it were primarily concerned with holding favorable reputation in the court of public opinion. Much of their behavior was dictated by the desire to acquire, preserve, or display lofty social status whether through family, wealth, or religion.

Jesus ridiculed them for it. He mocked those who sought places of honor at banquet, the best seats in the synagogue, or salutations in the marketplace (Luke 14:7-10, Mark 12:38-39). He condemned any religious practice that was driven by the desire for public recognition: "Do not sound trumpets when you give alms," he said. Instead, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18).

Jesus reserved some of his most scathing criticisms for those who made religion their god. His famous parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee made this point sharply (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee's prayer of thanksgiving extolled his own religious behavior: "God, I thank You that I am not like other people . . . I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

In Jesus' day, respectable religion commonly made the practice of outward forms of piety into the be-all and end-all of human life. Jesus saw this as a woefully misguided devotion to a miserably false god. He taught that when devotion of that kind turns self-righteous and showy, as in the case of this Pharisee, it steers us aggressively away from the God who really is God.

Devotion to the true God revealed in Jesus steers us in very different directions. It gives us family ties made not by blood, but by mutual commitment to doing God's will. It aims our pursuit of wealth not at the securing of our own comfort or image, but at the offering of generous service to all of God's creatures. It bestows our sense of self-worth not from having high social status or from practicing external forms of religion, but from being purely and simply loved by God.

Embracing our real identity as God's beloved, we find our fulfillment in loving all of God's others just as God does. Loving as God does means we love even when we're not loved first, even when we're not loved back. St. Paul expresses some of the nitty-gritty of this from his own experience as an apostle when in today's second Scripture from his first letter to the Corinthians he says, "When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered we speak kindly." Or as our sisters and brothers in Christ among the Amish in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania reminded us so pointedly and poignantly a year ago this month, "When sinned against, we forgive."

Remember from last October how Charles Roberts broke into an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines and shot ten young girls, five of them to death before killing himself. Remember how the Amish community as a whole and the families of the murdered girls in particular reached out to comfort the *Roberts'* family. Remember how the family of Marian Fisher- Marian who had been killed- specifically invited the Roberts' family to join them in grief and remembrance both of their daughter and of Charles. Remember how the families of all five of the murdered girls attended the Roberts' funeral. Remember how the Amish set up a fund to assist Roberts' wife, Marie, so that she'd have enough money for her three young children. Remember how Mrs. Roberts said that she and her family were overwhelmed by "the forgiveness, mercy, and grace" shown to them by the Amish. Remember how she said that their love for her family "has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need."

This is Christian love in action. It's selfless, suffering, and forgiving love, exactly the kind that Paul, the Amish, and we try to live in response to God's love for us. We know that it can look like sheer foolishness to other people. St. Paul openly admits to that. He says that we are "fools" for Christ's sake.

Yet we look like fools only when the meaning of our "devotion" is misunderstood, only when its intensity and proper object are forgotten. In Christian devotion, we center ourselves in, bind ourselves loyally with, and give ourselves over to God in Christ. And why do we do that? Because this God *in truth* gives us the primal connection we need to who we really are, what really matters, and how we, therefore, can best live.

Our most important choice in life is the God that we choose. Real foolishness comes in choosing a false one- whether family, wealth, status, religion, sports, looks, power, or whatever others are out there- all of them phony gods who *can't* deliver on the truth we need the most. But the true God can deliver. The God made known in Jesus Christ *does*.

So in apparent foolishness but with the actual height of wisdom we choose this God. We choose the One who went to the cross to show how foolishly selfless, suffering, and forgiving the true God is in love for us. At the height of this foolishness, we find the deepest truth of our life in living that same love. With Jesus, the Acts 2 church, St. Paul, and our Amish sisters and brothers, we bless when we're reviled, endure when we're persecuted, speak kindly when we're slandered, and forgive when we're sinned against. We do it all gladly because we're fools for Christ. Amen.