...DEVOTED...

“A joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.”

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Y ears ago, when I was in college, my summer job consisted of working with a construction company responsible for widening I-270 near Gaithersburg, Maryland. As summer help, I was relegated to shovel duty. By summer’s end, I graduated to driving the water truck, used to curtail dust at the construction site.

That summer, I worshipped at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. Dick Halverson was its pastor; he later went on to serve as Senate chaplain. Dick spoke to the college group, of which I was a part, about a successful businessman who had become a believer. This man wanted to serve Christ with his life, but he was extremely busy and kept putting off this decision. Time and again, the man expressed interest in becoming more involved in his Christian life, yet he kept postponing the commitment.

One day, his doctor reported to this businessman the results of medical tests he had taken. The doctor told him he had an incurable disease and only a short time to live. “This businessman,” said Halverson, “never got around to serving the Lord while he was well, and once he became ill, it was too late.” I’ve seen this scenario replicated many times over. People want to serve Christ with their lives, but their busyness takes priority.

Stephen Covey, in his book *First Things First*, divides our use of time and activities into four quadrants. Quadrant I depicts those things in life which are urgent and important. Quadrant II represents choices which are important but not urgent. Quadrant III exemplifies urgent but unimportant things. Quadrant IV symbolizes those things in life which are neither urgent nor important. Our goal is to prioritize our lives in such a way that first things come first, not last.

The Psalmist writes, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain for ourselves a heart of wisdom” (90:12). In Covey’s words, there are two ways of telling time. We use the clock to manage our appointments and busy schedules. The clock measures speed and efficiency. We can also number our days by means of a compass. We use a compass to determine direction and vision. Some of us can tell time but don’t know how to number our days. Some of us need to focus less on the clock—appointments and schedules, and more on the compass—direction and vision.

A lawyer asked Jesus which of the 613 rules of the Torah was most important. Jesus answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your
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The book of Acts records a moving sermon Peter preaches on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit fills Jesus’ disciples (Acts 2:14-39). As a result of Peter’s sermon, 3000 people become believers and are subsequently baptized (2:41). We regard the baptism of seven children in our middle service as a considerable number. Imagine 3000 new disciples being baptized!

Isn’t it curious that a larger number of people are won to Jesus in a single day than Jesus recruited in three years of public ministry? I recall something Jesus said to his disciples: “The one who believes in me will do greater works than the works I do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12).

Luke supplies us, in verse 42, with a composite of how these early Christians spent their time: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers.” They were devoted in much the same way we want to be devoted.

In our vision statement on the bulletin cover, our church aspires to be “a joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.” Luke enumerates in verse 42 the four ways the early church was devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.

First, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. When Luke wrote his gospel, there was still, as yet, no New Testament. Disciples like Luke were still in the process of writing it. The apostles’ teaching took written shape in the first century. Their legacy is the New Testament.

Are we devoted to the apostles’ teaching? Are we committed to reading the Bible, meditating on its precepts and applying its instruction to our lives? Biblical illiteracy is one of the most significant obstacles to spiritual vitality in the church today. We want every believer to devote real time to this book. Scripture is our owner’s manual and playbook, our road map on the way to Christian discipleship.

Second, they devoted themselves to fellowship. Regrettably today, we deploy the word “fellowship” to refer to little more than social chit-chat. The Greek word koinonia, refers to the deep sharing among believers in the Spirit of Jesus.

On the day when the Holy Spirit filled Jesus’ disciples, they were gathered together at the Jewish festival of Pentecost. They were people from every race and tongue (Acts 2:9-11). Their fellowship was not confined to skin color or dialect. Their koinonia was in, by and through the Spirit.

I desire to serve a church committed to ethnic diversity. I want more African-Americans and Asian-Americans in this church. I want more people whose primary
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language is something other than English worshipping and serving among us. It’s beginning to happen here; we want it to happen with greater frequency. Hospitality includes everybody!

Third, they devoted themselves to the “breaking of bread.” The phrase, “breaking of bread,” refers both to the Lord’s Supper as well as a common meal called the agape or love feast. Early Christians shared table fellowship as part of the Lord’s Supper.

Richard Bliese writes, “Meaningful worship and meaningful meals are critical to any attempts at renewal, and one doesn’t work well without the other. Never trust a Christian fellowship where Christians regularly worship together but don’t like to eat together, or where they eat together but neglect worship.”

Are we devoted to the breaking of bread by sharing meals together? We’ve become too formal about entertaining in our day. We clean our homes like no one ever lives in them and serve meals that we insist must be gourmet. The most important ingredient served at table is fellowship.

Are we devoted to the breaking of bread in worship? Worship appears in second position among the seven covenants listed in our disciple-making focus. We ask you, whether or not you feel like coming to worship, to make worship your first priority every Sunday.

Fourth, they devoted themselves to prayer. One of the hallmarks of the early church was their steadfast commitment to pray together. These developments in the book of Acts are set into motion by what Luke reveals in the first chapter. These early disciples “constantly devoted themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). The Spirit accompanies those who wait upon the Lord in prayer.

Are we devoted to praying together? Our aim is to be a praying church!

We want to be “a joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.” The adjective in Scripture that appears most often alongside the word devoted is “wholehearted” (1 Chronicles 28:19; 29:19; Isaiah 38:3). God doesn’t call us to serve with half-hearted enthusiasm. We want to be wholeheartedly devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.

Notice what happens in Acts 2 when God’s people devote themselves to the study of Scripture, spiritual fellowship, public worship and corporate prayer. Luke tells us in verses 43-47 there is a profound sense of awe and wonder among God’s people. Signs and wonders occur with greater frequency. God’s people share their worldly goods with “glad and generous hearts.” Above all, they enjoy the people’s favor. There is a compelling winsomeness that results when we are “a joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor.”

We want to be an Acts 2 church.
We want to be devoted to Scripture study, spiritual fellowship, public worship and corporate prayer. We aspire to be a church that puts first things first.

Let me illustrate my point with this glass bowl. Let us suppose this bowl represents your life. You can fill the bowl with lots of things. You could fill your life with big things, like golf balls. Now that this bowl is filled with golf balls, you might conclude that the bowl is full. But if I pour smaller pebbles into this jar, they will find the open spaces between the golf balls. Now that the bowl is packed with golf balls and pebbles, you could once again conclude that the bowl is full. Ah, but there is still room for sand to be poured into this bowl.

As I said, suppose this bowl represents your life. The golf balls symbolize the really important things in life: namely your faith, family and friends. These golf balls represent those things that if everything else was lost and they were the only things that remained, your life would still be full.

The intermediate pebbles represent the less important, yet still vital things in life such as your job, school work, home or car. These things may not be of first importance; nevertheless, they still add value to your life.

The tiny grains of sand represent everything else—the small stuff.

Now, if we put sand into the bowl first, there won’t be room for pebbles or golf balls. If we put the pebbles in first, there is no room for the golf balls. We must put the golf balls in first and let the remainder find their place.

If we spend all our time and energy on the small stuff, we’ll never have room for the things important to us. Jesus told stories about people who focused on trivial matters, yet were clueless about important things. Take care of the golf balls first, the things that truly matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.

When it comes to being devoted to loving and serving God and neighbor, Scripture, fellowship, worship and prayer are the really important things. The rest is just sand.