

June 2, 2013
Church Planting

What Does God Expect?
Acts 2:42-47

Opening words: During the next three summers I am going to be preaching through the book of Acts. By Labor Day weekend of this year we will be completing the first eight chapters where Peter and the other original Apostles dominate the scene. The following chapters are dominated by Paul. I am calling this entire body of work *Church Planting*. You have actually heard the first two messages in this series. They fell perfectly onto the liturgical calendar. The first came on Ascension Sunday, May 5. The second came on Pentecost, May 19. This message is different because we are on our own. However, before we begin, let me ask you this important question.

Why donate so much time to the book of Acts? The answer is the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts is the story of how God planted the church to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. The church was not created by human labor or determination. The church was planted by God. The Holy Spirit was sent into the world and the believers were transformed. Without the Holy Spirit, the church would have never existed. Without the Holy Spirit, the church will stop existing. Our understanding of the Holy Spirit is vital to our future existence. Never forget, the church is not another human organization. The church is a divine organism. We are part of the body of Christ.

This morning's scripture lesson comes from the second chapter of Acts, verses 42-47. No piece of scripture has influenced my ministry more than these words. They hold the key to church growth. I have never met a pastor who didn't want to experience church growth. Let me call this message *What Does God Expect?*

Acts 2:42-47 ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What is on your bucket list? In other words, what do you still want to do before you die? What do you still want to experience before you die? Who do you still want to see before you die? What do you still want to eat before you die? Who do you still want to meet before you die? What is on your bucket list? I checked off one of my bucket list items last week.

I have been watching baseball my entire life. I love watching baseball because I was never very good at playing baseball. I watch close to one hundred and fifty Cleveland Indians games a year. Like many of you, I have watched them play in various stadiums around the country. I can't tell you how many games I have watched them play in Boston's Fenway Park. For years, Fenway Park has been in my bucket list. I wanted to see that famous left field wall, the Green Monster. It is a piece of American history. It was opened in 1912. The first game scheduled to be played there happened to be the same day the country was informed about the sinking of the Titanic. Out of respect for the dead, the open day celebration was canceled. It is an amazing story. I wanted to get there before they modernized it. I finally got there last week. I have to tell you, I wasn't disappointed. It met all my expectations. From our right field seats Kathryn and I witnessed the Indians win, 12-3! I couldn't have asked for more. With this in mind, let me ask you this question: How many times have you been disappointed by your own expectations?

I am not just talking about baseball. I am talking about life, itself. It is impossible to live without expectations. How many expectations do you hold? Does anyone here expect their elected officials to be honest? Does anyone here expect their doctor to be skilled and up to date? Does anyone here expect the meat at the grocery store to be safe for human consumption? Does anyone here expect someone to pray for you during life's most difficult situations? Does anyone here expect to see past loved ones in heaven? Does anyone here expect their children to study hard? Does anyone here expect their spouse to be faithful? Have you ever been disappointed? This next question is loaded. What do you expect from yourself? How many times have you disappointed yourself? This is the most important question: What does God expect from us?

The answer to that question comes from our scripture lesson for today. We are looking at the closing verses of the second chapter of Acts. It is important that you know that this is the same chapter that records the events of Pentecost. You remember the story. The Holy Spirit is moving and lives are being changed. In the verse prior to our reading we are told thousand individuals were saved in a single day. Our reading for today tells us about the activities and priorities of those new converts. Verse 42 spells it out clearly:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Those are great words. I would encourage you to take thirty seconds sometime today and memorize that Bible verse. That verse is important because it answers our question for today, what does God expect? God expects three things for us as a church. First, God expects us to be devoted to the Bible. In other words, we are to be a learning church. Second, God expects us to be devoted to the fellowship. How devoted are you to this church? Third, God expects us to be devoted to worship.

When you partake of the body and the blood of Christ and pray, you are worshipping. It is those three things I want to look at today. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Learning

First, God expects us to be a learning church. Verse forty-two says, *"They devoted themselves to the apostle's teachings."* Remember, these words were written about the early church. The apostles were still with them. In time, the apostles would spread through that area of the world and spread the Good News about Jesus Christ. In more time, according to tradition, eleven of the twelve would be martyred for the faith. Those times had not come yet. The apostles were still with them. Just think about it for a moment. The apostles were eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry. They reported about those experiences. The early church didn't just listen to their words. The early church was devoted to their words because they had so much to offer. Time changed things. We are not living in the days of the early church. We are the contemporary church. We can no longer hang on every word of the apostles, because they are dead. The best we can do is study their written words. In other words, the best we can do is study the Bible. How much serious Bible study have you done lately? How devoted are you to the scriptures?

On August 25, I am scheduled to preach the last sermon in this series. It comes from the eighth chapter of Acts, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Do you remember the story? The apostle is on his way to Gaza. It is on that road he encounters an important Ethiopian authority. He was returning home after worshipping in Jerusalem. When Philip meets him, the Ethiopian is reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. He does not understand what he is reading. Can anyone relate to the Ethiopian? Have you ever had a hard time understanding the Bible? There is nothing casual about reading the Bible. If you want to understand the Bible, then you must be devoted. How devoted are you to the scriptures? God expects us to be devoted to the Bible! If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Fellowship

Second, God expects us to be a caring church. Verse forty-two says, *"They devoted themselves to the apostle's teachings and to fellowship."* Don't just jump over that word, fellowship. It means more than a pot luck dinner and a friendly greeting. It is much deeper. It means they were willing to sacrifice for one another. If you don't believe me, then look at look at verses forty-four and forty-five. They say, *"All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."* This next line is hard for us to accept. In the early church, family relationships were secondary to church relationships. That is hard for me. I will sacrifice anything for my family. I have limits of what I will sacrifice for you. Our opinions don't change the divine truth. God expects us to be devoted to the fellowship. How much are you willing to sacrifice for the church? How devoted are you to the church?

On Thursday evening, the Administrative Board met. If you haven't heard, our custodian, Bill Richards, is retiring at the end of this month. He has been with us sixteen years and I am going to miss him. We voted to hire a new custodian, Randy Weems. The entire meeting went smoothly, except for one item, the treasurer's report. I can report two good things about the treasurer's report. First, all of our bills are paid. Second, we are on track to pay all of our apportionments. At the end of May we have sent over \$21,000 to the conference to help do ministry beyond our property. The bad news is, we have had to borrow \$12,000 from ourselves to make this happen. You know it is true. There is no topic in the life of the church that is more uncomfortable than money. The problem is not a shortage of hard workers. No group works harder to raise money. The problem is not the size of the budget. We can't afford to cut a single ministry. We only do part of the job because we don't have the money to do the whole job. There is no other way to say this. The problem is, so many of us aren't devoted to this church. Ask yourself one question. If everyone gave as much money as you do, would the ministry of this church expand or decrease? How you spend your money says a great deal about your priorities. How you spend your money says a great deal about your spiritual maturity. How devoted are you to this church? How much do you really care? God expects us to be devoted to the fellowship. God expects us to be devoted to the church. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Worship

Third, God expects us to be a worshipping church. Verse forty-two says, *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."* The phrase 'the breaking of bread' means Communion. Jesus broke the bread at the upper room to represent his body. If you combine Communion and prayer, then you create worship. How important is worship in the life of the church? You can eliminate everything else in the life of the church and still be a church. If you eliminate worship, then you stop being a church. You can eliminate the United Methodist Men, the United Methodist Women and the Methodist Youth Fellowship and still be a church. You can dissolve the East Ohio Annual Conference, the Mahoning Valley District and the various committees here at Western Reserve and still be a church. You can eliminate Sunday school and all the committees. We could sell the building and still be a church. We could cancel all the concerts and picnics and still be the church. However, the one thing you can not eliminate and be a church is worship. Is there anyone here who is planning on worshipping less during the summer months? How devoted are you to worship? God expects us to be devoted to worship. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Last week, Kathryn and I didn't just go to Boston to visit Fenway Park. We went to Boston to celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. It has been a fast twenty-five years. We stayed in Boston for eight days so we could experience the whole city. We experienced a great deal. We stayed in the historic fishing community, Marblehead, home of the famous painting *The Spirit of 1776*. We traveled to Salem, the home of the house of seven gables. We rode on the Boston subway system, the T.

We walked the Freedom Trail. We traveled to the home of our second and sixth Presidents, John and John Quincy Adams, Peacefield. However, we saved the best for last. On Memorial Day, we went to Gloucester and took a whale watching tour.

Have you ever been on a whale watching tour? They guaranteed a whale sighting, but I wasn't convinced. I am a product of this area so I'm a little cynical. I expected to bob off the Massachusetts coast and see nothing. I figured the guarantee was a picture of whale at the end. That is why I was shocked when I saw a whale. In all, we saw four different whales. One was so close you could study her details. The naturalist called her Pinball because she had a perfectly round circle on her tail. I was overwhelmed by Pinball's size. We watched Pinball swim under the surface. We watched Pinball shoot water through her spout. We watched Pinball stick that massive tail up out of the water. The whole experience with Pinball made me feel better. I felt better about our world's ecology. After all, we hear so much about pollution. We must be doing something right! Just think of all the fish that must be in the sea to sustain one whale. How many whales are in the world? The whole experience made me think about God. How could you look at such a superb creature and not believe in God? We were out on the ocean for four hours watching whales. The truth is, I didn't want it to end. Listen to what I am about to say. The whole experience was more than I ever expected. How many times have you said that in your life? Wouldn't it be great to be more than God ever expected?

What does God expect? God expects us to be a learning congregation. How devoted are you to the scriptures? God expects us to be a caring congregation. How devoted are you to this church? God expects us to be a worshipping congregation. How devoted are you to worship? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"