



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

PIT BULL CHURCH

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If I mentioned “a show about nothing,” would you know what I was talking about? That’s how Jerry Seinfeld referred to his hit TV series. I just heard an interview with him on NPR, talking about this idea of how the show really didn’t have a dramatic center. It was original in the way it focused on slice of life kinds of situations – ordering soup, waiting for a table, getting a parking space. While other TV shows were going for high stakes drama and over the top situations, Seinfeld highlighted the ordinary, everyday events that average people could identify with. It was so basic that it was cutting edge material.

That’s a bit like our text for this morning. If you think about most of your favorite Bible stories, they’re larger than life. Noah and the flood. Moses and the plagues in Egypt. Daniel in the lion’s den. David and Goliath. Jesus feeding the five thousand. The book of Acts is full of big, dramatic moments. We saw that last week with the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the middle of wind, fire from heaven and strange voices. These stories are epic and powerful.

Then along comes the end of Acts 2, which is a slice of life. It has no big central crisis. There are no giant heroes to admire. Instead, it gives us a slice of life and what it looked like for the nameless thousands who became Christians in those early years. We catch a glimpse of average, ordinary believers and their daily routines. And in this context, it’s so basic that it’s cutting edge.

Last week, you may recall that we said after the Holy Spirit made such a spectacular entrance at Pentecost, Peter got up and addressed the crowds. With a new found power and clarity, he preached a powerful message right on the spot. People responded in droves. And that’s where we’ll pick up the story today.

Acts 2:41-47

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous

signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

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, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Back during the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, a popular cry among church scholars was “ad fontes.” It literally means “to the fountains”, to the sources. Just like water is purest closest to the source, there was this deep desire to get back as close to the original sources of the Bible as possible to understand it clearly and fully.

Ad fontes. That’s our cry this morning as we get back as close as we can to the original church. If you want to grasp what church is all about, Acts 2 is the place to start, because it captures it all. There is something pure and essential about this short little section that captures your heart when you read it.

I don’t know how much you pay attention to church news around the world, but I think 2008 is a very confusing time for anyone trying to make sense of Christianity. If I hadn’t grown up in a Christian home, I think I would be completely lost trying to wrap my mind around what church is all about if all I had to go on was what I saw in the media. There are reportedly over 38,000 different denominations (or flavors) of Christian churches, each with its own unique emphasis. Which one is right? There are high profile preachers and televangelists who say and do things that are just bizarre. You’ve got mega churches and house churches and everything in between. Some have political agendas. Some have social agendas. It’s a very uneven landscape.

And yet when I read Acts 2, I see a church that had a crystal clear understanding of who it was and what it was about. I see people that had a focus and a mission. I see a church that made a difference in a powerful way.

As we constantly evaluate what we’re about here at New Day, Acts 2 is our benchmark. I believe we find in this the essence of what God longs to see in his church. The key sentence is found in verse 42:

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

Four things they devoted themselves to: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. Basic. That feels too simple to be church.

Back in 1981, Franky Schaeffer came out with a book called Addicted to Mediocrity. I remember our little church library getting a copy of it when I was growing up. I haven’t read it in all these years, but I have always thought the cover of the book about says it all.

Here's the Cistine Chapel, one of the great treasures of artistic achievement, a magnificent masterpiece. It's an incredibly beautiful work by one of the greatest painters of all time, being covered up by a very different kind of painter. You can almost hear the logic of the person who thought this would be an improvement. "Nothing beats clean white. The ceiling looks too cluttered. It's out of date. And all that skin is embarrassing and too close for comfort. It would be much better painted over to give it a contemporary feel with some solid color."

To me, the end of Acts 2 is like the Cistine Chapel. It's this incredibly beautiful picture of how the church was designed to function. All the essential elements of the Christian life are there. And yet, I think all too often we set about trying to paint over the picture. We want to add on to what the church is about, make it contemporary and hip. At times church can seem to have too much humanity and life the way it is in Acts 2 can feel too close for comfort. So we try to rewrite or repaint the church as something else, something that seems more impressive in our own eyes. And in the process we can lose the precious masterpiece we've been handed.

We can't improve on the beauty of what God has created the church to be – devoted to teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer. I'd like to look at each of these with you in more depth, but first I want to talk about this word devoted. What does it mean that they devoted themselves to these things?

When I think of the word devoted, it brings up pictures of a golden retriever or a yellow lab, stretched out in front of a fire sitting right next to its owner. It's a comfortable, contented kind of word.

But that's not how it feels in the Greek. It's a different breed. It's much more tenacious. Devotion is about perseverance and hanging on to something despite all odds. Tom Skeldon, a dog warden in Ohio, tells of one time when a pit bull they had caught was getting wild in the cage, so he shot it with a tranquilizer. Tom left for a few minutes to give the dog time to pass out. After he walked away, the dog jumped up and bit the cable locking the cage. When the warden came back, there was the dog – completely unconscious, body gone slack, hanging by its jaw that still firmly held on to that cable.

That's the kind of devotion we're talking about. That's why I call this pitbull church. It is a commitment to these four concepts, in spite of all the difficulties and opposition around them. It takes that same kind of tenaciousness for us to hold on to these ideas today when there are so many choices facing churches.

So what made the Acts 2 church a pitbull church? To begin with, it was a **learning church**. The first trait Luke mentions is that these people were devoted to the teaching of the apostles. They wanted to soak in everything they could from the people who had been closest to Jesus.

That learning for them had three distinct components. There was a **taking it in** aspect. They listened to people like Peter preach. They read Paul's letters. They sat in

fascination as different apostles shared their stories of what it was like to travel with Jesus. They were getting all the input they could.

But their learning also included a **living it out** dimension. They weren't just accumulating knowledge in their heads – they were attempting to put into practice what they saw and heard.

These people had the opportunity to watch the apostles firsthand. The early church could see how the disciples conducted themselves and learn from their example. Paul told the Corinthian church straight out that they should imitate him:

1 Corinthians 4:15-16

For although you may have ten thousand others to teach you about Christ, remember that you have only me as your father. For I was the one who brought you to Christ when I preached the Gospel to you. So I beg you to follow my example and do as I do.

There was an understanding in this early church that learning wasn't just in the head – it was in the hands and heart as well. We internalize knowledge as we externalize it in our actions. Part of that action is another component of learning, which is the element of **passing it on**. They didn't want to just learn it for themselves – they wanted to teach others.

When my brother-in-law was in med school, he said that when he had to learn how to do a new medical procedure, the school's approach was simple: See it once, do it once, teach it once. I'd rather see it ten times to try to learn by observing, but that wasn't as effective for truly ingraining the techniques. You had to actually do it for yourself and then help someone else learn to do it. Only then would you have a firm grasp on it.

Paul told the Corinthians, “For what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance..” The apostles' teaching was so important that it was a priority to get the word out to other people as well.

We want to be a learning church, and for us today, it's going to include the same three components. For us, the words and teachings of the apostles are captured in the New Testament and framed by the Old Testament. The early church did a careful job of selecting which books and letters to include in the Bible so that those teachings would be preserved.

We know the Bible is important, and we all nod our heads when we say we're committed to it. But that doesn't always translate into really learning it. George Gallup, Jr. of the Gallup Poll once said, “Americans revere the Bible, but by and large they don't read it.”

If we want to have a pit bull devotion to the apostles' teaching, that will begin with getting to know the Bible. Reading it. Studying it. Listening to it. Memorizing it. Yes it can be difficult to understand sometimes. Yes it can be difficult to care about sometimes. That's why it takes tenacity. That's why it takes perseverance. If you have a

hard time grasping it or you get bored by it, then CHEAT. Find a friend or a group to read it with. It helps to struggle through with someone else encouraging you. If you're having trouble finding your way around, bring your Bible on Sundays to practice looking up what we read here.

This teaching was so central for the first Christians, and it is for us as well. The theologian Albert Mohler put it this way: "We will not believe more than we know, and we will not live higher than our beliefs." In other words, knowing what we believe is what gives us a firm foundation for how we live.

And how we live is important, because we need to live out the apostles' teaching if we're devoted to it. I got a call this week from an old friend I haven't seen in a long time. I could tell something wasn't right, and it turned out that his marriage is in trouble because of some choices he's made. But now he's broken and humble before God. He said, "I don't even know who I was when I was making those choices."

Then he said, "At first I told her that if she felt she needed to leave me, I'd understand. But now, I want to fight for her. I want to fight for our marriage." And he listed out all the ways he was changing and working for that. And I thought that was so encouraging. Here was someone who knew in his head what Scripture says, but he hadn't lived it out. And now he had changed and wanted to hold on to it, wanted to be devoted to God not just in what he knew but how he lived.

We have to take it in, live it out and then pass it on. Not everybody is a born teacher. In fact, James comes right out and says, "Not all of you should play professor." We're all gifted differently, and I'm not here this morning to put out a plea for more Sunday School teachers.

And yet if we are all learning the Bible and working it out in our lives, we all do have something to teach in some way, because we have our own life experience with Jesus. Your relationship with Christ is unique and something that only you can share with somebody else. What you've seen God do in your own life is something that could help somebody else in theirs. Oftentimes what's most encouraging is letting people in on our failures. We think that's the worst. That's too much skin. So we try to cover it up and paint over what really shows off God the most, and that's his grace for our sin. We're all called to throw the gospel forward in some way. How can you invest in someone else's spiritual development?

In addition to being a learning church, the first Christians were a **loving church**. Luke tells us they were devoted to the fellowship. The word there is *koinonia*, and it means sharing something in common. They took that very literally.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Rice rationing has been in the news. If you go to Sam's Club, they only let you buy a couple bags. But reporters say it's not because there's actually a shortage – it's because people are panicking and hoarding mass amounts for themselves.

The New Testament church was doing the opposite of hoarding. They were giving away everything to each other. Land. Possessions. Food. There was no concept of, "This is mine." It was all shared.

The apostles taught that the church is the body of Christ. If the church was as devoted to their teaching as they claimed, then they had to work out what that meant in real life.

If we're all a body, we're all connected. Let's say I have a stomach ache, so I go and take some Tums. I put them in my mouth. My mouth doesn't say, "Wow, these are good. I better hang on to these. What if I start feeling acidic someday? I might need these." That would be ridiculous. The body is connected, so the medicine goes where it's needed.

We tend to reduce fellowship to a watered down idea of holding hands and singing, "We are the world." It seems pretty weak. But when you treat it like the early church did and devote yourself to it, it takes on a much more powerful quality.

I love the story of *Les Miserables*, by Victor Hugo. The prisoner Jean Valjean is released and he goes to stay with this priest. One night, he steals the silverware and runs away. Madame Magloire, who works for the priest discovered it.

"Monseigneur, the man is gone! The silver has been stolen!"

As she uttered this exclamation, her eyes fell upon a corner of the garden, where traces of the wall having been scaled were visible.

"He jumped over the wall. Ah, the abomination! He has stolen our silver!"

The Bishop remained silent for a moment; then he raised his grave eyes, and said gently to Madame Magloire:

"And in the first place, was that silver ours?"

Madame Magloire was speechless. Another silence ensued; then the Bishop went on:

"Madame Magloire, I have for a long time detained that silver wrongfully. It belonged to the poor. Who was that man? A poor man evidently."

A short while later, the police show up at the door, having caught Jean Valjean with the silverware in hand. They bring him to the Bishop.

“Ah! Here you are! He exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. “I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I have you the candlesticks, too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?”

Jean Valjean was like a man on the point of fainting.

The Bishop drew near to him, and said in a low voice: “Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man.”

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of ever having promised anything, remained speechless. The Bishop resumed with solemnity: “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition and I give it to God.”

There is strength in that kind of selflessness. That priest new how to turn being the body of Christ into something tangible and powerful. Being devoted to the fellowship is more than just nice words. It is hanging on to our connection with other Christians like a pitbull and resisting the temptation to think of myself as just an individual.

The body of Christ was the broken body. It was the body that was given on behalf of the world. It was the body that was marked by sacrifice and humility. We want to be a church that lives out that radical kind of love. Christ said:

John 13:35

This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples — when they see the love you have for each other."

It won't be how many Bible verses we learned or how big our church building is or even how many of God's rules we keep. It will be the depth of our care for each other that draws people to God.

The Acts 2 Christians were a learning church and a loving church. They were also a **lifting church**. Two of Luke's statements fall into this category. He says they were devoted to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Let's talk about each one separately.

The breaking of bread refers to celebrating the Lord's Supper, much like we will do a little later this morning. That was one of the practices the early church hung on to like a pit bull. It was central to their worship.

I call this part of being a lifting church because in the Lord's Supper, **we're lifting up Christ**. When you look at our actual time of communion each month, you might think, “What's the big deal? We do it all the time. It doesn't seem like anything all that spectacular – eating a bit of bread dipped in juice. Why is that so important?”

Jesus seemed to think it was important. It was one of the few things he specifically instructed the disciples to do after he died. But it's Paul who helps us see the meaning in the actions:

1 Corinthians 11:26

For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup you are retelling the message of the Lord's death, that he has died for you. Do this until he comes again.

It is the center of the Christian story, and by physically acting it out, we are lifting up Christ. When we break our normal routine to pause and remember what Jesus did for us, we are lifting him up. Each of you becomes the preacher when you stand with that piece of bread and dip it in the cup. We have a roomful of people all saying together, "This is what I believe, and I am taking this because Jesus asked me to remember him this way."

It's easy for other parts of the story to squeeze Christ right out of church. We want to know how to live our lives. We want to improve our lot. We want to serve and be useful. All that's great, but it can distract us from the very heart of why we're here, which is the death and resurrection of Christ. Being a lifting church means fiercely hanging on to that truth when there are a million things to pull us away from it.

Luke also said this was a church devoted to prayer. I see this as a different kind of a lifting – a lifting up of the needs of each other. Call it weight lifting. We carry the burdens of our brothers and sisters to the Lord.

I need to be more of a pit bull in this area. I have to confess that many times, when somebody has shared their needs with me, I've said, "Oh, I'll be praying for you." Then I walk away and forget until the next time I'm about to see them. Then I panic and throw up a quick prayer at the last minute

What I've found works much better for me is to say, "Oh, can I pray for you right now?" Then I stop and pray with that person on the spot. That way, the other person can be in on it and be encouraged. And the actual praying puts that request deeper in my own mind so that I WILL remember to pray later.

About 26 years ago, Karin's family moved from Minnesota to California where her dad was hired to be the pastor. When they arrived, they met a man named Bob Packard. Bob had a daughter about Karin's age, and so he felt a lot of compassion for Karin and her brother having to move so far away from everything they knew. He pledged to pray for Karin and Jon every day.

After 12 years, Karin's dad moved to a new job. But he was invited back recently for the church's 50th anniversary. When he got there, there was Bob. Bob said, "How's Karin? I'm still praying for her every day." Fourteen years with no contact, no reminders, no chance to see prayers answered. Still, he faithfully lifted her up before God.

That's a pit bull. That's being tenacious in prayer. It's not about Bob – God was the one who prompted him to commit to that prayer. He was just willing to make it a living, vital habit. Wouldn't it be great if with God's help New Day became a church full of those kinds of people. It's that type of devotion that made the early church not only a lifting church, but also a **leading church**.

How they lived, what they did was leading people to Christ. Look at some of Luke's comments:

1. Everyone was filled with awe.
2. They enjoyed the favor of all the people.
3. The Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved.

This fourth quality of the church was almost a byproduct of the first three. What was happening in their midst was so compelling that people were drawn to it.

There's a new book out by Dave Kinnaman called "UnChristian." I don't know if you've seen it, but he presents some really sobering statistics on how the rest of the world views the church. Essentially, he says the situation is anything but what it was in Acts. Americans are being turned off by the church. They see Christians as judgmental, narrow minded, sheltered, too involved in politics.

Christianity may never be understood by the world, but something has gone very wrong when the church is viewed as being the opposite of Christlike. And the answer is always the same: go back to the beginning. Go back to what the first church devoted their lives to. Hang on with all our might to what the Bible really teaches. Hold on to each other completely and selflessly. Lift up Christ continually. Do those things and the way the world sees us will change.

When we were first dating, I bumped into Karin on the college campus early one morning, before she had put any make up on. She was horrified to be seen, afraid that I would think she was ugly. I guess that's a girl thing. But she didn't need the mascara or lipstick to make me think she was beautiful. I loved the real face, the natural Karin. That was who I was attracted to.

The church is the same way. We think we have to somehow do something more special for people to like it. But God has given the church a natural beauty. He's created it to show off his glory. All we have to do is let it be seen.

I want to be a pit bull for Jesus. I want to lock on to what's most important. We've talked about these concepts for us as a group, but it's far more personal than that. We can see all kinds of ways that the church needs to change. But I'm the church. You're the church. The group won't change unless the individuals change. As we come to communion this morning, think about those four areas we've looked at. Which do you most want to focus on in your relationship with Christ?

Learning – do you want to know Christ better and understand the Bible more?
Loving – Are you giving the candlesticks away? Am I being the broken body of Christ – giving myself away?
Lifting – Is Christ being lifted up in your life? And who can you be lifting in prayer?
Leading – Does your life make Christ compelling?

I look at that list and don't see one area where I'm feeling very good about myself. I could get discouraged and overwhelmed at every turn. It helps me to know that the picture of the church in Acts is not one of a perfect group of people who always got it right. It was a people who knew how much they needed Jesus and who lived in a community of forgiveness and grace. And everyone was filled with awe at what God was doing. Luke says it was God who was adding to their number. It wasn't about some fantastic church – it was about a fantastic God working through ordinary people.

That's what we're aiming for – to see God at work. I think about Jacob wrestling with God in human form. God said, "Let me go." Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go until you bless me." That seems a good metaphor to me for what we're saying about the church being devoted, holding on tirelessly to these important concepts. We don't let go until we see God do his awesome work.

Habakkuk 3:2

*LORD, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD.
Renew them in our day,
in our time make them known.*

That's our heart cry – to hold on to these truths until we're all filled with awe because we're seeing God rescue more and more people through Jesus.