

JUNE 4, 2017 ----HOLY PENTECOST

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

“LUKE’S LIST---THE BIG 4---ACTS 2:42, PART 1”

Today is one of the three greatest holy days of the year for Orthodox Christians---Holy Pentecost. 50 days after Christ’s Resurrection and 10 days after He ascended into heaven, the Third Person of the All-Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, was poured out on Christ’s Apostles, His mother, and the other followers of the Lord as they waited in Jerusalem. We just heard about this in our reading today from Acts 2. That day was the birthday of our Church. And beginning that day, the gospel began to be spread from Jerusalem to the whole world. Even eventually to Ohio!

That first parish in Jerusalem---how special it must have been! And yet our parish here in North Royalton has the same essential “thing” they had---the Holy Spirit. They received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We each have had our own personal Pentecost---when we were baptized and chrismated. The Holy Spirit descended upon us and filled us as the priest anointed us, saying, “The seal of the gift of Holy Spirit”, and the godparents loudly responded, “Seal!”. The same Holy Spirit is with us and in us as He was for the Jerusalem Christians in that first Orthodox Christian congregation.

A little farther on in the second chapter of Acts (the chapter where today’s reading came from), in verse 42, St. Luke (the author of Acts) tells us about 4 essentials in that first church. It was focusing on those 4 essentials that allowed that parish, by the power of the Holy Spirit that had come upon them, to do so much for God.

I call verse 42 “Luke’s list” and the “Big 4”. We should make the Big 4 of that first parish our Big 4 at St. Matthew’s. Luke’s list is still perfectly relevant and important today, just as it was 2000 years ago.

Before I read you the verse, let’s guess a little as to what St. Luke thought were the Big 4, the really important things for a parish to focus on.

Guess #1---this is something many often talk about as being highly important for a church---“Location, location, location”. You need a nice piece of land on an important street with nearby freeway connections. Yes, location, location, location.... But St. Luke forgot to mention that one. Not in the Big 4.

Guess #2---a most obvious one! Everyone would agree that a most basic necessity for a church is a big and healthy treasury---a great money situation.... But St. Luke seems to have forgotten to mention money, too. Not in the Big 4.

Guess #3---Can’t miss on this guess. No one will disagree that one of the hugest needs for a strong parish is a nice and large and beautiful church building. But St. Luke overlooked that one, too! Not in the Big 4.

Well, I guess it’s time to quit guessing as we’re getting nowhere. So let’s just go ahead and read Acts 2:42 to see what St. Luke put on his list----- “*and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.*” That is Luke’s List, the Big 4. And as that first congregation focused on the Big 4, with the help of God they grew rapidly. St. Luke tells us that just a few verses later in verse 47---

“and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” We’ve been getting a fair amount of new parishioners lately----if we get one new parishioner per month, we’re quite happy. They were adding people “day by day”! That’s pretty amazing--the Big 4 must have been a big part of that.

So let’s look at those Big 4 one more time so we remember them---Acts 2:42---“and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers.” The Big 4 are: 1. The apostles’ doctrine; 2. Fellowship; 3. The breaking of the bread; 4. The prayers. That first Orthodox parish focused on all four and that let the power of the Holy Spirit loose in their midst. They grew. They sent out missionaries. They began the changing of the world by the ancient Church. The Big 4 had a big impact.

And the message of today, Holy Pentecost, is that the same Person, the same Holy Spirit who came down on that first church 2000 years ago has also come down on us at St. Matthew’s. He is God. God doesn’t change. So still the same Holy Spirit..... And so, if we focus on the same Big 4 as they did, we will also let the Holy Spirit’s power loose in our congregation so that we can be a church truly alive for God and bringing glory to God.

Many summers I like to do a sermon series so as to dig a little deeper into something than can be done in just one homily. So today we’ll start a four Sunday series on the Big 4. We’ll look at them one by one, Sunday by Sunday. And, of course, #1 today.

#1 of the Big 4, #1 on Luke’s List is recorded at the start of Acts 2:42---“they continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine.” They continued steadfastly, they hung on to it, they focused on it---on “the Apostles’ doctrine”. Some translations say “apostles’ teaching”. Same difference----doctrine really means teaching. They continued steadfastly in what the apostles’ taught, in their doctrine.

Some Christians say doctrine isn’t important. Some say doctrine splits people up. There’s a catchword in some religious circles that expresses that feeling---“Doctrine divides” But true doctrine, the Apostles’ doctrine, is not divisive, but unifying.

It’s essential. It’s what the Apostles believed and taught. And so, it is obviously what we should believe and teach, what we should “continue steadfastly” in.

We certainly won’t be able to do Christ’s work well if we’re not even sure what it is we believe.....

St. Paul, in a different context, wrote in I Corinthians 14:8---“If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” True doctrine, true belief, apostolic doctrine is a good bugle to lead us in life.

Notice the precision of the words about doctrine in St. Luke’s list of the Big 4. He says--“*apostolic* doctrine”. We can trust apostolic doctrine because it comes from the original apostles of Jesus Christ. We can trust the apostles to have true doctrine. They were trustworthy men, taught what to believe by Christ and the Holy Spirit. They knew truth, they taught truth, they lived for truth, they even *died* for truth. All but one of the 12 died as martyrs for the Lord. (St. John suffered greatly but ended up dying peacefully). Why would they all die for something they weren’t sure about? They knew what was true, they were sure about their doctrine.

So we can trust them. We can feel safe believing what they believed and handed down. We do not have to, and should not, make up our own beliefs. And we should not follow after the beliefs of those who are outside of the Church the Apostles began---the Orthodox Church. Stick with the apostles and their doctrine and you can't go wrong.

When we start to follow the doctrine, or the teaching, of others, we may be led astray. No matter how good it sounds, if it's not the apostles' doctrine, it can't be trusted. The apostles' teaching has the real authority.

Some years ago the British Broadcasting Corporation had scheduled for one of their news shows an interview with an official of the government of Nigeria who was visiting London. He was a very knowledgeable and trustworthy authority on Nigeria and was going to explain recent events there. Well, he was running late the day of the live interview. And just minutes before it was supposed to start, another man from Nigeria walked into the building. He knew nothing about the radio show and not all that much about Nigeria, although he was originally from there. He had come to the BBC to apply for a job. But he was all dressed up and the people in charge of the radio show assumed he was the man they were supposed to interview. So, ignoring his protests, they rushed him into the studio just in time and put him on the air. He didn't know what to do so he faked his way through the whole hour. Part way through, the interviewer realized something was wrong, so he faked it, too! They got through it, but no one knew if much of anything the poor fellow said about Nigeria was actually true---he was not a real authority on the country. (in "Our Daily Bread", 4/28/07)

There are many religious teachers who aren't real authorities, even though many of them might mean well. They are not committed to apostolic doctrine and have no real authority. Don't follow them or trust their teaching. Stick with the real spiritual authority, the doctrine of the apostles of Christ as taught in the apostolic Church begun by Christ.

So, a simple message today. The first of the Big 4 from Acts 2:42 that our church should focus on is described in that verse---"and they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." So should we. We should also be steadfast in the doctrine of the apostles, which means the doctrine of the Church that the Apostles founded when the Holy Spirit came down on them at Pentecost. The Apostles' church, the Orthodox Church.

If we do that, balanced with and combined with #2,#3, and #4 on Luke's List (which we'll look at on later Sundays!), then our parish can become more like that of that first church in Jerusalem long ago. For we do have the same Holy Spirit with us that they received on Holy Pentecost.