

**JULY 16, 2017**

**ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

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

This summer I have been doing an “off and on” four week homily series on one verse in the Bible---Acts 2:42. Just a short verse, but lots in it! This verse is part of St. Luke’s history in the book of Acts about the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem. A growing congregation, a powerful church, a parish that sent out the first missionaries who began spreading Christianity everywhere. Why was that first Orthodox parish so powerful and so blessed by God, even in the midst of their many hardships? St. Luke tells us why in this verse, Acts 2:42. He lists 4 things. I call it “Luke’s List” or “The Big 4”. Here is the verse—“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ doctrine, and to fellowship, and to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers.”

In the earlier sermons we’ve already looked at numbers 1, 2, & 3 of the Big 4: the apostles’ doctrine, fellowship, and the breaking of the bread. Today we’ll look at the last one, #4---“the prayers”. They were devoted to “the prayers”.

And not just prayer in general. #4 reads “*the* prayers”. So it’s very specific prayers St. Luke is referring to---the prayers of their worship services when they worshipped God together. When they came to worship together, they devoted themselves heart and soul to “the prayers” they prayed together.

It’s not always like that in all churches. Rugby School was one of the most famous of the boys boarding schools in England in the early 1800s. Being affiliated with the Church of England there were daily chapel services with required attendance every morning. You can imagine the chapel at those times---packed out with a couple hundred boys. Probably often bored, fidgety, falling asleep, not too enthused..... One young fellow had an idea of how to make the services more interesting and lively. He somehow managed to catch a rat and he smuggled it into the service in a box. Then, right in the middle of the service one day, he opened up the box and let the rat out. Well, they say that may have been the liveliest service ever held in Rugby chapel---no boys (or teachers) dozed off that day! Eventually the teachers managed to chase the rat out of the chapel, but it took quite a while! (Eminent Victorians, Lytton Strachey, Modern Library, 1918, p. 205)

That is a method that will increase the attention level of all in attendance, but will unfortunately not increase the devotion to the prayers that St. Luke writes about. So a far better way to have more meaningful church services is to “devote” ourselves “to the prayers” as did the members of the first Christian congregation in Jerusalem.

Being devoted to the prayers means to pay attention to them, to actually *pray* them. Several times in the liturgy, the deacons cry out to us, “Let us attend!”. That is a commandment from God through the voice of the deacon telling us what to do in church---pay attention! For we should not come here to rest and relax. The word “liturgy” means “the work of the people”. So we come here to work, not kick back.... And we shouldn’t come here to watch the priest and deacons do the service---we should all be “doing” the

service. It is not a spectator sport.

So...you should attentively sing the hymns and pray the prayers that are for the laypeople to sing and pray. The prayers that are for the priest to pray? Follow along silently, paying attention to the meaning.

It is important to note that just “mouthing” the words of the hymns and prayers is not the goal! To sing the hymns and pray the prayers while our minds are somewhere else, to just rattle them off, is not good. This is an admonition for both laypeople and clergy. Whether you are “out there” in the pews or “in here” at the altar, we all need to strive to actually and consciously pray what we are saying.

It’s not a new problem. It was a problem 1600 years ago. St. John Chrysostom, the author of the liturgy we are praying this morning, addressed it in a sermon back around 400 A.D. He said the following to his flock---“Many enter the church and recite countless lines of prayer and then leave. But they do not know what they have said. Their lips move, but they do not hear what they are saying. How can you expect God to listen to your prayer if you don’t listen to it yourself!” (Quoted in Prayer, Tomas Spidlik, Cistercian Publications, 205, p. 32.)

So sing and pray thoughtfully, making the words your *own* words. And if there are lines in the liturgy that you’re not sure of the meaning of, just ask me about them..... Nothing makes me happier than a conversation about the meaning of something in the liturgy!

Be like those first Christians in that first Orthodox parish in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. “Devote” yourself to the prayers.

So the message of today’s sermon is very simple----when at church, really *pray* the prayers. And devote yourself to them.

Before I finish, I want to go slightly off subject. That verse we’ve been looking at in four homilies, Acts 2:42, speaks about “the prayers”. And we saw that is referring to the prayers in our worship services. But we also pray (hopefully!) when not in the worship services. Hopefully, a lot! And I wish to say something about one aspect of our praying outside of “the prayers” of the services.

I wish to mention this aspect because of a matter of timing, that our new parish list is coming out soon.....

One type of prayer we pray is called “intercessory prayer”. That is the type of prayer when we pray for people. Every day we pray for our families, our friends, our enemies. And we should also pray for our fellow church members. It’s very important for us to do that!

There was a woman who was a very active member of a parish and did all kinds of work for the church. Then as she aged her health began to fail and she became a shut-in. Her priest, of course, would go to visit her and bring her the Holy Eucharist. And they would talk. And she would say it was so hard on her to not be able to do anything at all for the church anymore. The priest told her there was something very important she could do while at her home. That was to pray for all the parishioners every day---they needed it! And she had the time to do it. She happily agreed to do so and it became a very joyous way for to serve God even though she couldn’t leave her house.

We're not huge---I suppose around 140 families or homes. But that's too many for someone to remember everyone in our parish family—and probably most of you would have difficulty finding time each day to pray for so many people.

But there's a good way to do it. Our new parish family directory should be out in a couple of weeks or so. It can be an excellent tool for us to use to pray for each other. Let's just guess (I really don't know) that the new list has 14 pages. Then what you do each day is to pray for everyone on 2 pages of the list---day by day. 7 days: 1 week: all 14 pages are prayed for. Manageable, you don't forget anybody, and you pray for all of us each week!

Now you won't know everyone on that list and so you won't always know what to pray for them. Don't worry---God knows them all! And He'll know how to “apply” your prayer to their lives.

So all of that was a bit off subject from the main thing in today's homily---our prayers here in church. But our prayers outside this building are also very important. So watch for that new parish list soon.....

To conclude this 4-week look at that one Bible verse---Acts 2:42..... Why was that first Christian parish so powerful and so pleasing to God? St. Luke tells us in that verse---“And they devoted themselves to (#1) the apostles' teaching, to (#2) fellowship, to (#3) the breaking of the bread, and to (#4) to the prayers.”

We've looked at those four one by one, week by week. Now may we more fully devote ourselves and our church to each one of those four.

And God will bless us.

