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ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

“LUKE’S LIST---THE BIG 4---ACTS 2:42, PART 3---THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD”

I have been preaching this summer through a short, off and on, sermon series based on one verse in the Bible. The verse, Acts 2:42, is part of a passage by St. Luke, the author of Acts, when he talks about the early days in the history of the first Christian church---that at Jerusalem 2000 years ago. St. Luke lists in this verse four things that that first Orthodox Christian congregation especially focused on. I have been calling these four “Luke’s List” and “The Big 4”. Four things that made that first congregation pleasing to God. Four things that we in our parish, all these years later, should also focus on.

Here is the verse that talks about The Big 4---Acts 2:42---“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ doctrine, and to fellowship, and to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers.” We already on earlier Sundays looked at the first two of the Big 4---“the apostles’ doctrine” and “fellowship”.

Today we will look at #3---“the breaking of the bread”. I am going to re-read Acts 2:42 up through that phrase so as to put it in context..... “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ doctrine, and to fellowship, and to the breaking of the bread.....”

“The breaking of the bread”. St. Luke isn’t just talking about any meal. He calls it “*the* breaking of *the* bread.” He is talking about a very specific type of meal---the Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion, the eating and drinking together of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

That particular breaking of the bread is what our liturgy is all about. It is the center of our lives as we do it in obedience to what Christ commanded on the night before His death. It was certainly the center of life for those in that first church. As St. Luke writes, “They *devoted* themselves.....to the breaking of the bread.”

We still break the bread. In fact, just a little while after this sermon, we will have “the breaking of the bread” right here and now. Just like we do every Sunday and every holy day liturgy. Today, on this altar, bread will be broken, wine will be poured—the bread and wine will be transformed by the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of our Lord.

Yes, we break the bread. But do we *devote* ourselves to it as did the members of that first Christian parish?

To “devote” ourselves to something means that we focus on it, that it’s a high priority, that it’s of central importance. For example---a husband might say he is devoted to his wife. Or an employee might say he is devoted to his job. Central, high priority, the main thing.

That is what “the breaking of the bread” should be for us. The most important thing we do every week. Not just a formality or a pretty ceremony or an obligation. But it should be #1—what we are *devoted to*.

How can we be more devoted to the breaking of the bread? How can we be more like

those first Christians in Jerusalem 2000 years ago that St. Luke describes in Acts 2?

There are quite a few ways..... And we don't have time to go through all of them today.....But there will be plenty more sermons when I can cover some of them. Today, briefly, we will look at just 3.

**#1---Be here for the breaking of the bread.** Every Sunday. If we just show up here occasionally or even rarely for the breaking of the bread, we're obviously not all that devoted to it. Then we are like a man who is telling a friend about how his father is now in a nursing home and how he is very devoted to making sure he is getting good care at the facility. And the friend says, "How is he doing there this week?" And the man replies, "Oh, I don't know. I haven't been over there to visit him for a couple of months." Not really that devoted!

If we have the habit of occasional, not weekly, attendance at the liturgy, we are in a similar situation as that man. Devoted in our words, but not in our actions. If that's the case we should examine ourselves----on Sundays when we are not here for the breaking of the bread, what is it we are doing instead? Whatever that may be, that is what we are more devoted to than we are to the breaking of the bread.

Then we need to change the object of our devotion----and we can begin to do so by being here, in the church, for the breaking of the bread.

**#2---Prepare for the breaking of the bread by fasting.** Most weeks of the year, Orthodox fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. It's not a total fast (no food) but a Lenten type fast---where we eat less and give up animal-based foods. There are several reasons for fasting, and we won't look at them today. Except one reason----one of the reasons for fasting on Wednesday and Friday is to prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Eucharist on Sunday.

The discipline of fasting on Wednesday and Friday goes back to the time of the Apostles. And keeping that discipline is a reminder to us on those 2 days of the week----a reminder that Sunday is coming when we will receive far better food and drink than what we abstain from on Wednesday and Friday. Sure, pork chops and cheese curls are delicious. But how much better, and how much more worthy of our devotion, is the Body and Blood of Christ---that wonderful feast contained in a spoon.

Think during the week about that Sunday morning meal. Desire it. Devote yourself to it. And fast on Wednesday and Friday because it will keep that upcoming Sunday meal on your mind and in your heart.

**#3---Prepare for the breaking of the bread by prayer.** Devote yourself to the breaking of the bread throughout the week leading up to it by praying about it---thanking God for it, praying that God will mercifully allow you to partake, asking God to bless you and sanctify you because of partaking.

And it is good and important to set aside some time to pray the "pre-Communion prayers". Saturday night or Sunday morning----get out your prayer book and pray those prayers. Prayer books differ. Some will have lots (really lots!) of pre-Communion prayers and hymns. If you can't do them all, do some. Others, like the red prayer book in our pews, have just 6 prayers. Anyone can find time to pray those.

But which prayers, or how many, really isn't what matters. What matters is that you prepare to partake by praying about it. Pray the prayers with attention, make their words your own words. They will help you be devoted to what you are about to eat and drink.

If you don't have a prayer book, see me and I'll run you a copy of some of the prayers so you can get started for next Sunday.....

There are other important ways to devote ourselves to Holy Communion and to prepare ourselves for it-----making sure we are at peace with all people as far as is in our power, going regularly to Confession, truly worshiping in the liturgy in which we are going to receive. But no time today to look at those.... And I quite frequently preach about the Eucharist so we'll look at them some other time.

Today, we have looked at three important ways to devote ourselves to the Holy Eucharist as did those members of the first Orthodox church in Jerusalem 2000 years ago.

#1---Be here for the Eucharist.

#2---Fast on Wednesdays and Fridays to "remind" you of the Sunday morning feast in a spoon.

#3---Pray the pre-Communion prayers either Saturday evening or Sunday morning.

That first church was very alive, very dynamic, very strong in faithfulness to Christ--- all with the help of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It was all from God, but the parishioners had a role, too. Their role was to focus on those Big 4, Luke's list, that St. Luke recorded for us in Luke 2:42. And number three of the Big 4 was that they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread. May we be like those first Christians and more fully devote ourselves to the breaking of the bread.

And now let us proceed to offer the holy oblation to the Father and to break the bread.