

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Toward A Healthier Church"
Dr. J. Dent

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(Fourth Sunday after Easter)

None of us are in perfect health. Whether it is dental care, or eye conditions, or skin imperfections, joint problems, headaches, or much more serious conditions such as blood sugar imbalances, cholesterol problems or blood pressure concerns, whatever it is, we have to admit we are not in perfect health. And even if we did have excellent physical health, we haven't even started to probe our mental state, how anxious we are, whether we lose our tempers, and the things we do to cope.

Our health condition is imperfect. And so too is the health of the Church far from ideal. I don't mean simply that St. David's is unhealthy. I mean every congregation, of every denomination and non-denomination, is unhealthy. We are all experiencing problems when we look at what we would like to be ideally. Every Board and every Session (the Elders, the spiritual leaders of the congregation) would love to see the church building full on Sunday morning, and the bank account so strong that we could whatever we needed to do at any time.

But there is more to Church than the number of people and the amount of money we have. There are ways to look at our congregation, or any congregation, to ask questions that will help us increase our health, and help us draw nearer to God and to one another.

And when we want to discern what to do and what questions to ask, we study the Scriptures. Without the Bible, we are just another social group trying to help the community. With the Bible, we have the thoughts and intentions of our loving, caring God to direct us and help us see life through God's eyes.

While we would have to study many different passages and probably do a thorough course together to get a more complete view of what a healthy church look like, I simply wanted to take a few minutes with you to look at Acts 2: 42 – 47. We find here the DNA of the newly established church. Dr. Luke records what was happening among those first three thousand or so believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 2:41)

A healthy church encourages devotion. That devotion to God happens in four areas: the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer.

What is devotion? We often talk about "devout" Christians or other religious people. I think we mean they attend their place of worship regularly and try to live out their faith. But this word speaks to faithfulness and perseverance. In fact, the verb *proskartareo* and its cognate noun, *proskarterasis*, is translated in English as patience and perseverance. Devotion to God in the church takes patience, perseverance and faithfulness. Because there will be, as there has been, many challenges to your spiritual commitment to be here with likeminded people. You will be tested in loyalties and adherence to the Lord in these four areas. Devotion to God takes courage, takes energy, takes caring. So when you say, "Yes" to the Lord, the Scriptures always encourages strongly to mean what we say and to back it up with actions. What do we say when someone asks us at the hospital what religious identity we have, or what church we attend? Devotion to God is first and foremost a heart attitude, and at the core of who we are. No one can force you for very long to be here. And if they do, then you have to wonder how long that action will last.

Devotion is a commitment in our hearts to God, and is why I continually bring up relationship to Jesus Christ as central to Christianity. Because if you miss that piece of what it means to be a Christian, you miss the core, the center of the Christian faith.

A healthy church is devoted to the apostles' teaching. This means that you will hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ often. You will hear that you should change your mind or repent of your rebellion against God, and choose God's ways and will for your daily living. You will hear about how choosing God's way is impossible without accepting what Jesus did for you in his death and resurrection, that he took the penalty of your sin upon himself and showed the keys of life were his in his resurrection. We no longer need to fear death. The apostles' teaching is contained in what we call the New Testament, which is reliable and helpful for guiding us and showing us both the healthiness and the sicknesses of the churches in the decades following Jesus' death. Healthy churches rightly interpret and apply the Scriptures to help Christians live in vital and lively relationship to God.

A healthy church is devoted to the fellowship. The root of that word *koinonia*, is what we have in common. We get the English word for “coin” from that Greek word. (\$5, 1 cent; coin=what we have in common) A healthy church experiences what we have in common and builds upon that. Of course, we have diversity. But in the essentials, such as is found in the Apostles' Creed, we have unity. Unity in diversity is fellowship. A word was created to express that thought. It is “university.” So the church is a university in that sense. Healthy churches provide lots of opportunity to enjoy one another within the congregation, such as dinners, because Presbyterians like to eat, and small groups, and other places to discuss and grow in our faith are essential to that faith, as well as places to simply “hang out” together. That is fellowship.

A healthy church celebrates communion and eats together. “The breaking of the bread” in Acts could be simply a meal, but it appears to be more than that here and in Acts 20 where they met together on the first day of the week for the breaking of bread. For a long time, Christians have debated how often they should celebrate Holy Eucharist. Some say it should be every week, as it happened to be in much of the ancient church. Others say that every week creates a kind of rote quality or eliminates how special the sacrament is. Calvin noted that he was concerned that the sacrament be too frequently celebrated. I'm told John Knox celebrated the sacrament monthly. The Salvation Army considers every meal together to be a fulfillment of the communion in Scripture. I personally believe we should celebrate Holy Communion more often than three or four times a year. But thus far, the point being made is that “wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church exists.” (Calvin's *Institutes*, book IV, ch. 1, #9, p. 1023) A healthy church does communion, and provides opportunities to eat together.

A healthy church prays. Major Ray Rowe a couple of weeks ago noted that most congregations have lost their prayer services. And if they haven't lost their prayer groups, they are greatly diminished. Talking to God, and trusting God verbally is the mark of a healthy church. Sometimes we think praying is simply a formalized way to open and close meetings, or a slot in a Sunday service. But if we believe prayer is important in our personal lives, then shouldn't we also make the time and energy to pray in a corporate setting. Faithfulness in prayer is the most common use of that word translated above as “devotion.” Perhaps this is why many Christian

churches encourage people to have “daily devotions” and produce “devotional materials.” How can we once again recover the priority of prayer corporately, in this congregation? I would be interested in any ideas you have.

The believers at the end of Acts 2 did more than devote themselves to the teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. They also helped each other practically. They made sure that those who were helpless and had no income, usually widows and orphans, had enough to eat and a place to stay. The church ensured the common welfare of the people long before governments got into this part of our lives. They met in each others' homes, and they met in the temple courts. They had small groups, where they learned about their faith and grew in it, and they had the larger group setting for worship as we do on Sundays. They praised God, enjoyed God's favor, and the people's favor.

They received many more believers because their actions and their words went together. God even allowed miracles of healing and changed lives to occur often. God still allows this today.

All these aspects show forth a healthy church. In what ways, are we healthy here at St. David's? In what ways, do we need to improve? What is your part in making this place a healthier place? Are you offering your gifts and talents here?

These are just some of the questions on the road to becoming a healthier church. Helping the community, helping each other, listening to God in Scripture and prayer, inviting others to join you in your commitment here, loving and caring for others, as you receive love and care from God, practically showing your commitment to the church every week, all these are helpful for discerning how we might become healthier together.

All your input on this, and every teaching and preaching that happens here, is appreciated. This is not a final word, but an invitation to a dialogue. May God grant us greater health, personally and corporately, as we trust Jesus in this place.

Let us pray.