

SERMON TITLE: "Christian Devotion to the Apostles' Teaching"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:22-24, 36-42
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 18, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Seven years ago today my family held the memorial service for my dad. It's easy to remember the date because that day was also my dad's birthday. So, today brings up some memories of the things Dad taught me either with his words or by his example. Working hard, living honestly, being responsible, caring for family, and having some fun were all part of his teachings. When I was a teenager and had to take my 10-speed bicycle to a repair shop, I complained to my dad about how much the repair cost. I remember my dad saying, "Kim, don't ever deny or cheat a worker of their wages." I think my dad impressed upon me some valuable lessons, and I think I can say that I'm still pretty devoted to his teachings.

In this month's sermon series, we're focusing on how the earliest Christians developed and grew in their faith. Acts 2:42 tells us that—after they repented of their sins and were forgiven and baptized—those early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Last Sunday, because we served Holy Communion and shared a potluck lunch, we focused on the Christian devotion to breaking bread. Today, we're going to consider what it would look like to have a Christian devotion to the apostles' teaching.

1—APOSTOLIC TRADITION AND APOSTLES' CREED

In those early-Christian days of Acts chapter two, a devotion to the apostles' teaching would have meant gathering where the apostles were and listening to those persons speak. Jesus had spent three years training his disciples. Now that Jesus had died, risen, and ascended to heaven, it was time for the well-trained followers of Jesus to continue spreading his gospel message. The word "disciple" means to be a disciplined learner. The word "apostle" means a disciple who is then "sent out" to speak

about and do Jesus' work. That's what the apostles were doing in Acts 2, when Peter's preaching led 3000 people to repent and believe. In the initial years of Christianity, there were not yet any written gospels or New Testament letters. So the earliest apostolic teachings about Jesus would have been oral only. To be devoted to the apostles' teaching would have meant gathering where the apostles were and listening intently to their words.

Because thousands converted, the original apostles like Peter, James, John, Andrew, Phillip, Bartholomew, and Thomas were soon supplemented by other Christian leaders. You might have noticed from our Call to Worship reading from First Corinthians 15 that the missionary Paul referred to himself "as the least of the apostles." Paul described himself that way because his conversion and calling to Christian leadership came after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Others became apostles even later. For example, in Romans 16:7, Paul wrote about the "prominent apostles" Adronicus and Junia. Here's a fun fact for you. For centuries, Bible scholars assumed both of those apostles were men, but recent biblical scholarship has now recognized that the apostle Junia was actually a woman.

In the first century of Christianity, most of the apostles' teaching continued to be oral. The Christian apostles would take their message to Jewish synagogues, homes, riversides, and anywhere else that people would gather. New converts to Christianity would grow in their Christian faith by devotedly attending these gatherings, listening to the stories about Jesus, and hearing about forgiveness and salvation through Christ.

Over the course of time, the apostles' oral teachings were sometimes condensed into verses and songs that could be used in worship services. Bible scholars point out passages in the New Testament that were early hymns, sung by the believers. One of those that we know about is in Philippians, chapter two. I'll read it, and maybe it will sound familiar.

Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.
 Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that, at the name of Jesus,
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father. (Philip. 2:6-11)

Do you hear how that recitation of faith about Jesus could have been an early hymn? Put to music, those words would be easier to remember—easier to teach and easier to learn. We use hymns that way today, as well. The oral practice of singing in church choirs and congregations is one of the best ways to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching.

2—APOSTLES' TEACHING IN WRITING & READING

Of course, eventually, the apostles' teaching developed beyond just the spoken word and song to the written word, as well. Earliest among those writings were the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches around the Mediterranean region. Paul wrote those letters of faith and guidance in the 40s and 50s of that first century. The gospels about Jesus were written down decades later, likely in the 70s, 80s, 90s, and maybe even the early 100s. It would take some additional centuries before those writings were gathered up and compiled into what we now think of as the New Testament.

Once those writings were collected and came to be understood as authoritative, high-level church leaders gained more access to them for reading. Hand-copied scriptures were very expensive and weren't very abundant, however, and most people weren't literate, so average Christian believers still depended on hearing someone else preach the apostles' message.

After the invention of the printing press in the 1500s, Bibles became more available, and more people learned to read. So, today, in addition to hearing the Bible read at church, we can devote

ourselves to the apostles' teaching by reading our very own personal copy of the Bible in the comfort of our own homes. That's why we Christians today commonly talk about the practice of daily "devotions," in which we read some chapters or verses of the Bible every day. If you are devoted to the apostles' teaching in this way, good for you! If not, I encourage you to begin this Christian devotional practice. The Bible isn't the kind of book that you can just sit down and read straight through, like a novel. But it is the kind of book that you should have close at hand, next to your favorite chair or your bed. Devoting ourselves to daily Bible reading is a great way to gain familiarity with the apostles' teaching.

Of course, it's good to read and study the Bible together in small groups also. Sometimes it helps to have a well-prepared teacher and other students to ask questions and have a discussion. If you're open to this idea, I would really encourage you to come to Adult Sunday School this fall. My husband, Steve James, is going to lead the class through the Gospel of Mark, which is a wonderful place to begin learning about and devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching.

3—THE APOSTLES' CREED

Some of you may have been wondering how I could talk this long already about the apostles' teaching and not yet have mentioned the Apostles' Creed. Well, we've now arrived. But before we get into the specifics of that, I'll tell you a funny story. About eleven years ago, I had a surgery and had to stay home for two weeks. So, in advance, I bought a new book on early church history. My primary goal in reading the history book was to prepare for an upcoming sermon series on the Apostles' Creed.

When I finally reached the end of the book, however, I was puzzled. After slogging through 250 pages of church history, I didn't recall reading anything about the famous creed. I'd read about all kinds of theological controversies, persecutions and deaths of martyrs, fanatically-ascetic monks, and even the development of the New Testament, but I couldn't recall anything that was labelled "The Apostles' Creed." If I'd been reading that church history book in the first days after my surgery, I might have chalked that up to the fuzzy-headedness of pain and pain medications. But I didn't start the book until

my mind was pretty clear. Thinking I'd surely missed it somehow, I looked up "Apostles' Creed" in the index. Nothing. I even went back through the book, page by page, re-reading all the passages I'd highlighted in yellow. Still nothing.

So, I finally did what any self-respecting 21st-century preacher would do. I googled "Apostles' Creed" on the internet and discovered the reason why it hadn't appeared in my very comprehensive textbook of the church's first 400 years. The Apostles' Creed as we know it didn't reach its nearly-final form until in the 700s, and it has even seen changes since then. The Apostles' Creed was a work in progress for more than 1000 years. What began with the original apostles was revised again and again in the process of encouraging the faithful and instructing new converts in different times and places. Whenever the people wanted to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching, they could memorize and recite the creed and explore its deep theological meanings.

CONCLUSION

So, to conclude this sermon, as an act of devotion to the apostles' teaching we're going to recite the Apostles' Creed. I didn't print it in the bulletin, and it won't appear on the Facebook worship screen. But maybe, if we say it slowly, you can remember it well enough to say it along with me.

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth;
 And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, dead, and buried;
 the third day he rose from the dead;
 he ascended into heaven,
 and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
 from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic church,
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting. Amen.