August 31/September 1, 2024

Community

Re-Think Series

Acts 2:42-47

Pastor Matt Meyer

Well, good morning. We're stepping back, as you can see on the screen behind me. We're stepping back into what we call our "Re-Think Series" that we do from time to time to address certain areas of our lives that we might need to rethink. The idea actually comes from the biblical word repent. The original Greek word means *to change your mind*, to change the way you were thinking about a certain thing. And we live in a culture where ideas and thoughts are debated, and they change all the time, and sometimes without even knowing it, our own definitions, our own thoughts about things, change right along with the culture. So, we want to rethink some of these ideas together with God, using the Scriptures as our guide. I'll give you an example of that. Sometimes words change their meanings without us even knowing it, or they take on multiple meanings; they broaden their meanings. An example of that would be the word love, right? I could say to my wife, "I love you, honey," but then I could also turn around and say, "I love pizza." Now, those are two very different statements, and I'm not saying that the way I feel about pizza is the way I feel about my wife or vice versa. And that's easy to see if you're a person who understands English. Sometimes kids have a hard time seeing it. It's not always easy to see that with other words.

Today we want to rethink the idea, the concept of community. So, to get us started, I'm going to invite you to do something communal. I'm going to give you about one minute to chat with somebody next to you, and if you have to get up and walk somewhere, do that. I saw people doing that last night. You have about one minute to discuss this question: "How would you define the word community?" You've got about one minute. Go ahead.

Okay, I'll interrupt the community that's happening right now. I'll call your attention back to the front. I think it would have been interesting if we could have gone around and maybe had some secret mics, miking all of you and your conversations…listening to some of the things that people said. I think that some of you probably defined community, geographically, right? You may have been thinking about the community of Lincoln and all the people that live in the city of Lincoln, or, similarly, the community of your neighborhood, and all the people that live in your neighborhood. Others of you may have been defining it or thinking about it in terms of something that people have in common, right? We use the word that way when we talk about the scientific community or other communities like that. Maybe people that have science in common amongst them; they are the scientific community. Still others of you, I think, would have thought, "Well, we're in church, so he must mean Christian community," and so you may have defined it that way. You may have said the community of Lincoln Berean Church is the people that attend here, that call this place their church home. You may have defined it as the community of your Life Group, if you're in one. Maybe you defined it in terms of a group of people that you share life with, that you can have fun with, that you can grow with, or you can share the struggles of things going on, as we saw in the video that we saw and listened to this morning. That was a beautiful story of community. All those descriptions and uses of the word community would be correct in some sense. A basic definition is this: A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. Another way of saying that is a feeling of fellowship with others, as a

result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. And we could add the word "beliefs" to that list as well. See, this word community gets used in all kinds of different ways, so we're going to take some time to rethink it today, using the Scriptures as our guide.

We're going to be in Acts, Chapter 2. If you want to follow along, I'd invite you to turn there. Acts is the story of the birth of the early church, told to us by Luke, the same guy who wrote the Gospel of Luke, and also wrote Acts. The passage that we're stepping into this morning, together, is the very end of Pentecost, this amazing thing that happened…a crazy thing that happened. It's when the Spirit of God comes upon the apostles. It was the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus made that the Holy Spirit would come upon them. And I think it would have been amazing to have been there in that moment, amongst that group of people, because it was crazy. I mean, there was this great rushing wind that came through, and these flames of fire that came and rested on the foreheads of some of the followers of Jesus, and on this group of people who were from all over the nations of the world. Jerusalem was filled with people, we're told, from all over the world, and the apostles began to talk and teach and speak, and the people that were hearing them, were hearing them as if they heard them in their own language. That's not necessarily the language that the apostle was speaking, but that's the way the person was hearing it. So, if they were from South Africa, which may or may not have existed at this time, they would have heard it in that language. It was an amazing thing that happened. Peter goes on, in Acts chapter 2, to explain, because everyone was saying, "What is happening here?" So Peter goes on to explain it. He connects it to the Old Testament, and we're told that a lot of people repent. They rethink who God is, what it means to relate to Him, and what that looks like. So they become followers of Jesus, which then leads us to our passage today. Verse 42 says:

> **They** (They are the followers of Jesus.) **were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**
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> **Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.** (…those who became followers of Jesus.) (*NASB, Acts 2:42-47)

Isn't that an amazing description? Do you find yourself wishing you were there amongst this group of people, this community? This is the community of the early church. Why do I say community? Because it describes this group of people who were gathering together regularly. They held things **in common**. We're told **they held all things in common**. They were sharing with one another, providing for one another. They had common attitudes, beliefs, interests, and goals. It says they were *of one mind*. These people were ***devoted***, we're told. That word devoted means *profoundly dedicated or committed*. And we're told they were devoted to four things, specifically in verse 42. They were committed **to the apostles teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and a prayer.** We're going to talk about each one of those, so we will understand what it is that they're talking about.

First, **the apostles teaching**: It's interesting, as you study the book of Acts, nowhere in Acts does Luke specifically define what the apostles taught. We have many sermons by Peter, Stephen, and Paul, and most of those are them sharing the gospel with people, helping people understand how to get saved, connecting it to the Old Testament. But we know their teaching had to have gone beyond that. We might think of this from our perspective, "Oh, they, the apostles, taught them the Bible." Well, probably not, because this Bible, in this form, didn't exist yet. The New Testament hadn't been written. The Old Testament Scriptures existed, but the New Testament hadn't been written. It's very early on. Most likely they taught them the things that Jesus had said and done, and they probably connected those things to the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus' final words to His apostles, as He was ascending into heaven, was to, "***teach people to do everything that I have commanded you***." This teaching probably happened in all kinds of settings. I think there was formal teaching at times, kind of like what we're doing right now, but I also tend to think there were a lot more questions and discussions. Imagine being a Jewish person, for a moment, who just realized that you were totally wrong about Jesus. Wouldn't you have a lot of questions? Like, wouldn't you want to know what He said? "Tell me more about what He did." "Now tell me again what happened when they lowered this guy through the roof, and what did Jesus say? And what did that mean?" "And tell me again about this lady who reached out and she touched His cloak and she was healed." "Tell me again, what does that mean?" And as the apostles were teaching, as they were connecting it to Old Testament Scriptures, I think, if you were a Jewish person, your mind would have been spinning, and you would have continued to ask questions. Now, if you were a Gentile, who virtually knew nothing about the Old Testament, you would have had questions as well. So I think there were a lot of questions. These people wanted to talk about Jesus. They wanted to know everything that they could. It drove them. They were devoted to it. So that's the first thing: **the apostles teaching.**

Secondly: They were **devoted to fellowship**. Now this word means *sharing,* primarily. It's used all over the New Testament for many different things. It's used to describe the sharing that we do when we participate in communion together. It's mentioned to describe the relationship that we have with God in the Spirit, that there's this fellowship that goes on there. It's used to describe the sharing of meals. It's used to describe the sharing of possessions. The point is that they understood there's a unique sharing that followers of Jesus have with God through the Holy Spirit and with each other. And you can see the beginnings of their understanding of what that looks like, how it plays out in the description of the rest of the passage. They were together often. They begin to sell their possessions and property. They were eating together. They held all things in common, providing for others who had need.

Now to be clear, this is not a communist version of pooling all of our resources together in a big pile, and then it gets distributed out. If you were to look at other passages—and there's several of them in the book of Acts where it talks about this—again, it's not everyone selling everything. We know that some people kept their houses because the early church met in homes. What it was, was as needs arose, and as the Holy Spirit led individual believers to sell pieces of property or possessions, they did so, so that they could provide for somebody else in the body of believers, in the community. There was this unusual dedication or devotion to one another. So, the apostles teaching, and **they're devoted to fellowship.**

They're **devoted to the breaking of bread** was the third one. Now there's debate about exactly what this means. Is it a specific reference to the observance of communion, the way Jesus had said to remember Him on that night at the Last Supper, or is it just referring to the idea of eating together? It could really mean either one. Both are found in this passage, and most likely it's referring to both. Because, again, if you were to study the early church, one of the things you would find out is, it's hard to separate those two things. Communion—what we know as communion—almost always, almost exclusively, rolled out of a common meal together that they shared often. Eventually those meals became called Love Feasts, which is what Paul is talking about in First Corinthians when he's giving some guidelines. So, in many ways, it's probably referring to both. It's hard to separate them out. Again, the point is, they were together often, not just for religious observance, but they enjoy being together. They enjoyed sharing with each other. Verse 46 tells us **they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.** That word ***sincere*** could be translated *single-minded devotion*. We're back to that idea of the absence of pretense, or simplicity and devotion. That's difficult to determine exactly how is it being used here because all of those things, again, are found in this particular text. So, we can pretty confidently say there was an open-hearted attitude, a willingness to share. We can see that in the text. We could probably say there's no pretense. They weren't trying to impress. They were not trying to perform for each other; they were just trying to help provide. And we can say that they had joy that came from the heart. They enjoyed being together, **breaking bread.**

So, the early church was devoted to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to breaking of bread. **and to prayer.** Now, literally, the text says the prayers, and that's probably referring to the hours of prayer that were observed in the Jewish temple. We know that, in the beginning anyway, the apostles continue to observe those. In Acts, chapter 3, verse 1, we're told that Peter and John are on their way to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer—set times where the Jewish people gathered together. The Christians continued to observe that. But we also know that the apostles prayed at other times, individually, and privately with people. One of the major things that occurred, at the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts, is that God's relationship with humans went from being primarily a corporate relationship with the nation through a priest, to a personal relationship with individuals. People no longer needed a high priest to mediate to God for them, because Jesus, as the ultimate High Priest, had made atonement once and for all, and now the Holy Spirit was present in each person who trusted Christ and received His forgiveness.

Now, when it comes to prayer, one of the major contributions that Jesus made to the Christian understanding of prayer was His own intimacy with the Father. Jesus called God “Father”. “Abba” was the term that He used, which was and still is the term people use today. Little kids call their father Abba over in Israel. This was a revolutionary thing in His day, and Jesus taught His followers to call God, “Father” or “Abba” as well.

Some of you are maybe familiar with what's called the Lord's Prayer. The first song we sang today was a musical version of that. It's found in Matthew, chapter 6, and Luke, chapter 11. It's where the apostles come to Jesus, and they say, “Teach us to pray, Lord. Teach us to pray.” And so He gives them this prayer, and it's become kind of known to us, or referred to as The Lord's Prayer. Maybe you grew up in a church, like I did, where that prayer was prayed every week. And so I heard it over and over and over again, and it became very commonplace to me. I could repeat it verbatim without even knowing what I was saying. But when Jesus taught His followers to pray

“Our Father, who art in heaven,” it was not commonplace for them. It was shocking. They may have stopped Him and said, “Wait a minute. You're saying, I could address God that way?” See, no one addressed God as Father in their day, but Jesus did, and He taught His followers that they could be that close to their Father as well. So, when we hear they were **devoted to prayer**, I think their devotion flowed out of this personal relationship, an almost unbelievable belief that the God of the universe is my Father, that He hears me, that He knows me, and that He wants to relate to me!

The early church was devoted to the apostles’ teaching. Now, if we were to translate that into our day, we would probably say the Bible—the Scriptures—because what we have is the extended version of their teaching, the letters they wrote, the things that they said, the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels. So, they were devoted to the ***apostles teaching***, or biblical teaching, or the Scriptures. ***They were devoted to fellowship, they were devoted to the breaking of bread, and they were devoted to prayer.***

Now, let's talk for a minute about the word *devotion*, because I think we get confused about that word and how it works sometimes. I think we think that devotion is what created the things that we see happening in this passage. We think it was their devotion that changed them. It wasn't. It was the Holy Spirit who changed them. Their devotion to these things was a result of an encounter they had with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. And the people who devoted themselves to these things that we read about here, they had realized something. They had realized that a personal relationship with the God of the universe is actually possible, and that changes everything! It wasn't that they disciplined themselves in these things, and that created devotion or passionate commitment. It was that they had an encounter with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, and that changed them. It created that devotion in them, and certainly being devoted to these things, relating to God through them—through the Bible, through spiritual community, through prayer, through communion—allowed the Holy Spirit to continue growing in them. But the encounter with Jesus through the Holy Spirit is what changed them.

Let me explain and give you an example of what I mean. When my wife Renee and I were first getting to know each other—when we were dating, if you can call it that—we lived in different states, and so I became very devoted to my email. Now I didn't just become devoted to my email for the sake of email. I became devoted to my email because it was a way that I experienced Renee, that I got to encounter her, that I got to get to know who she is, and what she's like. And that devotion and those emails eventually led to phone calls, which led to trips to see her, which eventually led to me saying, “I want to devote the rest of my life to you. I want to be devoted and spend my life with you.” And, in a sense, when we become followers of Jesus, that's what we're saying to Him. “I want to spend the rest of my earthly life and eternity with You, devoted to you.” That's what these people in Acts said. It created devotion in them, and they were passionate about living life with Jesus through the Spirit.

But I want us to notice something else about their devotion. They were not just devoted to God, and their individual relationships with God. As revolutionary as that was for them, they were devoted to one another. Their devotion showed itself in a communal way. See, I think, as Americans, we tend to hear this list of things they were devoted to: ***the apostles teaching or biblical teaching, the Scriptures, fellowship, sharing of life, breaking of bread or communion***

and prayer, and I think we hear that list, and for the most part, except for fellowship, we think of them as individual pursuits. So, if I were to say to you this morning, "You should be devoted to these four things—biblical teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer—you might start evaluating your life and asking yourself these questions. "Am I devoted to biblical teaching…to the Scriptures?" "Am I devoted to fellowship?" "Am I devoted to partaking in communion?" "Am I devoted to prayer?" See, we think that way because, as Americans, our culture is very individualized. So I can be committed to each of these things myself, by myself. That's not necessarily a terrible thing, but it leaves fellowship and community as just one more thing on the list.

It's not the way the early church thought. They were devoted to these things together. It was a communal devotion. For one thing, they had to be, because, again, they didn't have individual copies of the Scriptures, so they had to gather together for this teaching. Their devotion to Jesus was interconnected to their devotion to the community of believers. If you were to look at the passage again, I would want to ask you to notice, "What is the pronoun used over and over and over again?" It's the word *they*, right? He's talking about a community of people, not individuals.

One scholar put it this way, commenting on this text. He said, "According to the Bible, the entire Christian life, including spiritual growth, battling sin and Satan, and serving God are intended to be done in community." Let me say it again. "According to the Bible, the entire Christian life, including spiritual growth, battling sin and Satan, and serving God are intended to be done in community." Now he goes on to talk about the book of Ephesians—the book we're going to start studying together next week—so listen to what he says. "The passages in Ephesians, for example, that describe these things—spiritual growth, battling sin and Satan, and serving God—are all in the plural, suggesting that we do them along with others. Unfortunately, we may miss that emphasis, because the "*you"* that appears in Greek and in Ephesians and elsewhere, is plural, but that is not immediately evident in our English Bibles." He's saying that in many places in the New Testament, especially the epistles—letters written to churches, letters written to communities like Ephesians—when it says "*you"* most of the time, it's not talking about an individual. It's talking about a group, a community of people. It might be better if we translated it. "Y'all," *(laughter)* but this isn't the South. They were devoted and committed to these things as a community.

Now you might be tempted to look at this passage and say, "Well, that works for them. This was the early church, and probably not that many people were involved." Go back up to verse 41 in the text. What it tells us is that, at the end of all of that stuff that went on with Pentecost and Peter explaining all of this, it says, "How many people were added to their number that day?" Three thousand! Three thousand people became followers of Jesus on that day, and they were a part of the text that we just read, who were committing themselves. So, it's a possibility that number was larger than our average weekly attendance here at LBC. So, it's not like we can say, "Well, that didn't work. We're too big for that."

Now, one of the things that you have to be careful of and keep in mind is, when you read the book of Acts, there are parts that are *descriptive*, meaning they're just describing what happened—how something happened—and there are also parts that are *prescriptive*, meaning they're prescribing something. They are giving us guidelines or commands as how to live as followers of Jesus. This is a very descriptive passage, so I wouldn't necessarily tell you that, as modern-day followers of

Jesus, we have to do everything exactly the way they did it. They were gathering at the temple every day. We don't do that. So how do you tell what's prescriptive, and what's descriptive? Well, you look elsewhere in the Scriptures, and each of the things that these Christ followers were devoted to, are commanded and given often in the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament letters, as *essential aspects* of Christian living. So, being devoted to the apostles teaching—or biblical teaching of the Scriptures—to fellowship, caring for the needs of others, gathering together, being of one mind, the breaking of bread, eating together, communion and prayer, all of these things are commanded regularly throughout the Scriptures. So we can know that, from this text, those four things, for sure, are prescriptive. Some form of those need to be a part of our followership.

The challenge for us today is to view our commitment to those things as part of a community commitment, not just an individual commitment. This is why we're so committed to Life Groups, because they allow us a space to be committed to these things together. Life Groups give us a space to grow in our devotion as a community, our devotion to God, our devotion to one another. They give us a space to know and be known, to reveal to someone else my struggles, my needs, and allow them, when appropriate, to meet my needs. They give us a space to be devoted to the Scriptures together, to be devoted to one another, to be devoted to prayer, and you can even be devoted and observe the Lord's Supper and communion within your Life Group.

So, just a couple questions I want to leave us with this morning. And I think they're pointed questions, so be ready. *Number one*: "What are you devoted to in your life…what are you devoted to?" The easiest way, the simplest way, to look at that and figure it out, is, "How do you spend your time? How do you spend your money?" And we can nuance it more than that. Maybe, as you think about that, as the Holy Spirit speaks to you, maybe there's something that you need to lessen your devotion to.

Maybe your answer to that question helps you answer question *Number two*: "How is your devotion to Jesus…how is your devotion to Jesus?" Now understand what I'm asking when I ask that, okay? I'm not asking how often have you attended church? How much have you read your Bible? How faithful have you been to be at Life Group? How much have you prayed? I'm not asking what are you putting the most effort into? I'm asking you to, "Think about your heart. Do you feel the way these early Christ followers felt about following Jesus?" Is that what your devotion is like? Because remember, their devotion grew out of this relationship, this unbelievable belief that the God of the universe is my Father, that He knows me, that He loves me, that He hears me, that He wants to do my life with me. Their devotion was fueled out of the community that they were a part of, the life that they shared together. How is your devotion to Jesus? Perhaps, maybe you find yourself in a dry time right now. Maybe you find yourself just going through the motions, doing things out of obligation. Guess what? That's okay. God is not upset with you…disappointed in you. In fact, the Holy Spirit is delighted to come and meet you right in that place. And perhaps the application for you, if that's you today, would be to ask the Holy Spirit to reinvigorate your relationship with your Savior.

Question *Number three*: How's your devotion to community…how is your devotion to community? Are you devoted to a community of people who are devoted to Jesus? Are you opening up your life to those people? Are you willing to let them meet the needs that are going on

in your life? Are you committed to them, no matter what? Are you able to sit and listen to them and hear what's happening in their life? Are you devoted to the Scriptures together with them, to have prayer together with them? Are you devoted to meeting their needs when it's appropriate? Do you have a community of people to be devoted to Jesus with? Perhaps that's what's missing in your life. Perhaps that might be what helps fuel your devotion for following Jesus. If that's you…if it's what you're missing, please come see us at the Spotlight booth in the foyer. Let us help you find a community, a Life Group.

I'll close with a quote from the NIV Application Commentary that summarizes everything we've talked about today. "Community life is an integral part of the basic Christian life, because Christianity is, by nature, a community religion. Paul says, "So we who are many, form one body in Christ, and each member belongs to all the others." Romans, chapter 12, verse 5. So, we get together, not only because it's helpful, but also because we are a vital part of the body of Christ. The body of Christ is incomplete without us, and we are incomplete without the body of Christ. Community life is not an option for a Christian, but a basic aspect of what it means to follow Jesus. You cannot be devoted to Jesus without being devoted to the community…of His body. Let's pray:

> *Heavenly Father, thank You for this passage, for these people who were so devoted to You, and to one another. Thank You for the encouragement it brings to us. Thank You for the desire it stimulates in us. Lord, I want that. I'm going to grow in that. God, I pray this morning for the person who is feeling dry in their devotion and their relationship with You. Holy Spirit, would You meet them where they are? Would You encourage them to move towards You, to move towards community? We're grateful, Jesus, that this isn't all on us, that it's Your Spirit who changes us. It's Your Spirit who creates devotion, moves us towards You, moves us towards the life that is truly life, moves us towards community. But I pray that we might be open, this morning, to what Your Spirit wants to say to us about our lives and what we're devoted to, and what we need to be devoted to. I pray these things in Your Son's name, Amen.*

So, as you noticed in our passage today, the early church was committed, devoted to participating in the Lord's Supper together. We have the opportunity ourselves to do this together today. In just a few minutes, the ushers will be passing the elements of communion through the rows. The worship team is going to lead us in a song during that time. But if you're unfamiliar with this, there's no reason to be embarrassed by that. You can let the tray pass right on by. But if you've trusted Christ as Savior, we invite you to participate with us. Participating is very much like what we see in our passage. We do this individually as followers of Christ, but we also come together as the body of Christ, as a community. So, once you receive your bread and cup, hold them please, and once everyone has been served, I'll come back up, and we'll participate together. The early church, by the way, would have done this around a table, as I said earlier, often after sharing a meal together. And in fact, when Jesus instituted this as a way to remember Him, it was around a table at which they had shared a meal that we know now as the Last Supper. We don't have an actual table here this morning, and it would be challenging logistically to invite everyone to come forward, but consider this your invitation to the table where Jesus is the host, and at the table of the Lord, as we all stand or sit or kneel on level ground. No one is better than anyone else. We all

are in need of grace. This is the table of the Lord. It has been made ready for those who love and trust Him, and for those who want to love and trust Him more. So come, you who have much faith, and you who have maybe just a little faith, even just a mustard seed's worth. Come, you who have been here often, and you who have maybe not been here for a long time. Come, you who have tried hard to follow and you who have failed. Come, not because I invite you. It is God who bids us come, and it is His will that all who want Him, should meet Him and remember Him here at His table.

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