

## 11.21.2021 Sunday Next Before Advent

In our Collect this morning we prayed: “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people...” This is the last Sunday of the Church year, and it’s often called “Stir-up Sunday” because of that fervent prayer. Today, as we reflect on the past year and look forward to the next, we pray that God would “stir up” the hearts and souls and minds of His faithful people.

If there’s ever been a time that the Church needed to be stirred up, it would seem that time is now. Recently I read yet another article about one of the many challenges the Church is confronting in these difficult times. The article was titled: *The Rise of the Dones: The ‘Done with Church’ Population*. This article focused on the growing number of people who were once some of the most faithful and engaged church members, but no longer attend, and have no intention of returning. These Christians are sometimes described as the de-churched, or to say it another way, people who claim that they haven’t abandoned the Christian faith, but have abandoned their local church. They’re called the “dones,” because they’ve come to the decision that they’re just done with church.

The article I read was written by a church leader, for church leaders, and one piece of advice the author shared was the importance of speaking with your congregation about the reasons we gather together on Sunday morning. As he noted in the article, it’s important to have this conversation while you still can, because many who belong to the “Done with Church” population were at one time faithful and engaged church members. Therefore, today, on this last Sunday of the Church year, on a day when our prayer is that God would “stir up” our hearts and souls and minds, let’s talk about why we’re here by looking at the reasons the first Christians gathered together.

When we look at the example of the early Church, we find that the first Christians lived out their faith, not in isolation, but in union with one another. The first Christians were members of a church community that built their lives around God and one another by placing four things at the center of their life together. These four things are named in the book of Acts, where we’re told that after the Holy Spirit descended upon the Church on the day of Pentecost, these Christians “*continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers*” (Acts 2:42).

When the Church began, the first Christian community gathered together in order to devote themselves to these things: The apostles' doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Let's consider each of these devotions, and as we do, notice the fact that these things can't be found apart from the Church our Lord established.

The Apostles' Doctrine. Two thousand years ago, members of the early Church grew in wisdom and knowledge and love for God by gathering, in a Christian community, to hear and receive the teaching of the Apostles. The first believers didn't have the option of calling themselves Christians, and being done with the Church, because unlike us, they couldn't watch sermons, read commentaries, or study the Bible at home. In fact, the Christians spoken of in the first few chapters of Acts didn't have the Gospels, the Epistles, or any of the New Testament books to study. In the earliest days of Christianity, faith in our Lord couldn't be separated from an active life in His Church, and in many ways that must have been a great blessing, one that would've prevented people from being out on their own, forming their own doctrine, instead of being inside the Church, being formed by the Apostles' doctrine. The first Christians knew that if they wanted to grow in faith, and in wisdom and knowledge and love for God, that they were going to have to grow together, in the Church, and that thought brings us to the topic of Fellowship.

The Christian life is a road that was never meant to be walked alone. In a recent sermon, we heard St. Peter's description of the way our adversary, the devil, hunts his prey. Like "*a roaring lion*" (1 Peter 5:8) he scatters and separates the most vulnerable among us, and Christians who make the decision to be done with Church are falling into his trap. They're wandering off, separating themselves from the Church that Jesus built (Matthew 16:18), and the truly miraculous fellowship we find within its boundaries. Now, describing Christian fellowship as truly miraculous may sound like an overstatement, but when you consider the words that our Lord prayed for all who would believe in Him, you realize that truly miraculous is the perfect way to describe the bonds we share. Listen to these words from our Lord's prayer to the Father. Jesus said, "*The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one...*" (John 17:22-23). Through His Church, our Savior Christ has given us the gracious gift of perfect fellowship with God and one another. Have we received His gift?

Prayer is another one of the four devotions the first Christians placed at the center of their life together. These Christians prayed not only in the way Jesus instructed us to in the Sermon on the Mount, when He said, “... *when you pray, go into your closet, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place*” (Matthew 6:6). Not only did they pray alone in that secret place, they prayed with one another, again remembering words that our Lord spoke concerning prayer, saying, “*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*” (Matthew 18:20). Our Lord built His Church so that men and women “*from every tribe and tongue and people and nation*” (Revelation 5:9) could gather together in His name, with His promise, “*there am I*” in your midst. It is the name of Jesus that draws this very diverse group of people together in corporate prayer. It is the presence of our Lord in His Church that binds us to one another as we pray together. It is the Person of Jesus Christ, who being fully God and fully man, prays with us in His humanity, and through His Divinity carries our united prayer to God’s throne.

The people in the early Church devoted themselves to the Apostles’ doctrine, fellowship, prayer, and most importantly, to the breaking of bread. The first Christians devoted themselves to Holy Communion, and Holy Communion is the reason we can’t be done with the Church. We’ve talked about the importance of doctrine, fellowship, and prayer in the Christian life, but receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord isn’t a vital part of the Christian life, this is the Christian life. Jesus revealed that truth when He declared: “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day*” (John 6:53-54). Our Savior Christ built His Church, and it is here in His Church, at the Lord’s Table, that God gives to us the blessed assurance of eternal life, as He gives Himself to us in this Sacrament of His Body and Blood.

I’ll leave you with this thought: At the Last Supper, when our Lord instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and commanded His Apostles to “*Do this in remembrance of Me,*” He said to them, “*With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you...*” (Luke 22:15-19). These are words that our Lord spoke to the Apostles, but there’s a very real sense in which He speaks these words to us today, “*With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you...*” The true, eternal, New Covenant passover in His Blood. If anything

should stir us up, it is the fact that our Lord and God has *desired* with *desire* to suffer for His people and thereby provide us with this Eucharistic Feast - a Feast He prepared in His house, a Table He set in His Church. By the grace of God may we always hear His call, “The banquet is prepared. Come to the Feast!”