

## 11.23.2025 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, our Collected prayer is that God would “stir up” the hearts and souls and minds of His faithful people.

Last Sunday, we considered the thought that it isn’t a mutual hobby or natural love, a love of affection or friendship, that guides us through the Church doors. Instead, it’s supernatural love, it is the Divine love of God that draws us here again today, and C.S. Lewis spoke of the Church in the same way. In *The Case for Christianity* he described Christians as “part of the resistance that is thwarting the usurper and church is where we network and get our instruction for proceeding with the campaign. It’s not just a place to meet friends. It is not just a place to hear motivational speeches. It is not just a place drink coffee and chat. Church is a war room where we make plans for the next offensive. It is serious business and no wonder that our Enemy wants to keep us and others away.”

Our Enemy wants to keep us and others away because Church is the place, where through Word and Sacrament, God stirs up His people. No one came here today to hear a carefully crafted, man-made motivational speech. Instead, we gather to hear the Word of God. We can drink coffee and chat anywhere, but only in the Church, through the Sacrament of Holy Communion instituted and commanded by our Lord, are we able to receive His most blessed Body and Blood.

Church is serious business, and when we look at the example of the early Church, we find that the first Christians were stirred up 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 God through these things: The apostles’ doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Let’s

consider each of these distinguishing marks of the early Church, and as we do, notice the fact that these things can't be found apart from the Church our Lord established.

The first mark of the early Church is 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, apart from the Church. 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. When we consider St. Peter's description of the way our adversary, the devil, hunts his prey like "*a roaring lion*" (1 Peter 5:8), the way he scatters and separates the most vulnerable among us, we're reminded that we must not fall into his trap. We must not wander off, separating ourselves from the Church that Jesus built (Matthew 16:18), and the truly miraculous fellowship we find within its walls. Now, if you, like me, have been hurt by fellow Christians, describing Christian fellowship as truly miraculous may sound like an overstatement, but in fact, it's only our own sin, the sins and failures of others, and the way we all struggle to receive and share Divine love with one another that leads us to feel that way. Consider words that our Lord prayed for all who would believe in Him, and you realize that truly miraculous is the only way to describe the bonds of Divine love that we share in Christian fellowship. Listen to these words from our Lord's prayer to the Father. Jesus prayed, "*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 intimate fellowship with God and one another. Therefore, the question becomes: Have we received His gift? Have we received the God-given, gracious gift of intimate fellowship with God and one another?

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 mighty 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 prayers to heaven.

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* our Enemy wants to keep us and others away. 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 and die for His people and thereby provide us with this Eucharistic Feast - a Feast He prepared only in His house, a Table He set only in His Church. By the grace of God may we always hear the call we all received this morning, “The banquet is prepared. Come to the Feast!”