

Acts 2:1-6, 38-42

## Devout Men

First off I need to make a disclaimer. The title of the sermon, as you have already seen, is “Devout Men.” I didn’t really want that title, for a couple of reasons, but that’s the way it worked out. I’m not apologizing- John Wayne said never to do that- and it’s not the proper way to begin a sermon, but I should explain my thinking. The devout men of my title are the devout men of verse 5, and are among the people who come to see what all the commotion is about early that Pentecost morning; they are the ones who hear Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, spoken in their own various languages. And perhaps this miracle of the gift of tongues given to the apostles, was also a miracle given to these devout, of the gift of ears able to understand what God has to tell us. The devout men are contrasted to the people in verse 13 who mock the speech of the apostles, saying, “They are only drunk!” These mockers seemingly do not hear intelligible speech, but only gibberish. They are unable to recognize the wonderful working of God among them.

But it is important for you to know that “devout men” is the literal phrase in our passage, and as far as I am concerned, does not exclude “devout women,” just as we know the term “disciples,” describing followers of Jesus, did not exclude the women who were with the Lord, all during his ministry, and were among his

closest and most faithful and most courageous “devout ones.” And just as the term “disciple” today does not exclude women. And we need to realize that the devout men and women of Acts 2, interestingly enough, were people already devout before this Pentecost day, seeking God, and, I think, obedient and humble. God had in some way already invaded their lives and hearts to make them his, and to make them ready to hear and able to hear the important and glorious word about Jesus.

And we need to make the distinction that these are devout men and women, not merely decent people. There is a vast difference between the two. I know we sometimes think that if we treat people nicely and do the best we can, we’ll be all right in God’s eyes. But devoutness is rather, complete commitment to God, which includes decency, but also a “humble and contrite heart” before God, as the Psalmist has written, and a strong sense of fairness and concern for others. Could we say devoutness is righteousness? Yes, if we remember that righteousness does not mean holiness, so much as it means justice. And if we realize that righteousness or devoutness, is not an achievement or an ability we may possess, but rather, trust in God’s righteousness; and then from that, we become kind and hospitable people, as witnesses to God’s kindness to us. That is why the author

makes a point to show us the difference between these devout ones and the scoffers who make fun when the disciples are filled up with Holy Spirit; who scoff like those in the gospels who mocked as they walked by the cross of our Lord, and who are like those we read about all through the scriptures, the powerful ones- and perhaps some we know today- who are seemingly so casual about God's love and concern for the poor and the hungry and the despairing; who seem to think God's love and God-knowledge is something only for themselves, something they have a right to, rather than something they have received as a gracious gift.

There are devout people all through the book of Acts. Devout men come to take the body of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to bury him after he has been stoned by a furious mob. Ananias, the Jesus follower from Damascus, who baptized Saul, is named a devout man. And surely we could call those men and women devout in chapters 2 and 4, who sell their possessions and properties so that people in need could be cared for; Barnabas, we could say was a devout man who had words of encouragement for his brothers and sisters; and Tabitha, we read about in chapter 9, "full of good works and acts of charity"; and Cornelius, the centurion, the first Gentile convert, who was "a pious man, who feared God and gave alms liberally"; and Lydia, the first convert in Europe, a "worshiper of God,"

whose heart the Lord opened so that she might heed the good news. In every instance it seems, here were people who were not just good, but were seeking God and being led by God into the service of others; people whom God called to himself, called to become believers in Jesus Christ, the Crucified One, the One God had chosen and made Lord, as Peter stated in his sermon that day.

That is the point in Peter's sermon, these words in verse 36 of chapter 2, when those devout listeners in the crowd, are so moved that they interrupt the preacher and ask, "What must we then do?" And Peter answers, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus." Because, just as it isn't enough to be merely decent, it also isn't enough just to be devout. We must call on the name of Jesus and trust in him, hand over our life to him, and permit him control over our decisions and our hopes, and let our hearts be open to be the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. It may be that some will mock and make fun if we so devotedly belong to Jesus; it may be that some will want to hate or even hurt us. But this kind of Spirit-filled and Jesus-directed life is the life that bears witness to the love and faithfulness of God. It is the kind of life that displays itself to all those devout people out there seeking God- seeking, but haven't found, still looking- and still lost, but for the words we may speak that tell of his goodness, and our actions that

verify his presence in us, and in the world. And this kind of life is obedience to the command Jesus gave to his followers in chapter 1, and I think, still gives to us today, “Be my witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth.”

Well, let me give you the second reason I struggled with this title. For all these good things we can say concerning devout people, Pentecost is nevertheless, still about the dramatic arrival of God’s Holy Spirit, with all the noise and “signs and wonders.” It is true, the gospel is for us, but never about us; rather about God’s working in our world to reveal himself to us. And so our sermons- and our lives and our witness- are to display God’s love and our gratitude for it. So, this sermon, after all, is about the Holy Spirit, who moves in the hearts and minds of devout men and women. The Holy Spirit who is the great actor in the book of Acts, so much so that one scholar has called this New Testament work not the Acts of the Apostles, but the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit doesn’t come just to make a big fuss, or to make all these miracles, but to give the followers of Jesus the power to bear witness to God’s care for his creation and love for all his creatures.

There is one more thing our scripture tells us that we need to remember: that the Holy Spirit descends, it comes from heaven upon all those in the house, in the

first verses of chapter 2; it comes as a gift from God to the devout, as Peter spoke in verse 38; it comes in the name of Jesus, and it comes to bring all those into one body of believers, a community of the faithful. It is not from within us, not something we are, or something we have discovered; it comes from outside. And so, it is simply and purely the grace of God; and makes us his people, saved from the “crooked generation,” who thus, come together to worship, and who meet together now to break bread and proclaim him Lord.

Pentecost is just this one day. But the Holy Spirit did not come with the miracles just to get people saved, and then depart. *The work of the Spirit in Acts is to create a community of faithful and devout men and women, so that they may come together to give thanks.* That is why we rarely see only one person at a time converted in the stories of Acts, but groups, like the 3,000 here in our passage, and the 5,000 who come to faith in chapter 4, the “multitudes” of chapter 5; families are baptized; entire villages and regions come to know the healing and forgiveness of God in the name of Jesus Christ.

In our churches today, dwells this same godly presence. For that reason, even though we are small here at First Christian, and haven’t seen thousands

answering the altar call in some time now, we don't give up. Devout people don't give up. Devout people remember that they have received the gift of Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit has not gone from us, but still abides in the community of faith.

Our scripture, in verse 42, describes this kind of community. The verse doesn't make note of the individual acts of worship, or the style of worship, but the attitude of the worshipers: they come together to learn from those taught by the Lord, to pray and to give praise; they come for fellowship and to practice godly hospitality- the acts of God's people, reiterated in verses 43-47 and again at the end of chapter 4. It is never worship that is directed inward, or proud of itself, but it is worship that looks outward to God with thanks, and looks outward to other people, with confidence in the steadfast love of the God, whose Spirit is always leading outward devout men and women.

Let us devote ourselves to that kind of fellowship, and to speaking the Good Word that saves, and calling to this desperate and needy world, to believe and take hope in the name of the Crucified Lord, who was raised from the dead.