THE DISTINGUISHING MARK

Acts 2:42

The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost

Single minded people can be a bit annoying. No matter what the topic, they always seem to bring the conversation back to their favorite soapbox subject. You can start out talking about a prayer group in the church and they want to talk about prayer being taken out of the public school. Or, you can start out talking about fishing and they end up talking about saving the whales. Single minded people tend to have their own ideas which are usually set in concrete. They tend to think that their agenda and perspective is the only one, making them not only single minded but narrow minded as well. Generally speaking, we work it so that we can avoid such people as much as possible. They have a way of just wearing us out.

It is strange, therefore, when we read the Bible and it lifts up single mindedness as a virtue. The rich young ruler who came to Jesus wanting to know how to have eternal life turned away from Jesus because he lacked this quality. "One thing you lack" Jesus told him. Others who came to Jesus saying, "Lord, I will follow you, but first let me go and bury my father, or have a farewell feast with my friends" were also turned away because something was more important than being single minded about their devotion to Jesus. Another similar word of Jesus which we find in the Sermon on the Mount tells us,

> Do not worry about what you will eat, or what you
> will drink, or what you will wear…But strive first for
> the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all
> these things will be added to you as well.

In other words, Jesus is telling us not to worry about stuff. We just need to stay focused on Him. But, of course, the strongest word about the value of single mindedness comes in the 51st verse of the 9th chapter of Luke where it says that

> …Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem.

From that moment on it was like Jesus had on blinders which allowed Him to see only the cross which awaited Him at Calvary.

Our text for the day from the book of Acts takes us to a similar place. Acts 2:42 is the first description of the church as it was being birthed, shaped, and sent forth from the event we know as Pentecost. Almost all of chapter one focuses on that single event. The disciples and others were gathered secretly in a small upstairs room in Jerusalem praying in obedience to what Jesus had told them to do before He ascended into heaven. We have read the story of Pentecost many times. The Holy Spirit came upon the small gathered group of disciples in an extraordinary way. The room was filled with the sound of violent rushing wind, tongues of fire appeared over each one of them, and the gift of language fell upon them so that every person in Jerusalem was able to hear the gospel in their own language.

Peter stood to preach and by the time he said the benediction, the church which had not even existed at the beginning of the day had over 3000 members.

What did they do after such a power filled moment? Did they create a study committee to see what had just happened? Did they organize a task force to create a slogan and logo? Did they call in the old timers to see if anything like the wind and fire thing had ever happened before? Acts 2:42 tells us what they did.

> They devoted themselves to the apostles'
> teaching and fellowship, to the breaking
> of bread and the prayer.

What is easy to do is to run by this brief description of the newly birthed church looking for greater things like the building of big tall steeples or the first commissioning service for missionaries. A closer slower look enables us to see a much different thing. What we translate from Greek to English as "devoted" has as a literal translation, "they gave constant attention to a thing." Giving constant attention to a thing sounds a lot like being single minded. What they gave constant attention to was the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. In other words in its earliest moment the church was single minded about pursuing spiritual things which enabled the individual and empowered the whole church. In the beginning being single minded about spiritual things was not a negative. It was a virtue. It was then and is now something pleasing and acceptable to God.

The truth is we are a people distracted by so many things that being single minded about spiritual things is all but impossible. We are a culture enamored with doing. And not only are we enamored with doing, but we place even greater value of the ability to multi-task which is simply another way of talking about the ability to do a lot of things at one time. In our marriages, in the work world, in the places where we play, and even in the church, performance has become the basis for acceptance and worth. If we were to come in here one Sunday morning and I announced that we were going to sit quietly for an hour to see if the Spirit had anything He wanted to say through one of us, all of us would be most uncomfortable and some of us would leave. For us worship is not about being in the presence of God so much as it is doing something in the presence of God.

The story of Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary is a familiar story. It is found in the later part of the 10th chapter of Luke. Jesus goes to their home for dinner. Martha is the detail person who is in the kitchen getting everything done more quickly than it needs to be done while her sister Mary is simply sitting at feet of Jesus soaking up His every word. When Martha complains to Jesus, he says to her,

> Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted
> by many things; there is need of only one thing.
> Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be
> taken from her.

While the story does not negate the efforts of the Martha people of our world, it does remind us that there is great value in living with a constant attention to spiritual things.

It is so easy for the church to lose sight of its call to be single minded about spiritual things. We do not want folks to get the wrong idea about us. After all, we are not a bunch of religious fanatics who do not have a life outside of "toting" a Bible. The problem is that when we lose sight of our call to give constant attention to spiritual things, we lose our sense of spiritual identity. When we lose sight of our calling to be single minded about spiritual things, we wind up becoming just like other gatherings of people in our world. We end up becoming a homogeneous social group where everyone looks like us, thinks like us, and acts like us. We end up becoming a political caucus where our personal political agendas become more important than anything else. When we lose sight of our call to constantly give attention to spiritual things we end up with a secular like institution empty of spiritual power for none is needed where our efforts to accomplish what we want direct us.

Have you ever wondered what the church would be like if we were single minded about spiritual things instead of the current practice of giving them partial attention? Have you ever wondered what the church would be like if we directed all our energy toward putting ourselves in a position to be spiritually nurtured? Have you ever wondered what would happen if we directed all our energy on creating a spiritual community where any outsider would want more than anything else to be an insider with faith in Christ?

Have you ever wondered what folks in the community say about us a church? Would it not be a wonderful thing if we were know as a spiritual community that was filled with people seeking sound Biblical teaching? Would it not be a wonderful thing if we were known as a fellowship filled with people who loved each other, forgave each other, and accepted each other? Would it not be wonderful thing to be known as a place where people were excited about gathering around the table of the Lord Jesus Christ? Would it not be a wonderful thing for folks to look at us and say, "Those people can be counted on to pray for you?" Would it not be a wonderful thing to be a part of community that is not distracted by anything, but simply single minded in its devotion to spiritual things? If you really want to know what such a church would look like, go to Acts 2:42 and start reading the rest of the book of Acts. You will be amazed at what God do with the single minded church, the church that is constantly giving attention to spiritual things.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on October 23, 2005.