

The story is told of a couple who were about to be married. But the night before their wedding they were in a fatal accident. Standing before the Pearly Gates, they explained what happened to Peter. After expressing sympathy, he led them to their new homes. The next day the prospective groom found Peter, and said, *“my fiancé and I are happy to be here, but we regret not being able to get married. Can we get married here?”* Peter said *“I don’t know. I’ll set up an appointment with God and you can ask Him.”* The next day they met with God. After listening to the request, God said *“wait 50 years, and if you still want to get married, we’ll talk.”*

50 years passed, so they went back to God. God listened, and said *“Wait another 50 years, and if you still want to get married I’ll consider it.”* 50 years later, they hadn’t changed their mind and went back to God. This time, God said *“very well, you may marry.”* A few months later, the groom went to see God again. This time he said *“We made a mistake. We’d like to divorce.”* *“Impossible,”* God said. *“Why?”* asked the groom. God frowned, and said *“Because it took Me 100 years to find a minister up here. It would be impossible to find two lawyers and a judge.”*

As the father of a soon to be lawyer, I of course tell that story tongue in cheek, as NOTHING is impossible for God. But for us humans, some missions are indeed impossible. Noah recognized that fact when God told him to build an ark to save his family and two of every animal on earth. Abraham recognized that fact when God said he and his equally aged wife would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. And Moses certainly recognized that fact when God said *“I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt,”* for Moses replied in terror *“who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”* But since nothing is impossible for God, He saved Noah and the animals, gave Abraham and Sarah a multitude of descendants, and led His people out of slavery in Egypt.

Today is Pentecost. Short of the time God said *“let there be light,”* and began creating out of nothing, what we celebrate today may be the most impossible thing God has ever done. That is because on the day the Church looks back to as the day of its creation, our Heavenly Father sent the Holy Spirit into the world in such a way that He could continue through Jesus’ disciples the work of salvation He began in His Son. And we see the impossibility of that agenda when we take a closer look at some of Jesus’ first disciples.

Peter, for instance, was stubborn, and flip-flopped more than a fish on a dock. James and John had tempers, and were constantly trying to gain influence. And Judas was pilfering the treasury. In addition, most of those first disciples were uneducated. Most were poor. And all of them seem to have liked bickering, moaning, and squabbling. On a human level that looks like the textbook definition of an impossible mission. Yet, THESE were the people Jesus chose to help Him save the world, for as Jesus had said to them earlier in His ministry *“what is impossible for mortals is possible with God.”*

As I say lay out this imagery, you may be remembering an old television show titled *“Mission Impossible,”* or the more recent series of movies with that name. Each episode of the television show would begin with an agent listening to a tape recorder lay out a top secret message, and then

self-destruct. And each time, the message would begin by saying “*your mission, SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT IT, is . . .*” and then lay out an impossible mission.

With that in mind, turn back to thinking about Jesus. Forty days after He had risen from the dead, Jesus was about to ascend to heaven. So He gathered His disciples, and gave them their impossible mission assignment: “*Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*” Clearly, this was as impossible a mission as any Hollywood hero ever faced. And Jesus didn’t have Peter Graves or Tom Cruise to work with, but Peter, James, John!

But those first disciples of Jesus had something Peter Graves and Tom Cruise did not have: they had the power of the Holy Spirit. For as we heard in the passage from Acts 2, God sent the Holy Spirit into the world to help them do the impossible. As a result, the Church not only came into existence, but grew - taking in 3,000 souls that first day. From there, it spread to every continent on earth, and today has a presence in every nation around the globe. For this to happen year after decade after century (right down to our day and age), Jesus said His disciples would need to allow certain things to happen however.

Jesus said His disciples would need, for instance, to allow Him to transform their lives. Which was something that did not begin with Jesus. In page after page in the Bible we read how God called people to allow Him to change them from the inside out. In only the second book of the Bible, Exodus, we read how Moses was impulsive and fearful, and not much of a leader, until He allowed God to give him courage. In the book of Judges, we read how Gideon was timid and afraid until he allowed God to take away His fears.

And in the gospels, we read how Peter, James, and John had their frailties and problems, and only became powerful apostles after they came realized that it would be impossible to carry out the mission to which Jesus had called them without the transforming help of the Holy Spirit. Once they realized that, however, and began to let God begin transforming them, Peter was able to stand before a crowd on the day of Pentecost, and through what he said “*about three thousand were added to their number that day.*”

We see the vast difference between being able to accomplish the mission to which God calls us, and what we are capable of achieving in our own strength, in the life of Jim Whitaker. Jim was the mayor of North Platte, Nebraska. One winter, Jim made the promise that he would walk naked through town if the Humane Society raised \$5,000. With that challenge, they raised \$7,000! So Jim walked “naked” down main street. But to the disappointment of many, “Naked” turned out to be the name Jim had given the dog he rescued months earlier. So Jim honored the letter of his promise, but not the spirit. He hadn’t really fulfilled what he said he would do.

Which is exactly what happens when we try to bring about God’s mission in our own strength. It may look like the Church, and sound like the Church, but it does not have the power to transform people from sinners into saints. To successfully fulfill the impossible mission of making disciples,

Jesus said those who follow Him need to do more than let God transform them into holy and righteous beings, however.

Jesus said His disciples would need to let Him break down their walls. We see this in what happened at that first Pentecost. Jewish speaking followers of a Jewish speaking prophet were suddenly able to speak in the native tongues of other nations. And with that miracle, one particular wall of separation was broken down. Then as events unfolded, the walls of prejudice between the educated and uneducated, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, also began to fall. And they began to fall because the disciples began to understand that in order to carry out the impossible mission to which God had called them, they had to allow God to break down the walls that separated them from not just Him, but also those whom He had called them to reach with the transforming message of the gospel. For while they may have been comfortable with their prejudices and preconceptions, God was not. So God called them to allow Him to break down those walls so His impossible mission of salvation for all might be successful. Not that this is easy to do however.

We see this in the church that T.D. Jakes pastors. Its members are White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and just about every other people group who make up our country. But getting them all on the same page by keeping the walls down is not easy. For despite the fact that they know that there are one and a half billion people around the world of every skin color, language, culture, and socioeconomic class who follow Jesus, and despite the fact they know that through what God has done to transform their lives they have been made brothers and sisters in Christ with those persons, they still often squabble in petty ways - with each group advocating for their viewpoint above the others.

The reason is that sin causes each of us to have prejudices. Sin prods each of us to push people away who we do not think are like us. And sin pushes us to show favoritism to those on our side of our walls, and discriminate against those on the other side of our walls. So unless we allow God to break down those walls, the impossible mission of offering the entire world salvation will remain elusive. To successfully fulfill the impossible mission of making disciples, Jesus said those who follow Him need to do more than let God transform them into holy and righteous beings, and even break down the walls that separate them from others.

Jesus said His disciples would need to allow the power of the Holy Spirit to work in, for, and through them. We see how this played out when we look at the lives of the early Christians. They faced poverty, persecution, and even the threat of death. But because they chose to allow the power of the Holy Spirit to work through them, they were able to carry out the impossible mission of making disciples of Jesus anyway. Luke tells us, for instance, that not only did 3,000 people come to faith that first day, but in the days and years afterward people were miraculously healed, people willingly - and generously - shared with those who were in need, and people in "*Judea*," and "*Samaria*," and to "*to the very ends of the earth*" became His disciples. Which is the reason you and I are able to worship Jesus this very day.

2,000 years later, the issue remains that same. We can try to make disciples of Jesus in our own strength, or we can admit that we need the power of the Holy Spirit. This is because sin will always

prevent us from transforming our own lives. Sin will always stop us from bringing down the walls that separate us from others. And sin will always keep us from even seeing the need to do such things. But if we ask the Holy Spirit to help us we can begin to be what Peter called “*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,*” and we will be able to “*declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.*”

To help us here at Christ UMC continue to work toward doing that well, we will move into a worship series in June titled “Devoted.” It will look at four things Luke tells us those first followers of Jesus were “devoted” to doing. In preparation for thinking about how those four things apply to us, I invite you to begin praying now that you would hear what God has to say to you about what it means to be a member of HIS church. For the Church does not belong to you or me. It does not belong to those who were charter members. And it does not belong to those who give the most money, chair committees, or volunteer the most hours. It belongs to Jesus! And it is through His Church that He seeks to carry out His impossible mission to save the world.

As we move through the “Devoted” series, I will therefore invite you in the spirit of Pentecost to listen for God to speak to you about 1 NEW WAY He wants you to grow in your faith (like joining a Bible study or Sunday School class) and 1 NEW WAY He wants you to serve Him (like being part of a ministry group such as the Blessings Ministry or a prayer group) or even 1 NEW ministry activity you would like to create to reach the people of our community with the gospel. For that is what it means to not only be as “devoted” to God as He is to us, but also to be devoted to so working with God that the impossible mission of making disciples of Jesus not only becomes possible, but accomplished - for everyone willing to “*call on the name of the Lord.*”