

## Pursuing His Presence

I've been amazed at what the Lord is doing in the midst of our church recently. I've been amazed at the number of kids we see before us in the "Moments with the Children" part of our worship service. I've been amazed by the financial stability we see in the monthly Treasurer reports at Church Council. I was amazed by the attendance we had this summer and even last Sunday in the cold rain. I've been amazed at the number of baptisms we have had and will have had by the end of this year. I've been amazed by the spiritual excitement I have seen in a number of our families both old and new. I've been amazed by the enthusiasm of the people who will be joining with us in church membership two weeks from now.

The amazement in what I've been seeing has given rise to a question scratching at the edges of my mind. What's this all about? Why is it that the Fourth Street Church of God is alive and joyful when so many other older congregations around town are dying and full of gloom? What do we have that they don't have? What makes the difference between a church that is alive and growing and those which are neither?

I was visiting with Bill and Donna Wilkinson last week, talking with them about church membership. Before leaving their home, I read some Scripture from the book of Acts. And, while I was reading, part of our Scripture Lesson for this morning caught my attention and gave answer to the question within me. Acts 4:33 says, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all."

I was reminded by this verse that the central message of the early church as presented in the book of Acts is that Jesus Christ is alive from the dead. It was the belief and experience of the first century Christians that their Savior was alive, that they could have a living and transforming relationship with Him through the person of the Holy Spirit, Whom He gave to live within them. As a result of their belief and their experience of Jesus living in them, the earliest believers prayed with faith and testified with conviction and power. Their witness was contagious because they were filled with the love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faith, gentleness, kindness, and self control provided by the Holy Spirit. In short, Jesus was alive in them and among them.

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And that I believe is the secret to what is happening here at Fourth Street in these days. We are not just going through the motions of religion. We are not just concerned with sustaining a charitable institution. Rather, more and more people among us are coming to the place of taking it seriously that the Lord lives and that we are actually able to interact with Him through prayer and in worship. We are coming to the place of taking it seriously that the living Lord actually does love us, forgives us our sins, and desires us to be His people. We believe that He actually cares about our lives and wants to be involved in our lives and wants us to be involved in His life. We believe that He is available to comfort us in our sorrows, guide us in our decisions, and strengthen us in our weaknesses. We believe he is available to teach us and to show us how to live our lives as our lives are meant to be lived.

Louann spoke to the children the other week about filling buckets. Well, the bucket above my head has been filled over the past two weeks as I have been listening to the testimonies of the people who will be joining our church. There is absolutely no question about the fact that each of these people is experiencing the presence of the living Lord in her or his life. They are excited about Him and how He is leading and blessing in their lives. I am blessed and encouraged as I see their gratitude, witness their joy, and feel their spiritual intensity. And, I know they are not alone in this. Something good and Godly is happening in our congregation this year.

Still, there may be some among us who have never known the experience I am talking about this morning. Perhaps you've seen it or heard it in the testimony of others, but you've never actually known it for yourself. You may also be ambivalent about it. On the one hand, you find yourself hungering and thirsting for a more intimate relationship with God, but on the other hand you are afraid of it. You don't want to be seen as a fanatic. You don't want to feel out of control. You are afraid it might cost you more than you are prepared to give. Or maybe you are afraid of being disappointed; what if I seek for the Lord and don't find anything? It's better to live with a nebulous hope than to travel down a dead-end road.

There may be others among us who once experienced a more intimate and exciting walk with the Lord, but somehow you've moved away from it. At one time your heart was alive and

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full of enthusiasm, but somehow a lot of it has leaked out. You would like to find it again but you don't know how to go about it.

Whatever the case, let me encourage you this morning: I believe God is building spiritual momentum in this place at this time and He is absolutely inviting each one of us to be a part of it. He wants all of us to know and to experience Jesus alive from the dead. He wants all of us to have a living relationship with Him. He wants all of us to know the fullness of the Holy Spirit and to be overwhelmed by His love. He is welcoming all of us into His embrace. What's more I think this is something we want too. We may be afraid of it, but we hunger and long for it, for Him, nonetheless. **We are all invited to the party and we all would be blessed to be there.**

But, the question is how do we get there? Is there anything we are expected to do, that we can do, to experience more of Christ in our lives? As a matter of fact there is. First of all, I believe God is calling each of us to become aware of the spiritual hunger and thirst within each of our souls. He is calling us then to taste and see that the Lord is good. The Psalmist says in Psalm 42:1, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." When we become aware that the Lord has given us a spiritual thirst, a spiritual hunger, we need to follow it. God doesn't want us to settle for anything less. **We need to go for the good stuff.**

I have a confession to make. When Betty Jane bakes a cake, I'll ask her. Is this cake for us or for someone else? If she says it's for someone else, I know to leave it alone. But if she says it's for us, I will--preferably while it's still warm--cut myself a piece of that cake. And, every chance I get I'll skip the pieces around the edges of the pan, and take a piece from the middle, where it is thickest and most moist. In other words, I want the good stuff. I'm not going to be satisfied with the crumbs. Nor should we ever be satisfied with religion that is dry and hard around the edges. God will always give us a longing for the good stuff and we need to go for the good stuff.

The second thing I believe God is calling us to do is what we are already doing this morning, and that is to gather together. In our Scripture passages from Acts 2 and 4 we see the disciples gathered together--and this is important--they were gathered together at the call of Jesus. Jesus had told them to gather together to await the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 4

they were gathered together in a loving relationship with one another as commanded by Jesus in John 13. We are also challenged by the writer of Hebrews who says in Hebrews 10:25: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Our God is a community of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and He calls us to community as well. It is His desire to meet us and bless us in community. We position ourselves to encounter the Living presence of our Lord by gathering at His invitation to seek His face together.

I want to stress again that we need to come together by His invitation. Don't just come to church, Sunday School, or to your small group bible study or prayer group out of habit. Spend some time the morning of, or the night before, or in your devotions the day before, seeking to sense the invitation of the Lord to come and to receive what He has prepared for you. Imagine it as an appointment to meet Jesus. **Each time we meet together it is an invitation to come into the presence of the Lord.**

A third key to experiencing the presence of God is a rearranging of priorities guided by Christ's love. Acts 2:44 & 45, and Acts 4:32 are an affront to the materialistic consumer mentality so prevalent in our society today. Acts 2:44-45 say, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." Acts 4:32 says, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had."

When our first priority is material things and when we are in the habit of comparing and judging one another according to our wealth, possessions, dress, and status in society, there can be no true community or encounter with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke it clearly in Matthew 6:24 and in Luke 16:13 "You can't serve two masters [at the same time]. You will [inevitably] love the one and hate the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." My online dictionary defines ***mammon*** as "Riches, immoderate desire for wealth, and worldly gain." The hymn, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus" gives us the alternative: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." Both when we acknowledge and begin to follow our spiritual hunger and thirst for an authentic encounter with God,

and when we experience such an encounter, our desire for wealth and material things will be diminished. Paul tells Timothy in I Timothy 6:6-8: "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." We position ourselves to enjoy the presence of God when we loosen our grip on the pursuit of worldly gain. **We cannot serve both God and mammon.**

So far we have seen that if we want to experience the presence of God we can position ourselves to do so by following the spiritual hunger and thirst the Spirit places in our hearts and by actively seeking for God. We can gather together in love and ask the Lord to meet us in community. And, we can turn away from this world's obsession with materialism and value the things of God instead.

Finally this morning we can pursue the presence of God in the prayerful attention to the word of God found throughout the Bible and especially in the teachings of the apostles. Notice Acts 2:42: It says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer." These things are referred to in some circles as the "ordinary means of grace;" that is, reading the word, corporate worship and communion, and prayer are the tried and true activities in which we can expect to encounter the presence of God. I would not argue with that, only to say that doing these things together is more powerful than doing them alone. When we read Scripture together and bathe that reading with sincere prayer and read in a prayerful and expectant attitude, and do that consistently over time, God will show up. It's not that He might show up; He will definitely come and make His presence known. Lives will be changed, hearts will be transformed, wounds will be healed, souls will be empowered to love and serve the Lord. Miracles will occur. **Miracles certainly will occur.**

Our church is alive today because Jesus is among us. Let us continue to pursue His presence.

## The Fourth Street Church of God

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### Pursuing His Presence

Acts 2:22-36; Acts 4:32-33

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