

To Build a Multitude of Blessings

Acts 20:25-38

The Nature and Purpose of the Church - Studies in Acts

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Sunday, June 29, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

This morning I want to turn our attention to a teaching of Jesus, the Source of all wisdom in the church, as recalled by Paul in our passage from Acts this morning. This teaching goes to the heart of what it means for us to live by faith.

Paul affirms it was at the center of Jesus' instruction to his own disciples and reflects Jesus' message of kingdom reversals in the Beatitudes: *It is more blessed to give than to receive.*

Let us pray:

O God, by your Spirit tell us what we need to hear and show us what we ought to do to obey, to follow, to delight in the wisdom of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

It may be that when you heard the Scripture passage read by Chaplain Smith this morning, it had a ring of familiarity to it. That's because it is reminiscent of passages from the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus is also on his way to Jerusalem, leaving behind many followers with full knowledge that what lies ahead of him in that city isn't going to be easy.

Paul is now looking toward great challenges before him, but he is resolved to enter into them with the assurance God is with him.

The scene takes place during Paul's third missionary journey through the Gentile nations surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. The celebration of Pentecost in Jerusalem is approaching, and he wants to be there to observe it. On his way to Jerusalem he stops in Miletus. While he's there, he sends word to the elders of the new church in Ephesus, some distance away, so he might bid them farewell.

It seems odd that he would have them journey to him, instead of the reverse. But they do so because Paul had spent over three years in Ephesus teaching them the Way of Jesus. Paul was not the kind to stay in one place for long, so his investment in this relationship with them was significant.

You can tell from this passage that the elders of the Ephesian church do not hesitate to go out of their way to see him again, so sincere was their brotherly affection for him. When they arrive, Paul offers them words of encouragement and strength in his goodbye. But not before he reminds them how faithful he had been in proclaiming the Gospel to them without shrinking from telling them "the whole purpose of God."

He says that, as a witness to Christ, he has given them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, verse 31, *for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.*

It is Paul's ethos, his character, to share the complete truth of the Gospel with all its pathos - its sufferings, trials, challenges and joys - so that they might inherit the full blessings of God. He holds nothing back from them. His deep love and friendship with them causes him, in his farewell, to speak not only words of caring affirmation, but also words of admonition for them to stay on track.

He warns them that there are dangers close by, ready to subvert the church's work. He writes in verse 29, *I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.* But then to encourage them as they face those dangers, he harkens back to his ministry with them, telling them to follow his own example.

As Christians, we tend to place a high value on the virtue of humility. So when we consider true Christian leadership, we tend to lift up the quiet type, who will suffer indignities for the sake of the cause.

Now Paul might suffer for the Gospel, but he does not suffer quietly. No, their salvation is too important for him to slip away quietly. He knows his sufferings for Christ have been for a purpose, and so he shares the unvarnished truth with them to the end. He knows the ways in which he has worked through the rumors, the slander, the hardships is all part and parcel of his ministry.

He continues on, that despite what some might say, he was never in it for the money. He reminds them, verse 33, *I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."*

Contrary to the popular teaching, "God helps those who help themselves," Paul lifts up this faithful, if seemingly counterintuitive teaching, in the context of his farewell assurance to his followers. He reminds them that what made his own ministry strong and effective with them, was the fact that he trusted in God to provide for him richly. So richly, in fact, that he could, with confidence, pour himself out for the people in Christ's name.

What he's getting at is that for the church to be the church, for the church to withstand threats from within and without, for the church to look into the darkness and overcome, her members must be, as Paul was in his own ministry, engaged in giving themselves for others, in full confidence of the Gospel's power to strengthen and transform both the giver and the receiver. That's the economy of the Gospel where, by the power of God, no resource is scarce. Just the opposite: God's resources overflow.

Paul focuses on the character of our lives as Jesus' followers. He's getting at what drives us, motivates us, causes us to take risks, and makes us willing to suffer for God's kingdom cause. The content of that message is a confidence in God's power to shield and provide in times of trouble. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 6, *Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil...fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness...put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.*

It is not the kind of confidence that eliminates the need for clear thinking, informed planning, or even calculation of risk. It is the kind of confidence that is clear-minded in sacrifice, makes plans for bold steps, and accepts certain losses for greater gains.

It is the kind of confidence in God's redemptive power that leads Jesus to Jerusalem, despite Peter's and others' objections to such a course. It is the kind of confidence that leads Paul into the abyss of persecution, because he knows God will work all things together for the good, even Paul's own suffering at the hands of those who would imprison him.

Paul sets quite a standard for the folks of Ephesus and for us to meet, doesn't he?

What would it mean if we, as Paul, lived with such outpouring of care for those around us, that we could, without hesitation, point to ourselves as an example for others to follow, and know that in doing so we would be pointing to Christ?

That's quite a standard, and perhaps it was unique to Paul's witness to speak with such boldness. Paul was humble before Christ, but he wasn't quiet. His passion for Christ was continually pouring out. Verse 36, *When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him.*

It is this kind of standard of Christ's love for his people, and in turn, Paul's love for his disciples, that we are called to meet.

Paul lived a life in which he poured out his life for Christ by traveling into uncharted religious territory

and speaking a word he knew would be well received by some, and strongly, even violently, rejected by many. Not all of us are called into the same ministry. Some are prophets, some preachers, some apostles, some servants to the sick, but all of us are called to share with confidence the love Christ has shown us, the kind of love that casts out fear.

This kind of love sets all the right conditions for Christian giving. Because it is through God's economy of love, that giving to others builds a multitude of blessings. Divine love multiplies and magnifies every human blessing offered up.

When I think of the congregational ministries of NPC—Stephen Ministers, Deacons, Care Teams, In Touch and prayer ministries—I think of people engaged in pouring themselves out for others in Christ's name. People who are, as Paul, helping members and friends of our church find God's presence in the midst of darkness, are helping them through it by his light.

When I think of people engaged in missions through NPC, fostering Christian marriage in countries like Moldova, where the institution of marriage is suffering; or volunteers traveling to places like Guatemala and the Dominican Republic to serve the poor; or to New Orleans to help rebuild broken lives, I see a church continuing in full confidence of God's power that mission begun by Jesus, then Paul, and carried by generations since.

When I observe individuals in the church encouraging one another through times of challenge, complimenting one another in successes, blessing each other through prayer, I see a church remembering Paul's words, *Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure...keep on doing the things that you have learned and received...from me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Dallas Willard writes in *The Divine Conspiracy*, "...genuinely good people are those who, from the deepest level of their understanding and motivation, are committed to promoting the good of everyone they deal with...In this they have, with God's assistance, gone beyond righteousness understood as merely 'not doing anything wrong'...and are acting from their inward union of mind and heart with 'the heavens.'"¹

Indeed when we are occupied with the kind of righteousness that defines itself by what is not done, we are occupied by the kind of religion Jesus and Paul preached against.

Rather, when we are occupied by the motivation to do good for others out of a sense of inward spiritual abundance—a confidence that no one is beyond God's reach of forgiveness, there are always enough resources to go around where there is generosity of heart that God can see us through the mistakes and hurts we've felt or inflicted—then we are trying on for size the faith of Jesus, the faith of Paul, the faith of the Gospel and finding a fit.

The love of Christ casts out fear. His love does not make us mindless or irrational. It makes us bold in proclamation, service, and in the kind of righteousness that seeks to bless others.

It is more blessed to give than to receive. When we give ourselves in his name, his Spirit builds a multitude of blessings.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Divine Conspiracy, Dallas Willard, p. 187