

Sermon Series "Acts" - Paul Is In A Hurry  
Acts 20:7-12 / Acts 20  
Colebrook Congregational Church  
September 3, 2017 / Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

In this week's section in the series on the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is starting to make a vague parallel between Paul's Journey to Rome and Jesus' Journey to Jerusalem, though Paul is currently on his way to Jerusalem by way of Macedonia.

Paul had already made the decision to leave Ephesus before the Riot of Silversmiths that we heard about last week, and so the first part of the chapter just outlined how he went from Ephesus to Troas. He visited many churches to give encouragement, he avoided a plot against him, and then was delayed in Philippi to celebrate Passover.

Then Paul stayed for a week in Troas, and we have the first mention in the New Testament of a Christian Sabbath being observed on a Sunday.

We Christians observe a Sunday Sabbath for a variety of reasons. My first pastor told me that his favorite reason was because by having it on the first day of the week, it was symbolically more hopeful. Another reason, which is alluded to in today's reading is as a memorial of the Resurrection, which happened on a Sunday. And they were probably following traditional Sabbath rules in Troas, based on the description, starting on Saturday evening after sunset and going until dawn on Sunday with a common meal, like how was done on Easters.

But Paul is in a rush. He is trying to make it to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, so he's doing Bible Study late into the night. What happens next is like a scene out of a Mel Brooks movie. One moment, Eutychus, a name which means "Lucky," was listening to Paul while sitting in a third story window, then he fell asleep, and then [WILHELM SCREAM SOUND EFFECT] he was gone! Not to worry, Paul rushed downstairs to revive "Lucky" and then ran back upstairs to continue Bible Study like nothing had happened.

I've said many time before that there is a bunch of the New Testament that is meant to be funny, but it's unfortunately lost in translation, and this is one of those stories. We can tell because this poor guy is given the name, "Lucky."

The chapter continued with Paul's voyage from Troas to Miletus, and from there, he summoned the elders from the Church in Ephesus and delivers what some call a Speech of Succession.

Here's the thing. The Ephesians were the most beloved by Paul. He spent the most time among them, and it shows in Luke's accounts that they held a special place in his heart. Paul knew that he was going to lose his freedom of movement once he makes it to Jerusalem, and he chose one church to have a personal last meeting with and give his last speech to, and he chose the Ephesians. Not the Corinthians, to whom he spent the most amount of ink...they were always troublesome to him. Not his sponsoring church in Antioch, nor those in Jerusalem. Just the Ephesians. These were also the ones that whenever Paul was arrested, they would send money and people to see to their needs.

This speech that Paul gives them is set up in form and function to parallel the story of Jesus preparing the Apostles for ministry without Him, as Paul was doing here for the Ephesians.

Paul great line of the speech is verse 28, "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers."

Paul outlined three points, describing what effective leaders of the church should remember. The first was that they teach sound doctrine and assist one another in avoiding errors in theology. Clergy do this by meeting regularly in associations or councils of churches.

Paul gave the second point more practical importance, which was how leaders used their possessions. He reminded them that Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Is our handling of our possessions gracious, or is it greedy? I know that I and a number of members regularly bring our own personal possessions from home to here to be used for the benefit of this

church's programming. I would also include people's talents and gifts. Those who are placed in charge of spiritual formation must not covet possessions, but when they make money, it should be redistributed to those in need. It is in the simplicity of one's lifestyle and the sharing of one's goods the truth of God's generosity toward us all is made more concrete.

The third point is how that person handles personal power. The leader who imitates Paul's example is drawn to a ministry by the Holy Spirit to serve the redemptive interests of God and the needs of God's people, setting aside any unseemly ambitious acquisition of power or pretension of self-importance.

I had intended on reflecting in the weekly newsletter about the response of a particular church to Hurricane Harvey, until I realized that this speech of Paul's was very fitting.

I've always considered that one of the most important aspects of pastoral ministry is being responsive, especially in times of need, and this probably comes from my upbringing. I was a Boy Scout from Tiger to Eagle, trained to be prepared to respond to problems, I later taught first aid and search & rescue at Camp Workcoeman. My current Troop in Torrington is part of that city's disaster response plans, the same when I served in the AmeriCorps, and now as a Volunteer Firefighter here. And my chaplaincy at Hartford Hospital was all responding to tragedies and traumas.

I've also seen it Jesus' teachings, where He teaches the Disciples to respond to people right in front of them who are in pain or in need. Every miracle or healing was a response to someone's need. And of course the story of the Good Samaritan.

That is why when I heard about the lack of response from a Houston mega-church, I was appalled.

That multimillion dollar, state-of-the-art, mega-church, that was above the waterline and could hold 16,800 people, refused to open their doors to help those in need. They had to be shamed by their brothers and sisters in Christ to open, but they said only after all other services had been exhausted, and then their pastor emerged from his mansion and went on the news to defend his actions by saying that no one had asked for their help.

In a time when people have been abandoning churches, this sort of behavior from such a famous pastor is counter-productive and can have a negative effect on all churches. I've seen this personally, when people leave because of how a church fails to respond, or responds in a way that Jesus would definitely not do. And it is so difficult to get someone back in the door once they leave.

A furniture store opened their doors to provide refuge to victims, and no one had to ask the owner. Anheuser-Busch stopped making beer in their Florida plant, and started producing cans of water to send to victims, and no one had to ask that company. I saw lines of cars towing boats and horse trailers on their way to the disaster to go help, and no one had to ask them.

No one should have had to ask a CHURCH to open its door in response to a disaster. Their doors should have already been open. It is our calling as Christians to respond to any need, be it a personal difficulty, an accident, a natural disaster, or terrorist attack. Doors open and lights on with hands reaching out in assistance. A Church should be proactive and reactive in times of need, ever ready. No Church should have to be asked.

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer.

Loving God, we ask that Your Spirit come among us and give us the strength and courage needed to be responsive followers of Christ. May we use our gifts and goods in gracious ways, and never in greed. May we show ourselves to be faithful believers and proactively meet the needs of others, whatever they may be. Amen.

## INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

Loving God, We ask for the gift of Your Holy Spirit to help us pray as we ought, offering up to You our thanks and prayers for Your creation, its nations, and peoples, for your church, for ourselves and all in need.

We give You thanks for all Your gifts to us—for food, for health, for every comfort that we enjoy; for Your guidance, for our Joys, and for our loving friends and families. And thank You for all who put themselves between us and harm, and for those who have helped us in our times of need.

We ask Your forgiveness, for sins known & unknown. We pray to You in our weakness, because we cannot go through life's troubles unscathed. We are stressed and strained, but we know that we can do better and be more aware of ourselves and of those around us.

We pray for all Your people who are in need. For energy and vision for those who are tiring in their battles against injustice and oppression; & for those who struggle with poverty and hunger. We ask for hope and comfort for those overwhelmed by pain in mind, body, or spirit; & for the victims of terror. We ask for peace and joy for those living in the shadow of war and violence; & for those eaten up by guilt and anxiety. We ask for the guidance and strength of Your Spirit, for those uncertain how to use their time, talents and gifts; for those tempted to do what is wrong. We ask for love and courage for those reaching out to comfort the distressed.

We ask for Your help, to face the difficulties of our own lives, and to guide us through our tribulations to safety; and to give us the courage to respond to the needs of the world, give us the stamina to follow You, to be Your hands and heart in the world; and enable us to witness to Your grace and mercy.

We also pray for:

Sue Kenny

We offer these prayers in confidence and trust, as well as the prayers of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

## Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hidden from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

## Acts 20:7-12

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, 'Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.' Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.