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Acts 20:7-12
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Paul and Eutychus

Over the course of my sabbatical, I spent a lot of time thinking, reflecting, and praying about my past, present, and future ministry here at Cascades. And interestingly, what I discovered was that those seasons really do mirror our church motto: Come. Be Fed. Be Sent.

Twenty-one years ago, I felt called by God to come to Cascades, fresh out of seminary, with my wife and four small children—all under the age of seven. I was wide-eyed, energetic, and ready to lead Cascades into the future. I had vision. Enthusiasm. Four young children. So clearly, I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

When I arrived, Cascades had just come through one of the most difficult seasons in its history. Good people had left. Those who remained were tired, hurt, and uncertain about what came next. And yet, God began to breathe new life into us.

We gathered for strategic planning. Everyone had a voice—from charter members to brand-new people, from our oldest members to our youngest. We developed a five-year ministry plan. We clarified our vision, mission, and core values.

And eventually, we came up with a simple motto: Come. Be Fed. Be Sent. And for a while, Cascades experienced some wonderful growth for a church our size.

But something continued to hold us back. Our space. I kept hearing the same thing over and over: We need to create more sacred space for the community God is calling us to become. A place where we could be fed not only by God's Word and worship, but by friendship, fellowship, and meals around a table.

And so came our second season: Be Fed. What had once been our sanctuary became our fellowship hall. We created space for pancake breakfasts, potlucks, small groups, women's teas, sweetheart banquets, and all-church celebrations.

And something important happened. This space opened up our imagination. We began to imagine not simply what the church was, but what the church could become.

About that same time, I was finishing my doctoral studies in Missional Leadership. In other words, I spent several years studying a question that probably could have been answered with a cup of coffee and a conversation: How does a

church stop existing primarily for itself and begin participating in what God is already doing in the world? How do we become a people who are sent?

That became the third part of our motto: Be Sent. We began listening more carefully to our community.

One of the most significant relationships we developed was with Silver Star Elementary School just down the street. Before COVID, Cascades members were classroom reading assistants, Chess for Success volunteers, Teach One to Lead One coaches, lunch buddies, members of the community action board, and volunteers working with families. We developed a strong relationship with the Family Community Resource Center and began helping families who were struggling to make ends meet.

And then something beautiful happened. People outside the church started hearing about what Cascades was doing. Resources began coming in. Our Benevolence Board was born.

Since 2017, Cascades has expanded that ministry beyond Silver Star into Vancouver, Battle Ground, Camas, and Washougal. In all, Cascades has now channeled almost $900,000 into our community. That is an incredible testimony to what happens when a church takes seriously those two little words: Be Sent.

And then COVID came. Suddenly, being sent came to a screeching halt. Like churches everywhere, we had to concentrate on the first part of our motto: Come. How do we stay connected? How do we worship? How do we care for one another? How do we keep people safe?

And several years later, I think we have been slower to pick back up that third part of our calling. Be Sent.

Recent research has found that while volunteerism in America has begun to recover, volunteerism through religious organizations has declined. People are increasingly willing to volunteer—but they are often more likely to volunteer somewhere other than church.[1]

And I have to admit, my first instinct is to look at that and say: "We've got a problem. We've got to fix this." But during my sabbatical, I began wondering: What if this isn't simply a church leadership problem? What if God is doing something? What if God is actually pushing his people out of the building and into the world? What if our mission field isn't necessarily sitting in these pews?

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[1] Recent research on American volunteerism has found a decline in volunteering through religious organizations even as overall civic and volunteer participation has shown signs of recovery. See, for example, research from the University of Maryland's Do Good Institute and related studies of volunteering and religious participation. https://news.gallup.com/poll/701204/volunteerism-recovered-pandemic-low.aspx

It may be sitting next to us at work. It may live next door. It may be on the soccer field, in the bleachers, at the bowling alley, across from us at Starbucks, or standing next to us in the grocery store.

Our motto is: Come. Be Fed. Be Sent. We are not a club that exists for the benefit of its members. We are a sending organization. We exist to participate in what God is already doing in the world. That's why we have that little reminder above the exit: "You are now entering your mission field." The church exists to be sent.

And that's why spending time in the latter part of Acts is so important for us. Because the Book of Acts is essentially the story of a church that refused to stay put.

Last week, Paul was in Ephesus dealing with the great brouhaha between the followers of Jesus and the local economy—which, as we discovered, is apparently not a good time to criticize somebody's favorite idol. That eventually launched Paul into the final leg of his missionary journey.

And today, Luke gives us a travel itinerary. Honestly, Acts 20 sometimes reads a little like somebody's vacation scrapbook: "Here we are in Philippi. Here's Paul getting on a boat. Here's Paul getting off the boat. Here's Paul getting on another boat." Not exactly riveting. So I'll spare us the travel details and focus on a fascinating little story tucked into all of them.

It's about a young man named Eutychus, who has a hard time staying awake during one of Paul's sermons. I love this story because it makes me feel not quite so alone when people fall asleep on me.

Listen to what Luke tells us from Acts 20:7-12.

7 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. 8 There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. 9 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. 10 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." 11 Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. 12 Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were greatly comforted.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination

Let's camp on a few of these details. Paul arrives in Troas. The church gathers together. They share a meal. And Paul starts preaching. And preaching. And preaching. Luke says Paul continued talking until midnight. Now, I don't want to criticize Paul. But Luke specifically mentions that there were many lamps burning in the room. It was late. It was warm. It was crowded. There had probably been a full meal. And Paul was still talking.

Enter Eutychus. He's sitting in a third floor window.

And eventually Luke says he begins to sink into a deep sleep. Was he exhausted? Probably. Was he bored? We don't know. Was he thinking, "If Paul says one more thing, I'm going home"? The Bible doesn't tell us.

But then Eutychus falls asleep…and falls three stories out of the window. That's one way to get Paul to wrap up the sermon.

Luke, who was a physician, tells us that everyone assumed the young man was dead. But Paul runs downstairs. He throws himself upon the young man and embraces him. The Greek wording actually says that Paul pressed himself onto Eutychus. I'm wondering if Luke is talking about performing CPR. And he says: "Do not be alarmed. He is alive." They take the young man home. And everyone relieved.

Now, Luke could have left this story out. But I think he included it because it tells us something profound about the mission of the church. Paul noticed the person who was falling. He didn't just keep preaching. He didn't say, "Well, that's unfortunate. Let's get back to focusing on church stuff." He stopped. He went down. He embraced him. He cared for him.

And I think there is a word here for the church today. Because young people are falling out of the church every day.

Research organizations such as Lifeway and Barna have tracked this phenomenon for years. Young adults give all kinds of reasons for leaving: college disrupts their connection; they don't feel like they belong; they experience the church as judgmental or hypocritical; they are frustrated by the church's approach to political and cultural issues; and some simply say the church is boring or irrelevant to their lives.[2]

Ouch. That's hard to hear. And believe me, it's hard for me to say. Because when we hear statistics like that, our first instinct is to ask: "What are we doing wrong or what can we fix?" But maybe the Gospel question isn't simply, "What's wrong?" Maybe it is: "What is God up to that we can join in on?"

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[2] Lifeway Research and Barna Group have conducted extensive research on young adults and religious disaffiliation, including the influence of church relationships, belonging, perceptions of hypocrisy and judgment, cultural and political disagreements, and the perceived relevance of Christianity. https://research.lifeway.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/

And here is the encouraging part. The research doesn't just tell us why young people leave. It also points toward what keeps them connected.

Young people want to be known. They don't want to be treated like a demographic. They don't want to be marketed. They don't want the church saying, "We need more young people." They want somebody to know their name. They want somebody to ask how school is going. They want somebody to show up at their game. They want somebody to notice when they're missing. They want adults who genuinely care about them—not because we're trying to get them into a program, but because we actually love them.

And that means something for those of us who are a little older. Sometimes the most important ministry you can have with a young person is simply to remember their name.

Young people want a faith that is intellectually honest. They have questions. Big questions. Questions about suffering. Sexuality. Science. Politics. Hypocrisy. Questions about whether God is really there. And sometimes the church has responded as though questions themselves were a sign of weak faith. But what if questions are actually an opportunity for deeper faith? Jesus wasn't afraid of questions. Young people don't need us to have canned answers for everything. They need adults who can say: "That's a really good question. I don't know. Let's wrestle with it together."

Young people want to experience God. They want MORE than information. They want to know God. They want prayer. They seek authentic, but dangerous worship. They crave silence, reflection, and scripture that connects with real life. And they want to see adults whose faith isn't simply something we talk about on Sunday morning, but something that actually shapes how we live Monday through Saturday. Because young people are pretty good at detecting hypocrisy. They may not know much theology yet, but they can spot a fake from about three miles away. They want to know whether Jesus actually makes a difference in us.

And finally, young people want a sense of purpose. They don't want to sit on the sidelines waiting until they're old enough. They want to contribute. They want to know that God can use them now.

Which brings us back to Eutychus. Paul didn't see a wayward kid sitting in a window. He saw a person worth saving. Look at what Paul did. He didn't stand three stories above and yell "Young man, you need to make better choices!" No! He met him where he was. He embraced him. He cared for him.

And here's the beautiful part: What everyone else thought was dead, Paul believed was alive. That's the Gospel. We live in a culture where it is very easy to look at a generation that isn't coming to church and say: "They're gone." "They're lost." "They don't care about faith."

But my friends, what if they're not spiritually dead? What if God is still at work? What if the Spirit is already moving? What if our job isn't to complain that they aren't coming to us—but to go where they are?

That's exactly what Paul did.

One of the things I have always appreciated about Young Life is the story of its founder, Jim Rayburn. For those of us who aren't familiar with Young Life, it is a Christian outreach organization that reaches out to teenagers who don't know Jesus. Rayburn was a 27-year-old Presbyterian youth pastor in Dallas in the 1940s. His church happened to sit right across the street from a high school. He was trying to figure out how to get teenagers involved in his church. His senior pastor gave him some very simple advice:

"Jim, leave your office. Go across the street. Go to their turf. Develop relationships of trust. Then share the Gospel."[3] That became one of the foundational principles of Young Life. And Rayburn had another saying that I think the church needs to hear: "It is a sin to bore a kid with the Gospel because the Gospel isn't boring. Sometimes we are."[4]

Amen.

Because the Gospel is about Jesus. It's about grace. It's about forgiveness. It's about redemption. It's about God taking dead things and bringing them back to life. That's not boring.

So imagine with me. What if instead of lamenting that we don't have enough young people sitting in our pews today, we started asking: Where are the young people God has already placed around us? What if adults intentionally developed relationships with students in our local schools? What if we saw our mission field as the places where our children and grandchildren already spend their time?

Crew teams. Soccer fields. Softball fields. Baseball diamonds. Golf courses. Football and basketball teams. Orchestra pits. Bandstands. Theater groups. Debate teams. Schools. Coffee shops. Workplaces. Neighborhoods. What if, rather than trying to get everyone to serve in the same place, we commissioned one another to go serve in the places where God has already given us relationships and passions?

Imagine what God might do. Because that's the nature of Paul's missionary journeys. Paul didn't wait for people to come to him. Paul went to them.

And then, later in Acts 20, Paul does something else that I think is important. He calls the elders of Ephesus together. Remember, Paul had only been with these people for a couple of years. But he had made an impact. And now he tells them:

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[3] Jim Rayburn (1909–1970), founder of Young Life, emphasized going to young people where they were and developing relationships of trust as a foundation for evangelism and discipleship.

[4] The quotation is commonly attributed to Jim Rayburn, founder of Young Life: "It is a sin to bore a kid with the Gospel because the Gospel isn't boring. Sometimes we are."

“You know how I lived among you. You know how I taught you. You know how I served you. You know how I loved you.”

And then, essentially, he says: “Now it’s your turn. Take care of the church. Shepherd God’s people. Care for the weak. Give more than you receive. Continue the mission.”

Paul understood something important: The church cannot depend upon one person. The mission has to be passed on.

And that’s another thing I thought about during my sabbatical. Someday, there will be another pastor standing in this pulpit. Not now. Not anytime soon. But someday.

And when that day comes, I hope Cascades doesn’t simply remember the pastor who was here for TOO LONG. I hope we remember our mission. Come. Be Fed. Be Sent.

I hope we continue to be a church that welcomes people in.

A church that feeds people with God’s Word and the fellowship of God’s people.

And a church that sends people back out into the world to participate in God’s mission.

Because someday you may forget my name. You may forget my sermons. You may even forget that I was ever the pastor here.

That’s okay. Because this was never supposed to be about me. It has always been about Jesus.

And long after I’m gone, I hope that little sign above our door is still there: “You are now entering your mission field.”

Because that’s who we are.

We are not a club for ourselves. We are not simply a place where Christians come to feel better about being Christians. We are the people of God who have been gathered—to be sent.

So my friends: Come. Be fed. And then go.

Go into your neighborhoods. Go into your workplaces. Go onto your schools. Go onto your soccer fields. Go wherever God has already placed you. Look for the people who are falling. Look for the people who feel forgotten. Look for the people who think they don’t belong. And run toward them.

Because the Gospel is not boring. The Gospel is alive. And sometimes the person everyone else has given up on is the very person Jesus is preparing to bring back to life.

So let’s go now. Let’s go in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let’s go with the love of Christ. And let’s go knowing that wherever we go, we are entering our mission field. Amen.