

“Finishing Well”
Acts 14:21-28
August 24, 2008
Rev. Curtis J. Young

*The text of this sermon may be used without first obtaining my permission. I do ask, however, that if you use any portion of the message for teaching or preaching preparations, that you would e-mail me a brief note to say you are making use of it. This would be a courtesy and help to me personally. You will note that in some sermons sections are bracketed between two sets of three asterisks (***) . The purpose is to delineate material that I did not preach, but that is integral to understanding the theology or exegesis of what was preached. My e-mail address is revyoung@comcast.net – Rev. Curt Young)*

As you know by now, I am not preaching every single passage in Acts, but I selected this one in view of the timing.

Here it is August 23, and our church’s Nominating Committee is hard at work approaching members and asking if they will accept nomination to serve as officers of our church. The congregation, of course, votes on the nominees in November.

This passage underscores how extraordinarily important the calling to church office is.

The Apostle Paul had planted churches in four cities. To this end he had compromised his health, risked his life and suffered a terrible physical assault. He had been thrown out of Antioch, fled from Iconium, and stoned at Lystra.

Yet after all this, he insisted on returning to those same places to see that godly leaders were installed in the new churches. Given the threats and dangers, Paul obviously considered the task worth his life.

The most important decisions a church makes are her appointments of leaders. In Acts we see that a pattern was quickly established to pray and fast for them at the outset of their work. Then as now, praying and fasting were reserved for the most important decisions.

No one can anticipate the challenges a church is going to face. We do know about Satan. We know he will use anything to divide a church, to mislead and ruin it.

In the same way, no one can anticipate the opportunities. We know the Holy Spirit will give us opportunities to serve the Lord. Some will be obvious and familiar; others may be very different. It takes eyes of faith to see them and hearts of faith to seize them.

For these reasons and more, we need leaders who love Christ and this church, who care for the congregation, see what there is to see, and lead after Jesus’ example.

A number of you are being approached and asked if you are willing to be nominated as an elder or deacon. I would you to pray and think hard about this. I don’t think it is schmaltzy to ask -- How would respond if you felt the hand of the Apostle tapping you on the shoulder to ask if you would help continue the work he had begun. Humbled, intimidated, surprised, honored.

The apostles were merely emissaries of Christ. Jesus remains Lord of his church and is present by his Spirit. It is his calling, not the apostles asking, that matters most. He continues to do it. So I ask you to weigh the request carefully. Is the Lord calling you?

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Paul’s risking his life coupled with the congregations’ praying and fasting speak to us all to seek sound leadership for Church of the Atonement. Please, all of you be in prayer for our future.

The appointment of officers is not the main thing in this passage but leads to the main thing, which is a very happy ending and a wonderful reunion.

Paul and Barnabas journeyed back through the cities where he had planted churches and appointed elders to complete his work, and then go home to his home church in Antioch. What a wonderful celebration followed, as Luke tells us, of “all that God had done through them.” Such a great conclusion to such a hard work reminds me of John Newton’s hymn: Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come. Tis faith that led me safe thus far, and faith will lead me home.

Two things especially strike me about Paul’s missionary journey, two things that were necessary for the celebration to occur: Paul’s faithfulness to the Lord and the Lord’s faithfulness to Paul.

And I am struck by the fact that Luke records this for us as a pattern for our own lives, as a legacy to carry on: The challenge of our faithfulness to the Lord, and the assurance of the Lord’s faithfulness to us.

These themes, so closely connected, were the heart of Paul’s message to the churches, summarized for us in verses 22-23.

He was imparting the example of his own faithfulness and assurance of the Lord’s faithfulness to each congregation.

In verse 22 Luke tells us that he strengthened the disciples and encouraged them “to remain true to the faith.” (hapax)

Notice how he puts this challenge of the Christian life. In evangelism, the challenge for the person who is not a Christian is to believe what is true. For the Christian the challenge is to be true to what you believe.

You see the difference? Do you believe what is true? If Jesus is the Savior, if he is the way and the truth and the life, believe in him, receive forgiveness and life that God through him. Be reconciled to God. Live for him. God created you for this. Here is where you will find the greatest joy. This is the call to faith.

Then, for the Christian, the challenge shift from believing what is true to being true to what you believe. Don’t back off when the opposition comes; don’t return to the futility of life without the truth. Let Christ shape you, how you think, and how you live. Let him remake your priorities so that he is first in everything.

Don’t reject the pleasures of this life. Be grateful for them. But don’t live for them or in the end your life will have counted for nothing. Live for him willing to die for him, and your life will be fuller and richer than you ever imagined it could be. How so? It will be full of the knowledge of God.

This was the end to which Paul challenged the church, and it was the end to which he challenged himself. This is how one perseveres in the faith. You either run hard or you slip backward.

Paul used the language of the Olympics and other games of his time to challenge the people he loved to faithfulness. He did so not as a coach on the sidelines but as an athlete himself. In I Corinthians 9 he

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wrote, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly... (I Cor. 9:25-26)

You can look around and find Christians who are not so serious about following the Lord. They live as if the only thing that matters is whether they believe what is true, not whether they are true to what they believe. The two should not be at odds, but when they are, it argues they really do not believe at all.

Paul wrote, “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” He immediately decried those who did not. (Phil. 3:17)

The challenge to faithfulness is the challenge to be true to what you believe. What of the assurance of God’s faithfulness? Look with me at verse 23. Notice that in appointing elders, praying and fasting for them, Paul then “committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” Here is the assurance of the Lord’s faithfulness to them. He committed them to the Lord for the Lord’s faithfulness to them.

If you ask how Paul could so give himself to the truth, suffer as he did, and devote himself to the welfare of the church, the answer is (Choose one):

- A) He was more than a man.
- B) His ministry was so well received everywhere he went.
- C) He was supremely confident that Christ is faithful to bless his effort and use it for his glory.

If you chose “A”, Paul was more than a man, I cannot give you a star. As we saw at Lystra, Paul was horrified at the thought that anyone would regard him that way. Throughout his letters, Paul freely expressed his weaknesses, anxiety, grief, sleeplessness, uncertainty and loneliness. He was a man like any other.

If you chose, “B”, Paul’s ministry was so well received wherever he went, I have disappointing news. The very churches in Galatia Paul just planted, were about to be misled so that within he weeks he would write them, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel...” (Gal. 1:6) He would have to remake the case for his own calling as an apostle and defend the truth of the Gospel.

If you chose, “C”, Paul was supremely confident that Jesus, Lord of the church, would bless his effort by using it for his glory, you got it! Just as the Church at Antioch had committed Paul and Barnabas to the Lord for their ministry, Paul and Barnabas committed the churches and the elders to the Lord for theirs.

This was far more than mere words or ceremony. Paul was motivated and sustained by the deepest assurance of the Lord’s faithfulness. Here are two reasons we know:

First, because he continued in the ministry when there was every earthly reason to say, this is too hard, the opposition is too great., what I am doing can’t last.

Second, because when he completed his ministry, he went home. Paul had put in place Apostolic teaching, pastoral oversight, and reliance on the Holy Spirit. That was enough. He didn’t try to hang on to control. He realized he didn’t need to. The building of the church was not up to him. The Lord would do it.

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How many times do we hesitate to serve or faint along the way, because we have not given due weight to the fact the Lord will be faithful? How often do we feel crushed by our own false sense that everything depends on us?

The Christian life handed down to us does come with great challenge but also great assurance, because God’s mercy is never in doubt. His grace and love are the great givens that inspire us and keep us.

Living fully in the embrace of both the challenge and the assurance spells many happy endings – ministries completed, a difference made, and celebration in which we bring to the Lord our testimonies of his grace and goodness.

That’s what happened at Antioch. Verse 27 says that Barnabas and Paul “sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.”

They had set out for the Lord’s glory, and now they brought him glory, not in the form of things they had done, but in the things they had seen him do through them – people coming to Christ, churches planted, and in Paul’s case his life amazingly spared.

These are the special moments that make the hard times worth it. Like standing on the podium about to receive Olympic gold. Only the honor isn’t receiving but in giving glory to what the Lord has done.

“Follow my example,” Paul wrote, “as I follow the example of Christ.” (I Cor. 11:1)

Jesus was the one who set his face like flint, like an arrow, headed for Jerusalem and the Cross. He was the one who did not stop until he could say, “It is finished.”

Paul built his life on that Rock, Jesus Christ. The pattern and legacy Jesus created was the pattern and legacy Paul passed on to us, because we, too, like living stones are being fitted together by the Lord, solid, firm, resolute until the moment of celebration that will never end.