

“The Magnitude of Christ’s Work”

Acts 20:28-38

Rev. Curtis J. Young

November 2, 2008

*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](mailto:revyoung@comcast.net) – Rev. Curt Young)*

This morning we conclude our series in Acts by turning to Paul’s farewell speech to elders from the church at Ephesus.

The speech is divided into three sections. Last week we looked at the first section, which was a reminder. Paul reminded his brothers of his life and ministry among them, because they are now to resume where he left off.

It is so significant, then, that he proceeds to a charge, which is not some confidence boosting declaration of their readiness to go out and change the world, but instead, a sober warning, in essence, not to let the world, or god of this world, change them.

This tells me that this was a concern that Paul lived with, not only for the church but for himself. Paul began by saying to these elders, “Keep watch over yourselves,” before including, “and all the flock.” He applied it to the leaders before applying it to the church. Undoubtedly, he applied it to himself, before he applied it to the leaders.

I think of I Corinthians 9: 26, he had written of his own ministry using the metaphor of a Greek athlete, “I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my salve so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

Paul himself knew the sudden bite of demonic temptation. He himself endured the pounding of satanic deceptions hurled like boulders against his mind and heart.

All this is to say the warning is for us to hear as well, and for exactly the same reason. If Paul were standing before us this morning, delivering a charge to fulfill our mission as a Church, to lead people from unbelief to mature, joyful faith in Christ, we would hear the same sober warning.

You can’t gain what Christ calls you to gain, if you lose what the Lord himself has entrusted to you. This deserves a much finer point. You cannot gain souls for God, you cannot disciple the nations, if you have given up what is so essential to your own salvation as well as the salvation of others.

This is what Paul in his speech calls: In verse 24, the gospel of God’s grace; in verse 25, the message of the kingdom, In vs. 27, the whole will of God; in verse 30, the truth; and finally in verse 32, the word of his grace.

If you think about this, it all makes sense. A warning implies there is something of value to guard, something that could be stolen by force, or lost through neglect.

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In this case, what we are talking about is the Gospel. Rather than use the term we are so accustomed to, I want us to think about what the good news is about: The magnitude of what Christ did on the Cross – the magnitude of what he did, of what occurred there.

To get at what I am talking about I’d like to invite you to take part in an exercise with me. Looking back over your life, how would you complete this sentence: I’ll never forget the day when...

Here are a couple that I came up with. “I’ll never forget the day Diane said, “Yes,” when I asked her to marry me. I’ll never forget the day when Diane and I walked out of Holy Cross Hospital with our newborn son, Isaac, to bring him home. I’ll never forget the day I graduated from high school.

On the other side, I suspect many of us would list, “I’ll never forget 911,” or, “the day JFK was killed,” or, “Pearl Harbor.”

This is what I mean by “magnitude”. It is about something huge that happens, something that changes everything so life is never the same, so I will never be the same again. This event changes me, how I think, how I view the world, how I relate to others.

It may be honored and celebrated, or, it may be a day of infamy, but either way, it must be remembered. It must not be forgotten. I must live it out. I must pass it on.

Here is the problem. If we are not careful events of great magnitude are “de-magnitized.” The magnitude of precious love that was involved in that beautiful young woman saying “yes” is diminished. The result, marriage, is no longer cherished. Commitment to that marriage is no longer held dear. Its blessedness is lost.

The magnitude of murderous aggression involved in commandeering four passenger jets full of people to fly them into buildings to create as much death and horror as possible, to cripple the economy and decapitate the government, is revised downward. The entire incident gets reinterpreted. It isn’t long before the truth has become so distorted that it hardly remains.

Here is how the New Testament describes the magnitude of what Christ did on the Cross.

Utterly Unique: Christ died for sins once and for all, the just for the unjust, to bring you to God.

Urgently Necessary: God was in Christ reconciling us to himself not counting men’s sins against them...We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Unimaginably Wonderful: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Markedly Definitive: Christ has now appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself...and he will appear a second time...to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Absolute: And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

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The magnitude of what Christ has accomplished. It is only in recognizing this that / call to faith and repentance makes sense. Belief in Christ is not at all a blind leap as some have said, but it is a huge step. It not only redirects the course of your life but your eternal destiny.

Only in recognizing the magnitude of what Christ has done makes sense of our worship, crying out at the hearing of his name, “My Lord and my God.”

Only as our hearts respond to the magnitude of what Christ has done are we freed to live in hope of an age when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and deny evil its demand that we despair.

Here is how Paul put it in his charge to the elders in verse 28: Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood!”

To shepherd means to lead sheep to food and then keep them safe as they graze. The food is this amazing message in all its magnitude.

As Paul goes on in verse 30 to declare with sorrow that some from their midst would arise and distort the truth, he is speaking of revising downward the magnitude of what Jesus did. This is where we are vulnerable. This is where the church is constantly under assault, because the Gospel is under assault, and your faith is under assault.

We can do this as easily by slipping into clichés about Christ rather than speaking words to convey the truth; or going through the routine of worship without responding to Christ; by reworking our Christianity into a set of rules by which we justify ourselves; or tolerating sin in our lives as if forgiveness were permission.

Paul is speaking to a higher level as well. At the conclusion of Ecclesiastes, the author gives this warning, and it applies: The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails—given by one Shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of making many books there is no end. (Eccl. 12:12-12)

What was he saying? Guard the wisdom -- for us, the Gospel -- of God. People will endlessly write of the magnitude of what Christ did. Some will deny it altogether, others revise it and still other reinterpret it, whatever is necessary to draw a following. Don’t follow. Here I speak of what takes place within the church.

To those who hate Christ and the magnitude of what he did, the Gospel contains the most dangerous ideas in the world. So every effort is made to deny the utter uniqueness of what Christ did, or the urgent necessity for the Savior, how unimaginably wonderful his work was, how it represents the turning point of history, and how absolute is the claim it makes on each of us.

Having issued his warning, no doubt with tears, he concluded with this committal. “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (32)

“To God and to the word of his grace?” Is God not sufficient? Of course. But the means God uses to build us up and give that inheritance is the word of his grace. To distort his word is to deny his grace. It is in the end to deny him.

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But to maintain it, to hold onto it and lead others to feed upon it is the very bestow eternal life.

“Therefore,” Paul would write, “since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, not do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God...

It is written: ‘I believed, therefore I have spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore, we do not lose heart.” (from II Cor. 4)