

Sunday November 12th, 2021

Acts 20:7-12

Series: Lessons from the Early Church

Sermon: "Visit to Troas"

There was a small rural Baptist church that experienced a rather common occurrence in the winter, and that was a severe snow storm that prevented most of the congregation from attending morning worship. The minister was there because he lived right next door in the manse, and then at five minutes after eleven an old farmer who lived nearby, dragged himself into the church. However, no one else came, even by 11:20.

The minister said to the farmer, "Shall we cancel the service, Bill?" The farmer replied, "I dunno how you feel about it, but I suppose if I went out at feeding time to feed my cows, and only one cow showed up, I'd feed it." "Right you are!" the minister said, and so they held a regular service. They sang every verse of every hymn, took up the collection, prayed-everything you would normally do in a service, but just the two of them.

When it came to the sermon, the minister gave a real strong, and long message. It went on for 25 minutes, then 40 minutes, finally almost an hour. When he had finished, the minister said a closing prayer, and came down to talk to the farmer. "Well, we had our own service, Bill, just the two of us!" "We sure did, pastor," the farmer said. "But, y'know, if I went out to feed my cows with a whole load of hay, and only one cow showed up, I'd feed it, but I sure wouldn't give it the whole load." (Let There be Laughter, p.2)

Nothing terrifies a congregation more than a preacher who gives more than ample sermons time wise. To prove my point, I remember telling a former parishioner some years back while at the local mall having coffee, that my watch battery had just ran out. Without missing a beat, he said, "I'd be happy to pay for that new battery. No preacher should be without a working watch." I share this with you today because it does relate to our scripture passage from Acts 20 as Paul visits Troas.

Troas was a small city in Macedonia, named after the ancient city of Troy. It was in Paul's day a thriving settlement, but today it is nothing but ruins covered with oak trees. It is clear that there was also a thriving little church community there; after all, Paul had visited there several times. The story in today's passage is straight forward enough, but if there is some humour in the bible, this passage is a clear example.

Luke tells us that on this particular trip, Paul came to Troas by way of the sea from Philippi, and he stayed a week. On the first day of the week, which is Sunday, Paul is with the believers of Troas, sharing the Lord's Supper, or as it also referred to as breaking bread. In those days, we must remember that the Lord's Supper probably meant a complete meal, with the elements of bread and wine being given special meaning.

So, let me see if I can paint a picture of what happened here on this particular Sunday. The church at Troas is gathered in the upper room of a house, in the evening. The room is crowded, and because it is evening, there are many lamps burning, giving off not just light but also heat.

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This is also the Mediterranean, so even the evenings are somewhat warm. In a word, it would have been stifling. These folks would also likely have worked all day and would be tired. Because Paul knew his time was limited with these folks, he decided, like our story of the farmer and preacher, to give the church the whole load. In other words, “Paul spoke on and on.” You can almost picture Luke’s eyes rolling as he wrote this.

So, it’s very warm, and crowded, and they haven’t yet eaten, and Paul is droning on and on. You will never complain about the length of my sermons again after this story. In the gathering of the church at Troas was a young man named Eutychus, who surprise, surprise become very drowsy.

We all know how this feels. I once heard someone who was asked why they went to church and the reply was, “To get a good sleep”. Eutychus doesn’t want to be rude, and disturb the gathering by walking out, besides he may have genuinely wanted to hear what Paul had to say, but he just couldn’t stay awake. Ah but “necessity is the mother of invention” and Eutychus notices a window, and he sits himself on its sill to try and keep as cool as he could.

However, despite his best effort, Eutychus succumbs to his fatigue, and he falls into a deep sleep. In and of itself, not a terrible thing, but he is in a window sill three stories up. Sure enough, Eutychus falls out the window and is killed. The church is in shock, and every one rushes down to assist Eutychus, but he is dead. Here we have proof positive that preaching is a deadly weapon, so no sitting on window ledges.

Then we read that Paul took the young man in his arms, and by the power of God the man is restored to life. Good news! Now what we read next I must admit, I can hardly contain myself from laughter. It comes off quite funny, at least to me. Eutychus is alright, so they head back inside, to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and then, this is incredible; Paul goes on preaching until dawn. You would think the death of Eutychus was a sign the people had had enough.

But no! Paul had a lot more to say. Where was that offer of watch battery for Paul? Then the most bizarre sentence in this passage. Luke tells us the Eutychus was taken home unhurt, “and everyone was greatly relieved.” Well, I guess so! What an odd little story. I am sure that it was the unusual nature of the event that prompted Luke to write about it, but what’s the point we are to take away.

Don’t fall asleep in church? Watch where you sit in church. Air conditioning is necessary equipment for the church. No one should ever preach until dawn. I mean what else is there here. I did a little digging on the internet to see what other preachers have done with this passage, and there were some very creative attempts to bring some exhortation out of this story. Most of them tried to use this passage as a wakeup call for the church, or a call to revival.

One preacher took this text and extrapolated a lengthy sermon, on why you should go to church. I don’t know how he got there, because the threat of dying is not much of a draw to me. As I thought about this passage, I began to wonder why I included it in our series; that is until I made a couple of observations. The first has to do with the Apostle Paul himself. The week’s stay at Troas, and the all-night preaching session seems to me to point to a desperation in Paul.

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I think he sees his time on earth drawing to a close. He says as much in the next chapter to the elders of Ephesus. I sense that he is trying too hard. Is it possible he relying too much on himself and not on God? I say this because we know of Paul's desire to go to Jerusalem. Actually, desire is too weak a word, it is almost an obsession. The Holy Spirit, Luke hinted at, was not behind this overwhelming push to get to Jerusalem. Paul then goes on kind of a farewell tour, making his way to Jerusalem. There is a desperation to it. I mean not even the death of Eutychus slowed him down.

I remember a story I heard when we were in Brownsburg Quebec. Laura's great Uncle George Baxter had been the pastor there many years before me. The story goes, that one summer Sunday evening there was a power outage, and people believed the evening service would be canceled. Uncle George would have none of that. He ordered some young men from the church to find two heavy wooden planks.

The front doors to the church were then propped open, and the Pastor drove his car on the church lawn up to the front doors, and up the planks so his headlights would illuminate the sanctuary. Some may say that was ingenuity, but I wonder if it was a necessary thing at all. Yes, there is an urgency to the gospel, but one wonders if anyone remembered anything else about that service except the car on the ramp, or in Troas, Eutychus falling and dying.

The issue, as I see it, is always quality over quantity in sharing the gospel. I also wonder, in thinking about Paul, how much trust he had in other preachers and teachers. Yes, I know there were false teachers, but there were men like Apollos, Timothy and others who could share the gospel, and help people to grow in the faith. I know this may seem unfair, but sometimes I get the sense that Paul felt that the success of the Christian mission rested on his shoulders.

I know that's harsh, but it is the feeling I get from the last few weeks of our series. There is a real danger in ever thinking that the gospel depends on us personally. I have personally encountered many sincere followers of Jesus, who think that if they take a break, or take a holiday or heaven forbid, actually retire, the church will implode. How tragic! What a terrible burden, and an unnecessary one to carry.

What happened to Jesus' promise that he would make our burdens lite? We are but instruments of transmission of the message. Jesus said that he was the one who would build his church. (Matthew 16:18) All we have to do is introduce people to Jesus. Invite them to follow him. We do not need to give them the "full load" the first time we meet them.

The truth is that the church continued to grow and thrive after Paul was martyred. The church was fully alive before we walked this earth, and it will be long after we are gone to glory. First Baptist is not my church, it is not your church, but it is Christ's church. Troas was not Paul's church, no matter how long he preached. Maybe the people were relieved not just because Eutychus was alright, but maybe also because Paul moved on. Just a thought.

The second thing that raised up from this passage for me was a serious question about why we come to worship in the first place. I read recently about the old adage, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder".

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One minister remarked, “Then there must be a lot of people who really love the church.” I came across an article by a news reporter who asked his readers to answer the question, “Why I don’t go to church?”

The reporter then decided to show the weakness of their reasons by substituting the word church with the word movie. Here is a sampling of what he discovered. One person said, “I am out of the habit of going to the movies that is why I no longer attend.” Another wrote, “I know a man who has gone to the movies for years, and he is no better than I am.” Still another wrote, “I stay away from the movies because I went when I was a child.”

Another wrote, “There are just as many good people outside of the movies as there are inside.” (The Sermon Notebook) You can see that some of these reasons are a bit absurd, even when we use the word church in them. Now it might be helpful to ask why people don’t come, but why do we bother to come. Why did the people of Troas endure the stuffy upper room, and Paul’s long-winded sermon?

Why do you nice folks come out each week to this place? Please don’t inflate my ego by telling me it’s because I am here. I know our motives have got to be deeper than that. So, what are our reasons? Well, honestly, maybe we are not sure why we come, at least some Sunday’s. Some of us maybe come some weeks out of habit, or if there is nothing else interesting to do.

But there has got to be more to it than that. Why, did the folks at: Troas, Ephesus, Corinth, Philippi and all those other early churches make such an effort to gather together? Later on, our early brothers and sister took to meeting in Catacombs or tombs, to avoid persecution. Why would they risk life and limb to meet? Well Luke tells us some of the reasons, and Paul in his letters gives us even more, but one stands out in today’s passage.

“On the first day of the week, we gathered to observe the Lord’s Supper.” In today’s church we use the words Communion or Eucharist. What was it about breaking bread together that was so important that even after Eutychus died, they went right back inside to celebrate the Lord’s Supper? Well to answer that, think about it as a family event. What is the focal point of every family celebration you have ever had? A meal.

I have mentioned in the past that in my family, and in many families, sharing a meal with the extended gathering is a big deal. It takes planning, and preparation. My mother has a list that she uses to check off items. Why is a meal so important at a family event? Whether it be a sit-down dinner or a backyard BBQ. Well, besides eating delicious food, what happens around the table? We interact, we share, we swap stories, pass on family news and traditions: all whether we realize it or not, to strengthen our family bonds.

“The family that eats together stays together”. Sharing food and drink is the medium over which we relate. When you wish to meet with someone socially, what do you do; you invite them out for lunch or coffee. The food and drink are really irrelevant, it is the conversation that is valuable. The early church coming out of a middle eastern culture, recognized the value of breaking bread, as did Jesus when he gave it new meaning.

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The church comes together to break bread, not just around the communion table, but in the coffee times, the aisle before and after service, at bible studies, anywhere we interact with each other. The bread and cup, the word and sermons, the hymns and prayers that we share, provide us opportunity to strengthen our bonds with each other and our bond with Christ. If we don't come to worship or to break bread, we don't know what is going on in the lives of our brothers and sisters, nor do others know what is going on in our lives.

It is not about news, but rather it is all about being the body of Christ. The reason the believers at Troas could sit all night listening to Paul, wasn't because they had comfortable pews. It was because they listened together. They shared the bread and the experience. Read again the last phrase of our lesson today. What was said when Eutychus was, okay? "Everyone was greatly relieved." Everyone. They cared for each other. They helped each other

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, "when one suffers, we all suffers; when one rejoices, we all rejoice." Whether the sermons are five minutes, or five hours is irrelevant, really, as long as we love each other, and know we are in this together.

So, why do we come? The same reason the believers in Troas came. They came because this was their family. It was like a story I read about an old man who although he was nearly totally deaf, still walked to church every Sunday morning. One day, his neighbour stopped him and asked why he insisted on going to church each week? After all he couldn't hear a thing, the preacher said. The old man responded, "Yes, I know I can't hear, but they love me and I feel at home there."

The people at Troas felt they were loved and were at home in that stuffy upper room. They came no matter what; even through an all-night preaching session. They felt at home there. Do you feel at home here? Honestly? Why or why not? Have you shared your concern? And then let me also ask you this. How have you made others feel at home here? Do you cherish those who come to break bread with you? Do you even know each other's names?

We are God's family. That is why we come. Not because of tradition, or habit, or heaven help us because of the preacher, but because we are Christ's body.