

Scripture verses: Excerpts from Acts 8, 11, 13, and 21

Title: The Journey of Faith: the Early Churches

That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them.

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia.

When we heard this, we and the people there urged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” [NRSV]

In the life of a church, no other issue is more painful than preparing for the end of an era of the church. The experience is sure to cause a great amount of anguish, anxiety, confusion, doubt, fear, and grief, to name a few. We all have shared these feelings and emotions among us, especially in the last several months. And there exists yet another type of feeling that is arguably the most uncomfortable and disturbing. We call it *guilt*.

I would like to ask you to recall the moment when you first realized that our church was in a crisis. At that very moment, you might have asked yourself: what did we do wrong? Could we have done more and better? Could we have tried some new programs? Could we have worked harder? Could we have held on longer? Could we have believed harder? Could we have loved more? Were we not faithful enough?

Were we not enough? I am pretty sure many of you still struggle with these questions, even as you are sitting here for the final worship service at this Graham Road building.

And here's my sincere answer to you. No, you have done well. I repeat; you have done well. You have been good and faithful. You were and you are enough. I am telling you this, not because I love you so dearly and I want you to feel better by telling a white lie, but because you really have done well, and because I am confident that God knows it all.

The bible reading for today tells us how the early churches were planted and flourished. It was possible thanks to the hard work by the followers of Christ whom later were given the name, 'Christians.' They received countless persecutions and witnessed other followers being stoned to death. But they didn't hide. Nothing could stop them from working tirelessly for the Lord. As one of Christ's followers, Paul said that they were 'ready not only to be bound but even to die for the name of the Lord Jesus.'

But how many of those early churches in the bible stories we read this morning still exist and flourish today? The answer is none. The early churches are all but gone. A few sites exist today but either in ruins or as tourist destinations. None of the early churches exist and functions today exactly as they were in the beginning of their history.

But, can we say that the people who took part in the early churches were not enough and led to the closure of their church? Can we say that they have failed? No, because obviously that's not true at all. We all know how dedicated and faithful they were to God, so much so that they are even featured in the bible! We all know that through their labors so many wonderful ministries were completed. We all know that countless people became Christians thanks to their teachings. We all know that they are the reason we call ourselves a Christian today. And, most of all, God knows it all.

Graham Road Church has similar stories and history like the early churches. We have stories of lives transformed, stories of mission outreach, and stories of worship and significant presence in the community. The word of God was proclaimed from the pulpit. Lives were touched by its many ministries. Many tens of thousands of people have witnessed the virtues of what this church, what this congregation, what

you have done. God has accomplished so much through you. In that sense, you were, and you are enough. And God knows it all.

For past two weeks leading up to today, we have heard the stories of the faith journey bravely undertaken by God's people. Abraham and Sarah took the first step on the journey of faith, believing God's promise that they would be blessed to be a blessing to others. That journey continued with Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea through Exodus. And the journey didn't end when Moses died. God opened a new era, a different beginning for Joshua and the Israelites. And just as God promised, God was with them wherever they went. The faith journey of God's people continued through the time of Judges and Kings and the Prophets, and through the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, and through Paul's journey. It continued with our ancestors and still does so today with our own journey of faith.

As we take the final step from this Graham Road building heading toward a new beginning, we are remembering and celebrating all the ministries and stories we have shared in this place throughout the years. And not only are we remembering and celebrating our past, but also we are eagerly anticipating what God will accomplish through us next.

Our story and history are a part of God's story and history of salvation that began way before we got here. We are here because of the legacy of the people of God who have come before us. And now we are about to pass our own legacy forward in a new form, in a new ministry, at a new location. God's plan for us and our call to God's work will not cease just because we are leaving this building. God has led us this far and God will lead us into a new era. The end of one era is not the end of our history. We carry our stories within us. We embody them in us and will continue our stories.

Our future is not without a hope. God has a plan and a purpose for us. The blessings we received in the past cannot compare to the blessings yet to come. God wants us to look forward, not backward. God wants us not to look back at the way things were but to look forward and anticipate what God will accomplish through us next. It is not because there is no virtue in looking back, but because God is not done with us yet and God will do even more in what is to come. What God has done through the history of our church is nothing compared to what God has yet to do.

You have witnessed what God can do. You have brought your highest hopes and deepest sorrows to this place. You have brought here your family and friends. You have brought here concerns and situations that seemed beyond any hope. And each and every single time God met you here. You know that God is trustworthy, and that God keeps promises. So, you know what God will do. You know God.

As your pastor and your descendant in faith, I sincerely honor and respect you who decided to embrace a new future. I am grateful for you who are committed to focus on God's mission even as the original mission that founded Graham Road congregation decades ago has changed. You made this decision because it is about God and God's church and mission. You made a choice that is faithful and life-giving.

I recently found a bulletin of the worship service celebrating our 40th Anniversary. In it was a message which reads: *"We observe our 40th anniversary, not with a feeling that we have reached a predetermined goal, but with the realization that all is unfinished business. Graham Road Church continues to follow the text used for its first worship service, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.' (Romans 1:16) The unfinished business is to spread the gospel of Christ."*

Today in year 2019, some 68 years after Graham Road church was organized, we still believe this message to be the true. We still have an unfinished business. We still have lots more work to do. We are not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. We will spread the gospel until the end. We will share the love of God until Christ comes again. Nothing could stop us from working tirelessly for the Lord. We will continue to work for God and God's mission.

Well done, you good and faithful servants of God. God knows and cherishes every single moment of the last 68 years at Graham Road. And it's time for us to take the first step into a new journey with God. We still have an unfinished business. Let's get to work. So may it be, Amen.