

The Heartbeat of Urban Missionaries

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Date: 15 August 2021

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

I'm Melissa Arciniega. And I'm part of the North Berkeley Community Group. Today's scripture reading is from the book of Acts, chapter 20, verses 17 to 38, as printed in the liturgy.

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them, you know how I lived the whole time I was with you. From the first day I came into the province of Asia, I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents.

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

[1 : 1 9] And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

However, I consider my life worth nothing to me. My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you.

For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number, men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

[2 : 2 8] So be on your guard. Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. 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.

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions.

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work, we must help the weak. Remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again.

Then they accompanied him to the ship. This is the word of the Lord. Good morning, Christ Church.

[3 : 48] It's so good to see you all. As you can probably tell, I'm back from vacation. I want to thank you all for our session, our staff, and all of you for being so gracious, giving me an extended time away after a ridiculously extended season of pandemic ministry.

It was great to just rest and have some family reunions after two years of not seeing my family and Catherine's family. Our kids were able to go to summer camp with their cousins and their friends.

Best of all, Catherine and I had five days without our beloved children at the beach. It was glorious. We're really glad to be back here and reunited with you.

You're our family here at Christ Church. You're our California family. We're excited about strengthening our family ties. As we go in two weeks to this retreat, many of us down in the Santa Cruz Mountains to celebrate my birthday, to sit at Jesus' feet for a couple days and learn what it means to seek first the kingdom of God, to laugh hard, to play hard, to have a lot of fun, and to relaunch into a new season of ministry.

So we're excited about that. And if you're new, as Andrew said, we're thrilled to welcome you here. We can't wait to get to know you, help you get woven into the tapestry of our community, and help you grow into a deeper relationship with Christ.

[5 : 18] That's our mission. If you're new and you're kind of concerned about COVID and this Delta variant, I want to assure you that we took a survey of our congregation back in May, and 98% of us, ages 12 and older, are vaccinated here.

This is a really good place for you to be in this time. And we're just so grateful that God's given us the means to gather back in person and carry out our ministry in person together.

So we have, since Easter, been exploring a New Testament book of the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles, which is a study in the earliest history of the Christian church, because we're trying to get our hands around what is authentic Christianity?

What is real Christianity all about? Well, and last week and this week, we're focusing on this ancient city of Ephesus. There were many city centers in the Roman Empire.

I forgot how to speak while on vacation. There were many city centers in the Roman Empire. And these three around the Aegean Sea, Athens, the intellectual center, Corinth, the commercial center, and Ephesus, the spiritual center, were strategic places to launch the Christian mission.

[6 : 36] And prior to Paul's third missionary journey, there was no church in this city of Ephesus. But now in Acts chapter 20, Paul, having spent about three years in the city, the longest he's spent in any place, there is a church.

There's new converts and new leaders in this place of about half a million inhabitants, roughly the size of Berkeley and Oakland. And one of the things that Paul and Barnabas did when they were there was they appointed elders over this church, a ministry team that shared in the leadership and responsibility for the nurture and mission of this Christian community of disciples.

And this is the only text we have in this whole book where the message is strictly to Christians. Elsewhere, you have it here, a speech to Jews, a speech to pagan Gentiles. But here, it's just a message to Christians about what it means to be Christians, what it means to be the church, what it means to have a gospel ministry.

And it's this deeply touching scene that takes place in the year 56 AD, this famous farewell speech from the Apostle Paul to the elders in Ephesus, the message of one Christian leader to a group of Christian leaders.

And here's what Paul says. Paul says that good shepherds feed God's truth, fend off wolves, and value the sheep.

[8 : 09] And every Christian needs to think deeply about these things, that good shepherds feed God's truth. They fend off the wolves, and they value the sheep.

And I want to talk a little bit about how good shepherds feed God's truth. This metaphor of sheep and shepherd is a beautiful, time-honored image.

Moses was the shepherd leader of Israel. David was the shepherd king of the people of God. Jesus, it says in the gospels, when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

He told parables about how God was the shepherd who went after the one lost sheep. And then Jesus says, you know, actually, I'm the good shepherd. And at the end of his gospel, he says to Peter, I want you to feed my sheep.

And that's where Paul gets this imagery in verse 28 when he says, keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

[9 : 08] Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. In verses 18 to 27, leading up to that verse, Paul presents a pattern, a model of life for how he did the work of shepherding this Ephesian church over the course of three years.

And he set an example for these new leaders, this team of pastors and elders to imitate him. And what Paul showed is that the primary work of a shepherd is to feed the sheep.

It's to teach God's people to nourish themselves on God's truth. And what is the truth that Paul, the shepherd, fed his Ephesian flock?

Some of you were with us last year. We went through Paul's letter to the Ephesians. And you can go read that letter to get a sense of all that he said about God bringing to unity all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

That's what he was teaching them about. But Paul says here, he says in verse 24, that I was testifying to you the good news of the grace of God. And in verse 25, he said, as I was preaching to you the kingdom of God.

[10 : 19] And in verse 27, he says, I was proclaiming to you the whole will or counsel of God. And then in verse 21, he says, I was declaring to you that you must live a life of repenting and believing, of turning to God and trusting in Jesus.

What does a healthy flock of sheep, a mature, robust Christian church, regularly nourish itself on? The grace of God, the kingdom of God, the will of God, repenting and putting your faith in God and in his son, Jesus.

Sheep, Paul says, need to be led into the green pastures of the truth of scripture. And they need to be equipped to become self-feeders day by day, morning and evening, on the truths of God's word.

Paul, the shepherd, says that healthy sheep must feast on these particular truths. Verse 24, I was testifying to the grace of God.

In other words, the creator God wants to have a relationship with you as a gracious father. And because you and I are not enough, we are not sufficient to heal ourselves or to forgive ourselves.

[11 : 37] Our gracious father has given us his son and his spirit to save us from ourselves. And God himself has carried in the broken body of Jesus our sin and our suffering to the cross.

That's what the grace of God is all about. And Paul says, you need to chew on the truth of the grace of God. He goes on in verse 25, he says, I was preaching to you the kingdom of God.

And this is the first thing we hear about in the gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verse 15. Jesus' first words out of his mouth are that the kingdom of God is here. The gracious rule, the liberating reign of God himself has come in and through me, Jesus says.

The sovereign God has sent his one mediator. To do what? To bring us out of a kingdom of darkness, out of a kingdom of oppression, and into a kingdom of light, and a kingdom of liberty.

And what that entails precisely is the dethroning of all other kings, namely yourself. Your ego, your pride, and your vanity, all the things that you've enthroned about money in your life, and sex in your life, and power in your life, all of those idols must be cast down from the throne.

[12 : 57] And Jesus needs to be put on the center, right in the heart of things in your life, on his throne. Paul says we need to chew on the truth of the grace of God, and we need to savor the truth of the kingdom of God.

And then he goes beyond that in verse 27. He says, I was proclaiming to you the whole will of God, the whole counsel of God, the whole plan and purpose of God. And what did that entail?

Well, I think it meant three years of Paul teaching them, this is how to interpret the Bible rightly. This is how to interpret the Bible from creation to redemption. This is how to understand all the dynamics and the continuity from God's covenant with Abraham, with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and climaxing in Jesus.

This is how to understand the different sections of the Bible coming to their fullness and their fruition in Jesus' ministry as our prophet, our priest, and our king.

Paul spent three years telling them about the indicatives of all that God had done for them by his grace to save them, and all the imperatives of what it means for us to respond to God's grace in obedience and working out our salvation with fear and trembling.

[14 : 16] He told them all about, in great detail, the Christ-like conduct that God desires from his people. He told them to fix their eyes on the coming judgment and the coming salvation of this world.

Paul told them, you've got to chew on the truth of the grace of God. You've got to savor the truth of the kingdom of God. You've got to digest the truth of the will of God.

And Paul says, if sheep will feed themselves on the truth of the grace and the kingdom and the will of God, they'll be utterly transformed.

Paul, in fact, says, this is the reason I was teaching you with all of my effort in these large public gatherings, in your smaller home groups. This is why I was teaching you at night and teaching you during the day.

This is why I was teaching you every time with tears in my eyes because he says in verse 21, I was declaring to both Jews and Greeks that all of y'all must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

[15 : 23] That's the whole of the Christian life. It's a learning to turn to God in what Paul calls metanoia, repentance.

Metanoia means to change your mind. I want you to learn how to let go of all of your mind and to embrace all of God's mind.

I want you to learn how to think God's thoughts after him. I want you to learn how to see the world through his eyes. And the more and more you turn to God and do that, the more you're going to be trusting deeper and deeper in his son, Jesus, as your living Lord.

Now I wonder about you, Christ Church. Have you developed predictable patterns in your life to nourish yourself, to feed your mind and to feed your heart on these truths?

Has anyone taught you how to spend time with God and given you a method for how to start your day feasting on the truth of God's self-revelation in the scriptures?

[16 : 26] And if you've learned those things, are you doing them? Are you prioritizing the time? Are you giving adequate enough time to let yourself sit and soak in the grace and the kingdom and the counsel of God and learning to embody this life of turning to God and trusting in Jesus?

That's why the church exists. That's what the church is here to do, to convey to you this body of truth and to equip you to feast yourself on that truth.

Good shepherds, that's what they do. They feed God's truth. But Paul goes beyond that. He says good shepherds not only feed God's truth, but they also fend off wolves.

And this is what Paul says in verse 29. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number, some will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

In the Middle East, the wolf is the chief enemy of the sheep. A sheep is utterly defenseless against one wolf, much less a pack of wolves.

[17 : 42] And what would happen is a sheep would just be violently torn from limb to limb. There would be just nothing left but blood and guts and just an awful mess. And I wonder as you think about that image, what do you think about that image?

Is that image a little too intense for you? Does that sound like a paranoid fundamentalist who's blowing up the spiritual threats to God's people, to God's flock out of all proportion?

I want to remind you that this image comes straight from the mouth of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. He said in Matthew chapter 7, Watch out for false prophets.

They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. Jesus is warning us. Paul is warning us about destructive forces that harm the church, namely wolves that appear sheep-like.

They're Christian-seeming. They insinuate themselves in the church so that the flock takes them to be the real deal, takes them to be trustworthy when really they're dangerous.

[18 : 51] Truth twisters, Paul says, that draw disciples away from Jesus after them, away from the Jesus of the New Testament into some sort of sub-biblical pseudo-Christianity.

Have you ever seen that happen in a church? Paul's instinct here is absolutely right. His warning is spot on because we read later on in the book of Revelation chapter 2, Jesus addresses this Ephesian church.

And he critiques this church. And you know what Jesus says to them? He says, I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love.

You've forsaken your first love. You've allowed people to come in among you and twist the truth, distort the truth, and draw you away from Jesus in such a way that your love for him grew cold.

And you began to give your time and your energy and your attention to other things. You left your first love. Now, I was reading about this this week, and I came across this quote from N.T. Wright, who's a great New Testament scholar and scholar of Christian origins.

[20 : 03] And he said this. He said, I think right is right.

I think if someone came in here to Christ Church, and they took one of the 12 articles of our faith that we just confessed in the creed, and they straightforwardly denied it. They said, you know, there's not one God.

There's many gods. God isn't a God of infinite power. He's limited. Jesus is only human. He's not divine. His death is just a, it's an example of sacrificial love, but it can't actually do anything to atone for your sins.

Jesus, guess what, was spiritually resurrected, but not physically resurrected. And the Holy Spirit and the church are optional extra accessories for Christians.

And there is going to be no judgment at the end of time. I think if somebody came in saying those things, I hope that we would be grounded enough in the truth of Scripture and rooted enough in sound doctrine and strong enough in our faith that we would see that for what it is.

[21 : 24] But Wright says there's a more subtle and more pervasive danger to the church, and that is that we confuse the center of our faith for the circumference.

That we confuse the fountainhead of our faith for some sort of downstream tributary. That we take something that is important but not central, and we fixate on that one thing as if it's the only thing that mattered.

And I see this happening across the church in the United States. I've seen it happen in our own church, where we begin to analyze the version of Western Christianity that we inherited, that was given to us.

We begin to scrutinize our North American Christian subculture. We dissect the belief system that we grew up with. And when you do that, you very quickly become disheartened and disaffected by all the failures and hypocrisies and imperfections of the church.

You look at how the church has handled sex and gender, and you say, gosh, that's repressive and oppressive. You look at how the church has handled race issues, and you say, well, not only is that unjust, but the church also seems unaware in its complicity in injustice.

[22 : 38] You look at politics and how the church seems to be encouraging tribal identities. And you look at social justice and how the church is so disengaged from the poor and economic inequity.

You look at science and you think to yourself, how can so many Christians be so anti-intellectual? You look at the doctrine of hell and how the church has used that as a weapon to beat people over the head and make them feel excluded.

And I don't know, like, I don't want to be here. Anybody wrestle with these issues? Okay, I do. I don't know if I'm the only one. But if you do, I hear you, I see you, I feel you.

But I also want to warn you. You are primed to fixate on that one thing or that one package of things as if they're central to the faith and as if they are the only things in our faith that matter.

And you're also primed, I would say, to go looking for new teachers who will teach you new truth, which is really probably old truth in a new package on the internet, podcast, YouTube, whatever.

[23 : 48] And I think you're probably pretty primed for some of those inklings of doubt that are beginning to rise up in your heart to very quickly turn from doubt into disbelief. And I've seen that happen way too many times at Christ Church, even over the past year.

People that have been drawn away from the global, historic, orthodox Christian faith into some form of post-Christian, secular, even shallower versions of our faith.

And I'm saying this to be on your guard because I don't want it to happen to you. If you need to disenculturate your faith, and probably everybody here needs to go through that process.

It was the first year of seminary for me. I'm thinking, Andrew, for you as well. Like, you need to get broken down in order to get built back up. But if you need to disenculturate your faith with all these issues, Jesus shows us how to do it.

Jesus critiqued the culture of the church on the basis of the Bible. Right? In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, you've heard that it was said, but I say to you.

[24 : 58] You've heard that it was said, love your neighbors and hate your enemies, but I say to you, you know that hate your enemies part? That's not in the Bible. And somebody added that on, and you need to get rid of that and deal with that.

Jesus deconstructs the norms of his day, but he critiques the worldly corruption of the church with the truth of the scriptures. And Western people have this backwards because they use our late modern culture, what Paul called the standards of this world, they use that standard by which to critique the Bible and the church.

I'm preaching. Sorry. Okay. Two of my favorite bumper stickers since I moved here in 2005. Number one is don't believe everything you think.

And number two is subvert the dominant paradigm. Now, I was on a walk yesterday. I saw another bumper sticker that said, my inner child is an honor student at Burning Man. And I'm going to add that one to my list.

But don't believe everything you think and subvert the dominant paradigm. You should absolutely apply that to North American Christian subculture. But you should also apply that to Western secular culture.

[26 : 09] Don't believe everything everybody's saying. Don't believe everything you think. And subvert the dominant paradigm. Don't go along with the majority. Don't swim with the flow. Our culture tells you to come to the Bible in our individualistic society and to put your sovereign enlightened self to stand above the Bible or stand beside the Bible or stand on the Bible and to simply deconstruct it, which is really, really easy to do.

It's lazy intellectually. But Christians are called to sit under the Bible, to humbly submit ourselves to the authority of the truth of God's word and let it deconstruct us.

Let it question all of our sub-Christian ways of thinking and subvert the dominant paradigms that we've inherited from church culture or Bay Area culture and to be reformed according to a kingdom culture.

If you're reading the Bible regularly and rightly, chewing on the grace of God, savoring the kingdom of God, digesting the whole counsel of God, embodying this life of turning to God and trusting in Jesus, you're gonna become people of discernment.

People who can discern when someone is clarifying the truth and when they're distorting the truth. When someone is leading you closer to Jesus or leading you further away from your first love.

[27 : 34] And I just, as a shepherd this morning, I had to say, be on your guard. Be on your guard. Okay, good shepherds feed God's truth. They fend off wolves. And my last thing is that they value the sheep.

Good shepherds value the sheep. This is Pastor Paul's message to these elders, these shepherds of the Ephesian flock. And he says in verse 28, Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood. That's a wonderfully Trinitarian verse. Shows us how precious the church is to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that these sheep belong to God the Father.

This is not the church of Jonathan. It's not the church of Andrew. Paul says it's the church of God. And he's the supreme overseer and shepherd of the flock. And these sheep have been bought by God's own Son that Jesus loves everyone in here so much that he laid down his life and he shed his blood and he paid the highest price to purchase this flock with his sacrificial death on the cross.

So these sheep belong to God. They're redeemed by God the Son. And God the Holy Spirit has provided new converts here. He's provided mature servants.

[28 : 53] He's provided spiritual gifts for the church to be built up. And so it's our privilege that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit has made us a part of his flock. And this truth, I think, should humble us, inspire us, and motivate us to more loving care of the people that God cares for so much.

You know, if you talk to any real-life shepherd, they'll keep it real about the sheep, right? That sheep are not these clean, cuddly lambs that they appear from a distance.

One writer says they're dirty. They're subject to unpleasant pests. They need to be regularly dipped in strong chemicals in order to be rid of lice, ticks, and worms. They are unintelligent, wayward, and obstinate.

And I hesitate to apply the metaphor, or, you know, too closely here this morning, it would not be proper to call the beloved people of God dirty, lousy, and stupid.

Nevertheless, some sheep are a great trial to their shepherds. And some pastors are a great trial to their people. Can I get an amen? But when you find a sheep or a shepherd who's being difficult or irritating or exasperating, I want you to remember the infinite value that they have in the sight of God.

[30 : 12] That they are so precious that the whole Trinity is involved in caring for them. Next time you're with a tiresome sheep that just puts your battery on drain, you can say, not out loud, just say in your heart, God the Father loves you.

God the Son shed his blood for you. God the Holy Spirit has appointed me to care for you. And as the three persons of the Trinity are committed to your welfare, so I'm so deeply privileged to serve you right here, right now.

I love where Paul lands the plane of this message. It's where I'm gonna land the plane this morning. In verse 35, he says, we should work really hard to help the weak.

Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus himself who said it's more blessed to give than to receive. So I want you to just take a minute to look around this flock. Look at all the little lambs and the more mature sheep around here.

And I want you to ask this question, Lord, who are you calling me to help? Who's in a period of weakness who needs not just generic help, but needs my help?

[31 : 32] How can I help one sheep and do so in a way that I expect nothing from them in return? Jesus said it's better to give than to receive. It's better to serve than to be served.

Freely, we've received the grace of God. How can we give the grace of God to others with no thought of what is in it for me? Paul modeled that so beautifully.

He modeled this Jesus-shaped life so, so beautifully that at the end of this message where he reminds God's people of their deepest truths, he reminds them of their deepest identity, what happens?

We see this outpouring of emotion, tears, embraces, and kisses. And that's my prayer for us, that such fondness, such affection, such warmth, such heartfelt love would grow among us at Christ Church as we launch into a new ministry year together.

Amen? In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.