

Acts 15:36–16:5

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- [0 : 00] Good morning, and welcome to Holy Trinity Church. If you're visiting with us, especially welcome to you. Last week I was out of town with Pastor Nii, and we were actually in England.
- We spent some time in Cambridge and in London and in Oxford. We're just looking at churches there that were doing good work in world-class university settings with undergraduate students. We came back informed, enthused.
- It was very aspirational, and just to let you know, we privileged our time there as a means by which we would continue to hear from God on what we could be doing here as well.
- So it was just a great time, but it is always good to be home and to be back with your own church family. Well, the reading today, and I encourage you to keep it open in front of you, came from Acts 15, beginning in verse 36.
- I want to title the message, What is it that makes the local church strong? I really then am taking the closing line of each of the two paragraphs that were read as the emphasis of the message.
- [1 : 27] Take a look at verse 41, the way that first unit ends, and he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.
- Or the closing line of the second paragraph read, So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.
- And therefore, each incident ends with this moment of emphasis concerning the strengthening of the church. And it made me ask all week long, What is it that makes the local church strong?
- The answer, of course, could be looked at in a variety of ways, but the text in front of us seems to indicate two things. The first half is made strong in spite of herself.
- And the second half, it is made strong through intentional appointments that are bent on taking the gospel beyond itself.
- [2 : 35] That seems to be the way the narrative moves with all of the relational complexities in place. The church is made strong despite self-inflicted wounds, which you would think would derail it at any turn.
- And yet the church is also made strong when it determines within her members to make a selfless sacrificial act.
- So let's look at it. Part 1, 36 to 41. What is it that makes the church strong? Well, it is made strong in spite of herself.
- The relational rupture between Paul and Barnabas is still hidden from the view of the reader when the text opens.
- In verse 36, everything seems to continue to be going according to plan. The downward tilt of the paragraph is not yet known.
- [3 : 42] Paul says to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord and see how they are.

It really is ironic that a number of people point to this as the opening of what's going to become the second missionary journey. That five-city whirlwind tour, which will begin next week in the city of Philippi.

But the second missionary journey at the outset was remarkable for its lack of being a missionary journey.

They were not going to new ground. They were going back to ground where they had already been. Commentator Hans Dopp, a commentator indicates it this way, the description of this journey is most remarkable.

It is an intentional, non-missionary journey. They're just going back to where they've been. I think of George Whitefield.

[4 : 59] He was an 18th century English preacher who made no less than six visits to this country in his itinerant work.

And he actually adopted a strategy that he called preach and return. That the first time through a place, he got the word out. But the second time through the place, harvest was brought in.

It was a missionary strategy to go back to places where the gospel had been planted to secure the strengthening of that very gospel.

It seems to me that this is Paul's intention. He wants to go back. And yet, the unfortunate reality of verses 37 to 39 is right there. Take a look.

Now, Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

[6 : 00] And there arose a sharp disagreement so that they separated from each other. How is the church made strong? In spite of herself.

In spite of herself. A sharp disagreement. A relational rupture. A split. And it's not just any split. This is a split of two men who had been more instrumentally used for the early propagation of the gospel than any other team yet put forward in the book of Acts.

When Paul was converted, it was Barnabas, who was an early advocate, a believer in him before the apostles themselves believed in him, who came to him, came alongside him, and through the legitimacy of his own faith, vouched for him and gave him entrance into ministry.

In other words, the rupture that takes place between Paul and Barnabas is a rupture as deep as their commitments were strong.

These two were the two that had been in the trenches together on the first missionary journey. They'd been through a few things, including the stoning of Paul in Lystra.

[7 : 29] They'd been through the wars. How is it that those who had come together under the grace and strength of God, who believed in one another by way of conviction, who had shared time in ministry together, who these two stood against all others, how is it that they now come to falling out?

We don't really know. He doesn't make the argument. Luke doesn't. But he certainly seems to indicate there was a lot of arguing. That's a church meeting that you really wouldn't have wanted to be in.

It would have unraveled the entire assembly to think that now here is Paul and Barnabas on different sides of the aisle. I mean, it would have been distressing, soul distressing, upsetting.

It would have been faith-reducing. The argument gives way to alienation. The alienation is so far as separation, and it just indicates that even in gospel ministry, people problems are what always threaten the health of the local church.

Which makes it interesting that the paragraph ends about the strengthening of the churches. how is it that the church is made strong?

[8 : 57] It is made strong in spite of herself. It was a falling out. It almost looks like at a business level, if you're in business, this idea that take a look, Barnabas ends up going with Mark to Cyprus.

We know from chapter 4 in Acts, Cyprus was Barnabas' home place. and Paul and Silas end up going in a different direction through Syria, Cilicia, and obviously would have even had to have gone through Tarsus, Paul's hometown.

It's almost as if there was such a complete separation that there was a no-compete clause put down in the church minutes between them. That's almost the way it feels to me, the way it's written.

with Luke not at this point airing all the dirty laundry, lets you know enough to know a disagreement but it was separation which led to a no-compete clause and you go your way and I will not.

The irony, though, from our vantage point, is that there are not two missionary teams where there once was one.

[10 : 15] That doesn't mean I'm glad for the way it came about. Let me say a couple things about our church. Many of you know, some of you will not know, that when we were founded 20 years ago when I was young and did donate better, we did so in collaboration with John and Amy Dennis John Dennis and I married sister.

We got two of the five Schmidt girls. We were quite frightened to work together. We had already worked together for seven years but before we left to found this work, we had some long conversations conversations.

And we established between us almost a blood bond. We didn't prick our thumbs and do the Tom Soria thing but it's pretty darn near close to that.

We covenant having married sisters. That relational fallout would not be an option for us.

And if you want to know what's underneath it, certainly the strength of the gospel, believe me. But there's a more front-burning reason.

[11 : 45] if we went our own ways, Thanksgiving dinner would be a nightmare. The Holy Spirit has kept us together.

But I never really have neglected to know that sisters have kept us together. 27 years of my life, more than half of John's life, we have worked together now full-time in gospel ministry.

Do we always agree? Nope. Have we worked our way through? And always will. Because relational fallout for us has not been an issue.

As a result, I can say that at the 20-year mark of our church here, we have been really blessed by the protection of the Holy Spirit, the prayers of the people, the convictions of the members to get on with the work together, that the Lord has really seen us through many things.

But these things are not promised. And I don't know what kind of background you've had with organized religion. Some of you may be coming to Holy Trinity fearful of anything institutional or organized because of the pain and the rupture of previous content.

[13 : 18] And while I cannot guarantee for you that the next 20 years of Holy Trinity will be free from any internal strike, I don't guarantee such a thing, I can say to you that from this text, the church is made strong in spite of herself.

It is a wonder that the church is made strong. And this ought to give all of us comfort. This ought to give you encouragement.

God is at work in building a church. It doesn't all rest on you or me. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church that the Lord Jesus Christ has purchased with his own blood.

Praise God. And so, as you and I make our way through life together or perhaps you're here for three years and then you belong somewhere else, or perhaps you're just coming from a place that's been an absolute disaster.

Take encouragement and comfort in this. The clarity of this text will say that all leaders have clay feet.

[14 : 36] That sharp disagreements can arise among long beloved members. That small-minded thinking can dismantle a beautiful word.

All these things are true. But if you're not Christian here today, I would also, from this text, say to you, the hypocrisy or the insufficiency of lives that measure up to the Christian message, there's no reason for you to not embrace the Christian message.

Remember, when you critique the church for her foibles and her frailty, you are doing so on the measurement of what that message actually would call us to.

In other words, when you critique the church for its fallenness, you are actually embracing the standard which it upholds.

I pray that in the coming 20 years, we will continue to have this verse 41 before us, this active strengthening of the churches. And I pray that we will know nothing of verses 37 through 40.

[16 : 08] it's not only made strong in spite of itself, it's made strong because it strengthens itself in particular ways.

It's not stated here in verse 41. All you really see is the wonder of it. But believe me, it's made strong through the proclamation of the word that is given to it.

Take a look all the way back at verse 36. In every city where we proclaim the word, the word. So what did they do to strengthen the church when they arrived?

How was the church actively strengthened? Well, the verb that's there in verse 41 is also previously put forward in verse 32 of the same chapter.

And Judas and Silas were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. The church is made strong in spite of itself, that is a wonder.

[17 : 09] The church is made strong as it continues to proclaim the word and words to the people. This is a conviction of Holy Trinity Church. The Bible is God's means of revealing himself to you.

God's means of you. And it is the means by which you come to know what he expects of you. And it actually puts on display the gospel of Jesus when received by you saves you.

So the word of God saves you and it is that same word of God that strengthens you. It is the word of God which wins you.

And it's the word of God which woos you into growth and walking according to his spirit. It's the word of God that makes you right with God. And it is the word of God that will make you resolute in your way before God.

God. That's the way the church is made strong. That's why every week we come here and do something that you don't see anywhere else during the week. Not an attention to a preacher.

[18 : 23] An attention to this text. When I was young I used to get all out in here. When I was even younger I might even get down in here.

And then I realized the lunacy of such a way of building the church. Why would I put myself between you and the word? Why would I parade from one corner to another to let you know that even though I only have one eye I can get my eye on you?

Instead week by week what you find here in my ministry and in the ministry of the men who are here trying to proclaim the word I actually put my Bible over the top of this ledge on purpose every week because I want myself to be coming to this and I want you to be coming to this because this word mediates our world.

That's the way we'll continue to be. How is the church made strong in spite of itself? That is a wonder. How is the church made strong as it gives itself to the word?

how is the church made strong? Second paragraph not only in spite of itself but through intentional appointments that are making a commitment of the church to take the gospel beyond itself.

[19 : 52] It's really fascinating how these two paragraphs lean. Paul did not want to take this one with him but now Paul does want Timothy to accompany him.

it makes an intentional ministerial appointment and the ordination of a young man into ministry as we read later in the epistles what must have taken place here for the propagation of the gospel beyond their own lines.

The church will never be strong if it's only thinking about what is it doing for me here? We're going to do to Timothy.

Timothy was a young man almost put forward here as though Luke has no understanding of the significance of the figure.

It's all hidden from view the way good writing does. There is no person more important to the ongoing nature of the church throughout 2,000 years that moves from the apostolic era to where you and I sit today than Timothy.

[21 : 05] He stands as the bridge between the apostles and the pastors as the apostolic delegate who trains others city by city. You and I embrace the gospel and measure our lives with one another in large part because of the strength of this young man name Timothy.

He is a huge figure on the landscape of the scripture. But here he simply put forward as an assistant to Paul. Almost looks like an armor bearer on his way to a car. Let me hold your Bible for you before you speak.

Kind of timidly. But it is an intentional appointment. Look at it. He was the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer but his father was a Greek.

Interesting. By just observation, he was of a mixed religious and ethnic heritage. He was what some would consider within Judaism impure.

It would have been inappropriate for a Jewish woman to marry a Greek man but his mother did. And in some measure then we begin to ask what is it here about this idea of circumcision?

[22 : 19] Why does this young man get circumcised? Two things. Either Paul is fulfilling what should have been done at his birth but wasn't because his dad didn't let it happen.

In other words, because his mother was Jewish, he should have been circumcised. So either Paul is doing what should have been done so that when he goes into the synagogues and coming places there's no obstacle or according to people like Augustine or Jerome, in contrast to earlier fathers like Tertullian and others, he would say well no, he wasn't fulfilling his Jewishness to keep it from being an obstacle before Jews.

People would say no, he was actually taking a Greek and constraining him into the confines of Jewishness even though he's carrying letters that say nobody has to be circumcised.

In other words, it's pragmatic perhaps in regard to just getting the gospel out. But what I want to say is either way, the removal of the foreskin is a removal of obstacles that would hinder the propagation of the faith.

That's what it is. Think of the irony. Linguistically, I said in the first half, we're made strong in spite of ourselves.

[23 : 51] Self-inflicted wounds. Now, here's a young man who there is a, in the world of physicality, not figurative, in the world of physicality, a self-inflicted wound.

Why? So that no matter where he went, it would be no obstacle to the growth of the gospel. In other words, it is the relinquishing of personal rights so that the word would go forth that made the church strong.

I am amazed at the application for us in the present day. We live in American Christian worlds that are consumed with retaining, advancing, securing, going back to grab hold of all our rights.

The only time Paul that I can see makes use of his own rights was where he knew it would get him arrested and incarcerated so that he could get the gospel to kings.

The only time he says, I have a right, it got him incarcerated for proclamation. This is what he does in 1 Corinthians throughout and in chapter 9 especially.

[25 : 02] Paul relinquishes all personal rights so that the gospel will go forward. And Timothy's the same. And so why are we so consumed with securing our rights, having our rights, regaining our rights, standing up for our rights?

I would love to see what is purported to be the evangelical church stand and relinquish all rights for the propagation of the gospel and only hold to rights if it will advance the gospel.

It's an intentional commitment to appoint people who will relinquish everything everything so that everyone might have an opportunity to know Jesus.

This is fundamentally, this fundamentally changes all of our life together. That's what makes the church strong. The church is made strong as you and I relinquish every right we can conceive of, even at great personal cost.

to make sure that the gospel remains free for everyone. I mean, that's the letter they're delivering, isn't it?

[26 : 22] Verse 4, they went on their way through the city's delivering for them the observance of the decisions that have been reached. Fascinating. They walk into town, we have a letter, nobody needs to be circumcised anymore.

Timothy, how about you read that out loud for us? Well, I will, having just been recovering from my circumcision. In other words, the church is made strong when unified leadership is committed with words to keep the gospel free for everyone.

Nobody has to do anything other than believe in Jesus to walk into a relationship with God. You do not have to conform to any other religious or prescribed notions, but faith in Christ in accordance with the scriptures.

scriptures. We will place nothing else on you. In fact, we will restrict any right we have culturally, institutionally, that other people would have it free.

That's the way it grows, people. That's the way it goes, people. This is what I want for our church family. Not only this notion of seeing the church go strong through the word held at the center, but seeing the church go strong as the members of this church relinquish any rights.

[27 : 45] The conclusion today, and let me shut it down. What is going to make us strong right here in Hyde Park?

Well, let's just get this straight. It's going to happen in spite of ourselves. Lord, have mercy. And it's going to happen through intentional appointment that takes the gospel beyond ourselves.

Lord, give us strength. It's going to happen as the word is proclaimed. And it's going to happen as the word is kept free. It's going to happen as the gospel is made clear.

That's going to happen as you live it out of the simplicity among your friends. It's going to happen by way of wonder.

By way of word. That's going to happen that table by way of worship. For here is the one before you who relinquished all rights that everyone might have a seat at the everlasting table of God.

[29 : 13] May we then be made strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. if you have faith in him and you are looking to him as the only one who forgives your sins and the only one you need to forgive your sins then you are welcome at this table.

And if you yet have not come to Christ then sit this one out because this is a meal that points to what he has done to bring us to God.

And if you have such relational rupture that you will not forgive other people then I encourage you to think carefully before taking this meal and ensuring that you make things right with one another so that you can eat in clarity of conscience.

Paul writes in words what he indicates was given to him by Jesus and he says for I received from the Lord what I delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said this is my body just for you do this in remembrance of me in the same way also he took the cup after supper saying this cup is a new cup in my blood do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me dear Christian brothers and sisters I invite you to the table through which by faith you will be made strong for the coming week Ž Ž Okay.