

New Challenge

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Father, we do believe in you. We believe in your Son, Jesus Christ, that he came among us, that he shares our nature, that he lived and died for us, that he rose again, and we believe in the Holy Spirit.

And so we ask that you would be here by your Spirit, that you would open our hearts, that you would open our minds, and that you would grant us the precious gift of repentance and faith, your Holy Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

Amen. Well, please open up your Bibles, as we do each week. It's in the back section.

We're on page 116 and 117. Nice big reading again this week. I realized something about myself as I was preparing and reading the text this week.

And I was thinking about this earlier. I'm not sure what this says about me, particularly on All Saints Day, but I like jailbreak stories.

[1 : 13] I like prison breaks. I don't know that I like them in real life, but I like kind of, you know, they make great stories. One of my favorite movies is the Shawshank Redemption, which is a fantastic story about this guy gaining freedom in a variety of ways, but one of which is he breaks out of prison.

I grew up in Southern California, and one of the legends in California, it's a true legend, but it kind of takes on mythic quality, is the escape from Alcatraz.

Alcatraz, you know that Alcatraz was a prison on an island in the middle of San Francisco Harbor, and it was supposed to be inescapable, but in 1962, three guys escaped.

And after months of planning, they made their way out, they got into the water, and we don't know what happened to them. They're still on the FBI's wanted list, and it makes for a great mystery.

And in our passage this morning, we've got a prison escape. I take some comfort from the fact that it seems Luke likes prison breaks as well. I count three of them in the book of Acts, and they make great stories in part because when we're talking about an escape from prison, typically the stakes are very high, the opposition is very strong and fierce, and the resources are very, very slim.

[2 : 46] And so you bring all that together, and it makes for a great story and a great mystery. But the great mystery in the passage that's before us this morning is actually not the prison break.

It's part of it. It's not the center. The great mystery in this passage before us is the question of how in the world does the word of God continue to spread in the book of Acts the way it does.

It's one of the great themes of the book of Acts. This bewildering, supernatural, to some extent unexplainable and seemingly unstoppable expansion of the word of God just keeps on going, keeps on growing.

And in this passage before us, there's at least five different references to disciples multiplying or the word of God spreading or Jerusalem being filled with this teaching about Jesus and the surrounding countryside being filled with the message of Jesus.

There's something funny going on. And it makes for a great story because the stakes are high, the opposition is fierce, and there are very slim resources. And yet, nevertheless, the word of God keeps pressing onward.

[4 : 07] And the question for us is why? How? What's going on? What explains this continuous, incessant expansion of the word of God and the church?

I want to do two things. First of all, when you look to investigate a mystery, you want to observe something. So we're going to observe. We're going to look at what does it look like when the church is going, what does it look like when the word of God spreads?

We'll observe. Secondly, we'll ask why. What's the deeper source? What is moving the word of God forward? First of all, what does it look like? Like I said, I want us to observe something in this text.

There's a connection, almost a correlation, between two realities in these readings. On the one hand, the church's care and compassion for people seems to be related, on the other hand, to the spread of the word.

There seems to be a kind of positive correlation. As the church's compassion and care and love for people increases, so the gospel continues to spread and go forward.

[5 : 19] I want to show you this connection in two places. Look at chapter 5, verse 12. Page 116. Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles.

Skip down to verse 16. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Now, if you've been with us for a few weeks, you remember, I think two weeks ago, we were in Acts chapter 4. Church comes under persecution and they pray. What do they pray for?

They pray for two things. That God would give them boldness to proclaim the word, and that God would give them miracles to confirm the word. And now God is fulfilling that prayer.

He's answering that prayer, and he's answering that prayer like crazy. I can't think of any time in the history of the church or even within the book of Acts where you see this kind of miraculous power so consistently.

[6 : 25] It's regular. But it's not just any kind of miracle. Look at the text. These are miracles of compassion and mercy and love.

So all the villages around Jerusalem are gathering and they are being healed. Those who are oppressed by demons are being released. And look what's happening at the same time. Verse 14. And more than ever, believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. Do you see what we're observing? There seems to be a connection and almost a correlation between the church's care and compassion for people, in this case, miraculous healings, and on the other hand, the growth and the expansion of the word and the church.

Let me show you the same thing in chapter 6. Chapter 6, verse 1. Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

I think it's very helpful that Luke gives us this little story. It reminds us that the church in Acts wasn't perfect, which is helpful to remember. This was a big problem.

[7 : 44] The church in Jerusalem had two different groups. There was a majority group, those Jews that spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, and then the Hellenists, which were Jewish people also, but they spoke Greek.

And the Greek-speaking Jews were the minority, and their widows, probably their poor as well, were being neglected habitually in the daily distribution of food.

Now, this was a big, big, big problem. It was a big problem because all through Scripture, God has a special concern for the poor and a special concern for widows and orphans, and He had always commanded His people to look after them.

And if the church, the people of Jesus, couldn't look after their widows, couldn't look after their own needy, it would have been a sign that they were hypocrites and they were no better than the Pharisees and the Sadducees that were opposing them.

So it was a big problem. So what did they do? They ordained seven leaders that are specifically tasked to focus on ensuring equity and pastoring, so to speak, compassion and mercy and love within the church.

[9 : 01] And then that allowed the apostles to focus on their priority, which is always their priority, the proclamation of the word and prayer. So notice the pattern again. The church gives itself to kindness, care, compassion, and verse seven.

The word of God continued to increase. Now, why? What's the connection here? We've seen the pattern.

What does it mean? What's Luke teaching us? It seems that in the book of Acts, the church's love expressed both towards its own members, towards one another, but also towards those that are outside the church.

It seems that the church's love is a sign and an indication that Jesus is still up to stuff, that Jesus is still operating. He's still alive. It's a sign that Jesus is still active in the church and powerful, and it's a sign that the gospel is true and that the gospel works.

Let me explain. Remember last year we were in the gospel of Luke. Do you remember Jesus' first sermon? Luke is the prequel to Acts. Jesus' first sermon, it was in Nazareth, it was at the synagogue.

[10:17] He got up in front of everyone, his family and the community he had grown up with, and he unrolled the scroll of Isaiah to the part where Isaiah describes the job description of a Messiah.

And he read this. Listen, listen closely to this. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

See, Isaiah in this passage is saying that when Messiah comes, he will do things like proclaim good news to the poor, give recovery of sight to the blind, bring liberty to the captives.

And in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus begins to do these things, the people of Israel look at it and they say, that's the kind of guy we've been expecting. That's the kind of guy that the Messiah is supposed to be.

Somebody who heals people and opens blind eyes and releases people from the power of Satan. And in the book of Acts, when the people of Jerusalem see the church doing those same sorts of things, they know it's a sign that the Messiah is still alive and he's still among them and it filled Jerusalem with hope and it arrested their attention and the attention of the towns and villages around Jerusalem to look at the church and to listen to the word that they were proclaiming and to consider the claim that the Messiah who had died was alive again.

[11:55] Now, as the church's care and concern for people rose, the word of God went forward and that's a pattern that Jesus wants every church to exhibit.

Dan read at the beginning, let your light so shine before men that they see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. And friends, I think we can say that God's plan for St. John's is that we would be a people who love each other with an uncommon type of love.

That we be a people who love each other and love Vancouver and have compassion and mercy for our city and our friends and our families to such an extent that it match our orthodoxy at every point. so that when Vancouver looks at St. John's and they hear us saying things that just don't make a lot of sense to them, things like Jesus is alive and Jesus is Lord and Jesus saves and things like that, that they can look at that uncommon love, that uncommon characteristic of love and say, I've got to at least consider the claim.

Yesterday, I was with Ecclesia, their university students, on their retreat and Amber and I as we drove back, our hearts were filled with gratitude to God for what he has done among them because these young people, they love each other, they love each other and they love the word of God and the Lord's adding to their number and I found myself thinking and praying, Lord, will you make us older people at St. John's, the rest of us at St. John's, will you help us catch up with our youth and their maturity at this point?

[13:55] Okay. I think we should ask the question, does the rigor of your love for people match the rigor of your biblical orthodoxy? I want to observe that pattern in the text.

There seems to be a correlation between the church's care and compassion for people, love, and the spread of the word. But, and this is a big however, I'm not a statistician, but statisticians tell me, that correlation does not always imply causation.

I think it's important here. Because it would be tempting for us to conclude that loving well causes the word of God to go forward.

And if we thought that way, we would get busy doing really good things. I mean, we would try hard. And then we would expect that the gospel would go forward and things like that. That's not what this passage is teaching.

One does not cause the other. There's a deeper source and a deeper cause behind them both. Let me show you.

[15:07] Look at Gamaliel, verse 34, in chapter 5. Gamaliel's a very interesting guy. Let me set the scene. The apostles got into trouble.

They got arrested. The next day, they were out proclaiming all the words of this life in the temple again. And that didn't win any points with the high priest and the Sanhedrin.

They were rather displeased. And so they haul the apostles back in before them. And after Peter boldly proclaims the gospel, the Sanhedrin has had it and they are about ready to kill him.

And then Gamaliel stands up. Now Gamaliel was a very famous guy. You can read about him in the Mishnah. He was a leading rabbi of his day and he was extremely wise.

And Gamaliel had spent his life watching Messiah movements fail. Spent his whole life doing it. And he had learned a few things.

[16:07] He had seen a lot of people. You should know this. There were a lot of people claiming to be the Messiah in the first century. There's two of them mentioned in verses 36 and 37.

And Gamaliel had watched all these guys rise up, claimed to be the Messiah, get killed and then their followers inevitably dispersed. And over the years Gamaliel had learned that Messiah movements are unsustainable.

They're completely unsustainable. That's why Gamaliel is not concerned about the apostles. It's unsustainable. He knows these guys are going to burn out and they're going to burn out really quickly.

He's not worried about it. The kind of love that the church was showing each other? Unsustainable. The kind of boldness that the apostles were proclaiming Christ with?

Unsustainable. Gamaliel knows that they are going to burn out and they are going to burn out quickly because they all do. This happens all the time. But he throws in unless, which is a good word.

[17:17] verse 39. Was he hoping? I don't know. Was he hoping? Unless God's in it. Unless God is behind it pushing it forward with all his power and might.

If that is the case then that changes everything. Gamaliel knows this. And friends, this entire passage, this big long reading is designed to convince you and I that the only power sufficient to spread the word of God, the only power sufficient to fuel the church's love, there's just one source, everything else, everything else is unsustainable.

But if Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, the Lord of all, if he is the source behind it all, nothing can stand against it. You know, that's the whole point of the jailbreak.

The apostles didn't break out of prison. Jesus did it. He used an angel, but he did it. That's the whole point behind the miracles.

The apostles, it wasn't their piety or their power. Jesus was healing people through the apostles. It was Jesus that was fueling the church's care and concern for each other so that they cared about widows.

[18:39] And see, friends, the church can do nothing, absolutely nothing. Our Christianity is utterly unsustainable without Jesus.

Our only hope is if Jesus is alive, our only hope is if Jesus acts, if his work in the church becomes the true work, that's the only hope we have.

So how does Jesus do it? Peter fills us in. Look at chapter 5, verse 30. Peter tells us precisely how Jesus powers his church.

Peter says that Jesus gives three gifts. Three gifts. And if you add these three gifts up, it explains how the word spreads so freely and how the church learns to love.

Look at verse 30. Look for the three gifts. The God of our fathers raised Jesus. This is Peter speaking to the Sanhedrin. Whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.

[19:40] God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things. And so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.

Okay, do you see the three gifts? Repentance. Verse 31. Verse 31 also. Forgiveness is the second one. And verse 32 is the Holy Spirit.

Repentance, forgiveness, Holy Spirit. When Jesus gives these three gifts, the word becomes irresistibly compelling and the church becomes inevitably loving.

Think about it for a second. Repentance. Generally, the way we talk about repentance is that it's something we do. There's truth in that. We hear the message of Jesus and then we choose to obey or to ignore it.

But here, Peter is giving a deeper reality, the source behind the source. He's saying repentance is a gift. Repentance is a gift of Jesus.

[20:49] You see, when we hear the message, when we hear the message of Jesus, the word of God, Jesus is present there and he actually reaches into our hearts and he changes us so that we used to want to run away from God but when Jesus gives the gift of repentance, we want to follow

after him.

We prefer Jesus all of a sudden and his path, even though it's a hard path, even though it's one that leads through suffering, we desire that more than we desired before. It's a gift. You have never repented by yourself.

It's the only thing that makes us have any hope that the word of God will be received at all. Jesus gives the gift of repentance. Second gift, forgiveness.

It's one we talk about a lot and this is how we learn to love. You know that you can never give love away until you've received love, right?

You'll never be merciful until you've received mercy. And for a Christian, the first way we receive God's love is when we receive the forgiveness Jesus gives us through his shed blood upon the cross.

[22 : 07] How does the church in Acts, how does the church at St. John's learn to love unconditionally? How do we learn to love people who have nothing in them that is attractive? How do we do that?

Because we have been loved that way when we were forgiven. And if we have received that kind of mercy, how can we have anything but compassion? How can we have anything but compassion even for our enemies?

Repentance, forgiveness, Holy Spirit. In Acts, the Holy Spirit powers witness. Peter says the Holy Spirit is a witness. The Holy Spirit gives boldness to the apostles.

The apostles were cowards until the Holy Spirit came upon them. Same for us. Until the Holy Spirit comes upon us, fills us, we will never be able to proclaim all the words of this life.

But when he does, we love to. Remember why jailbreak stories are great. Stakes are high, opposition is fierce, resources are very slim.

[23 : 19] Jesus has called us to mission in a place like Vancouver. Stakes are high, opposition is fierce, resources are very slim. And I tell you, if you rest on your own resources, unsustainable.

Your Christianity will be completely unsustainable. You'll burn out. It won't work. But if we rest on Jesus' resources, oh, even our weakness will become a tool in the hand of Almighty God to proclaim His word in this place.

Wouldn't that be great? And Jesus, what does Jesus want to do at St. John? He wants to give us these three gifts. He wants to pour out His forgiveness upon us.

He wants to show us what real love is so that we can love each other more than we do, so that we can love Vancouver more than we do, so that we can love our families and our schools and the people we work with more than we do.

And He wants to give us His Holy Spirit so that speaking of Jesus becomes sweet upon our tongue, so that our boldness and witness eclipses our timidity.

[24 : 33] And He wants to pour out repentance on us, continually, daily, repenting, resting in His gift to repent as the power behind everything we do as Christians.

And He wants to give repentance to a place like Vancouver, to your family, to your work, to your schoolmates. And if Jesus does that, it'll take a miracle, a bigger miracle than breaking out of prison.

But apparently, Jesus likes those kinds of stories. He'll do it. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, it is Your pleasure to release captives.

It is Your pleasure to release them by giving them forgiveness and repentance and Your Holy Spirit. Will You do that in us? Will You do that in us?

For Your glory, for the good of Your church, for the salvation of the world. Amen. Please kneel or bow your head as we continue to pray.

[25 : 47] Lord God, we give You our thanks for time and space to worship You this morning, for music that draws our souls to You, for Your Word that brings light, for the forgiveness of our sins and for being together in You.

We give thanks that in worship we get glimpses of that great paradox, how messy we are and how much You love us. Lord, in Your mercy.

Father, thank You for Your unending generosity to us. Thank You for warm homes, for people who show us care, for freedom to worship, for food to eat, for jobs, for our church community.

Thank You for good news that cheers us and for sad news that makes us reach for You all the more quickly. Thank You for Jesus, for Your gifts of repentance, forgiveness, and Your Holy Spirit.

Lord, in Your mercy. Jesus, we pray for our world in pain and turmoil in so many places.
[26 : 58] We pray for Your mercy and Your miracles on the people of Afghanistan. May You bring order out of chaos in the upcoming election. Be with the people and the leaders of Pakistan.
Bring Your relief to those battered countries. Be with the tensions and the danger and those who are so affected by them. Nearer to home, we pray for the homeless of our own cities.
As the cold weather begins, may You give them warm places to stay and vast quantities of kindness and grace. Please prompt each of us to care for them.
Lord, in Your mercy. Father, we have heavy hearts as the decision over the ownership of our buildings looms ahead.
We desperately need You and Your ways through this process. Hold us tight. increase our confidence in Your goodness. Prepare our hearts and our heads and our unity as a community.
[28 : 04] May we care for each other and for those around us as never before. May You prepare our trustees and staff who will have to carry so much of the weight and decision and logistics.
May all that we all say and we do reflect the work and the love of Christ. Lord, in Your mercy. We give thanks and we pray for our clergy, for David, Dan, and Jim.
We give thanks and we pray for their wives, Bronwyn, Catherine, and Amber, and for their children. We pray for those who work alongside them, Joanne, Ruth, Edie, Jan, and many others.
May You strengthen, encourage, protect, and bless each of them. May they feel how much we love them and appreciate them. May they have deep sustenance in You, Lord, in Your mercy.
We give thanks for those who serve You as missionaries from our own parish. Bless their work and sustain their hearts. We pray for Paul Ratsoy of Lighthouse Ministries, Marian Maxwell at Genesis House, and Dan and Fran Gow working with Seeds of Hope.
[29 : 25] Lord, in Your mercy. God, we pray for the pain and suffering in each of our lives and we ask for Your healing and redemption.
We desperately need Your comfort, Your wisdom, and Your perspective every day. We pray for those in pain and difficulty known to us at St. John's.
For Don, Harold, Rowena, Margaret, Marguerite, and Peggy. And in a moment of silence, we pray for those known specifically to each of us.
Be with them. Bring them to our minds frequently that we would pray for them and love them well through the coming week.
Lord, in Your mercy. Father, amidst these precious, unexpected autumn days of sunshine and lingering light, may we constantly rest and rejoice in Your great light, the light of the world that brings truth and clarity and hope as nothing else.
[30 : 42] May all these days be rooted deep in You. Amen.