



## "The Importance of Re-remembering"

Sermon Series: "The Way of the Spirit"

Acts 20:1-16

**Dr. Carol Friesen**

July 10, 2011



Six years ago this month [July 17, 2005] I stood before this congregation to preach as a candidate for the position of Associate Pastor here at WHPC. In the interest of remembering, I dug out my file from that Sunday morning and discovered this insert introducing the Friesen family to the congregation. Well, things have changed a bit since then. Josh is now 6'1 and a Junior at university – thankfully healing well after his car accident. Jessica is moving from Chicago to Boston to pursue an MBA in nonprofit management next

month. Hannah is continuing to work as an occupational therapist here in Austin, only this week she is serving at a hospital in Haiti. Meanwhile, Paul is continuing to work for the PCUSA and is in Cambodia today and on to the Philippines tomorrow.

In that same file, I discovered another insert listing new members received on that same Sunday, July 17, 2005. There were 25 people including, Kaimey and Scott Ela, Church & Ursula Jackson, Patti McClung, Ginny Murphy, Lisa O'Neill, Sharon & Dennis Pauling, Bud & Sue Reynolds and Mike & Stacey Ussery – quite an esteemed group joining the church six years ago.

Well again, remembering, I dug out my journal from those days and found a prayer that I wrote that morning in the hotel room. A prayer that I'd like to share with you today, only I've changed some of the pronouns. Please would you join me.

*Loving God we are honored and humbled by the door you have opened for us to gather in worship this morning and thankful for all the ways you have participated and provided and lavished your love on us. How do we say thank you to you, the King of the universe, who so tenderly and lovingly caring for us? I don't know. I am speechless, but I do believe that our gathering here this morning stems from a longing to know you, to follow you and to be increasingly transformed and conformed to your likeness. Lord, I come asking you to empower me by your Spirit that I might speak the truth in love and confessing that apart from you I can do nothing. So, Lord guide my words, give me freedom to speak and help us to listen to your voice above all others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Our text today tells the story of Eutychus – reminding us that some things never change – there have been long-winded preachers around from the beginning and along with that people falling

asleep during the sermon. Have you ever fallen asleep in the middle of a service? Now, be honest. Well, you're in good company and you officially have a patron saint – his name is Eutychus

The Back Pew – Jeff Larson



Eutychus fell asleep while listening to Paul preach fell 2 floors to his death... BUT recovered becoming the patron saint for those who sleep in church. Acts 20:9-12

Well, whether we actually doze off or not, the truth is that like Eutychus, we can become tired and distracted from worship. So distracted that we can forget where we are. While we may not fall from a third story window as a result – the consequences of our forgetfulness can prove disastrous never the less.



So, remembering is important. Again and again in scripture, we're called to remember – to remember God's saving acts in history, to remember God's covenant, to remember God's faithfulness and to remember our role in God's larger story. That word 'remember' in Greek carries with it the idea of 'making present,' and 'making alive,' or 'making real.' I find that after six years of working here at WHPC, there are certain things that I need to remember, not once, but again and again and I suspect you may need to remember them as well.

First of all, I need to remember that the church is not a building. You see, I spend a lot of time here at 7127 Bee Caves Road and if I'm not careful I can forget this important truth. In fact we can all forget especially when the dictionary defines church "as a building for public worship" and when we remember growing up and reciting that nursery rhyme, "Here is the church and here is the steeple. open the doors and see all the people." Do you remember that? No wonder we think that the church is a building.



But in the New Testament, the Greek word translated as our English word 'church' never, never refers to a building. Instead it speaks of "an assembly" or literally to "called out ones." When Paul wrote to Romans to "greet the church that is in their house," he was referring to a body of believers gathering in that particular home. In other instances that same word 'ekklesia' can refer to all the believers living in one place, for example, in Galatia or in Austin. Most often however, that word – ekklesia – refers to the universal church – the whole body of Christ, with the local congregation acting as a representative of that larger body.

We also know that there weren't any church buildings back then. Those first believers met in homes and so it was to someone's home that Eutychus went to hear Paul preach. Today there are house churches all over the world where Christians continue to meet. In fact just last Sunday Paul worshipped in a house church in Vietnam that had been renovated to accommodate a larger gathering.

Church buildings are useful – ask anyone who has had to lug their instruments and set up chairs for that place of worship on a Sunday morning. While I am deeply appreciative of the ministry

of Kyle, Travis and the Facilities Committee, I recognize that we can become overly attached to our building and begin to think that if we had a new sanctuary or a better fellowship hall or a bigger narthex, then the people would come. We need to remember that the church is not a building.



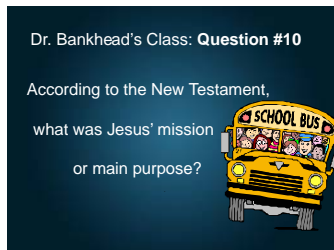
The second thing I need to remember, again and again, is that the church is not a problem to be solved. I think those of us who serve on church staff or on Session are particularly vulnerable to this one. We're always looking for ways to improve, not only our facilities, but also communication through our website and newsletters or our programs to increase Biblical knowledge and more effectively disciple our members or our missions to steward our resources and mobilize the congregation or our worship

experience to engage all age groups. All the while we are seeking to improve, we are monitoring the ABC's of church growth – attendance, buildings and cash. More often than not success is equated with getting more and more people into worship, creating bigger and better buildings and hiring more staff to run more programs and generating more mission dollars.

But are these the measures of success? Is it really about attendance, buildings and cash? Leonard Sweet writes in his book, *So Beautiful* that during World War II, the acronym APC was widely used to identify a pain medicine that was a combination of aspirin, phenacetin (fi 'na se ten) and caffeine – sort of like Excedrin or Aleve today. Apparently, APC was such a favorite that it became standard issue in the military. However, there was a problem. Long term ingesting of APC tablets turned out to be deadly. That fact wasn't discovered until the later 1950s.

There is a growing consensus among Christians in North America that the ABC's of church growth are also proving deadly. In our consumer culture, bigger is not always better. Perhaps we need to explore other ways to assess whether or not we are being faithful and rather than adopting the latest and the greatest solution to the church's problems, to listen for God's message and His mission for us. What is our unique contribution at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church? What does it mean for us to be faithful to that calling?

Yes, I need to remember that the church is not a building and that the church is not a problem to be solved, but there is also one third thing I need to remember.



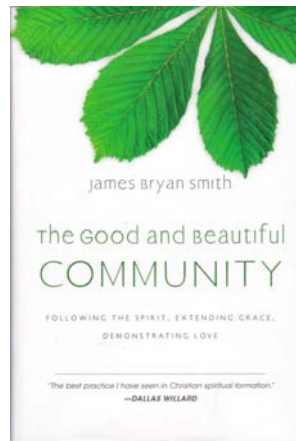
Last Sunday Jim Bankhead gave us a refresher class on the Holy Spirit and one of the questions he asked was "According to the New Testament what was Jesus' mission or main purpose?" Do you remember the answer?

The answer was Jesus' mission was to establish the Kingdom of God on the Earth.

Jesus came proclaiming and demonstrating that the Kingdom of God was at hand, “The Time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the Good news. In Acts, we’ve seen how Paul continued to proclaim that message and in chapter 19 we just read how he spent three months in Ephesus speaking boldly and arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God.

I need to remember that “The Church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of Jesus’ mission or even of the Gospel. Rather the church is its instrument and a witness to the in breaking of the Kingdom. A community where folks are learning how to live under the rule and reign of God. After all, God’s mission embraces not just the church but all of creating. God so loved the world – not just the church – that he gave his only Son. This doesn’t mean that the church isn’t important to God. We are His chosen people, His bride and His body. However, like the people of Israel we have been chosen and blessed not to be an end in ourselves – but to be a blessing to the nations.” (Gen. 12)

During these summer months, the Session and some of the staff have decided to read James Bryan Smith’s book, *The Good and Beautiful Community*. Just this week we read in Chapter 3 the author reinforcing this idea that churches exist for the Kingdom of God rather than for themselves. He rights, “Churches come and go, but the kingdom is eternal. Their life, power and reason for existence are in the Kingdom of God, and it will never falter....Communities become



“Churches come and go, but the kingdom is eternal. Their life, power and reason for existence are in the Kingdom of God, and it will never falter....Communities become others-centered when they are steeped in the narrative of the kingdom of God. They know that their community is an outpost of the kingdom of God, a place where grace is spoken and lived for as long as is needed. The value of a church is not in its longevity but in its love. The success of a church is not in its size, but in its service to the people and the community.” (72)

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When churches become focused on their own needs, image and success and when they lose sight of Jesus’ mission, they risk losing their very souls. They need to become other-centered. In fact, in the same chapter Smith quotes Dallas Willard as saying that the most important task a church leader can do is to pray for the success of neighboring churches for in doing so they break out of the trap of self-centeredness and reflect the very heart of God and His Kingdom values.

So if the church is not a building...and if it's not a problem to be solved and if it's not the goal...what are we doing here this morning? Shouldn't we be out in our communities, joining our neighbors down at Town Lake or drinking coffee at Starbucks? Or at least shouldn't we be serving somewhere? I think that is a good question. But today we remember and every Sunday to celebrate the Good News and the Resurrection.

In Chapter 20 we catch a glimpse of those earliest gatherings and in verse 7 we find the first clear reference to Christians meeting on the first day of the week rather than on the Sabbath. Because Sunday was not observed as a public holiday or a day of rest until the time of Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christians had to gather either early in the morning before work or late in the day. Imagine Eutychus perhaps after a hard day of labor, coming to the meeting at a friend's home to join with the other believers to hear the Apostle Paul. Of course, he fell asleep, he was tired.

Well that early gathering of believers celebrated the day of Jesus' resurrection, the day that marked the beginning of God's new world, the day when the Word through whom all things were made became the Word through whom all things were to be remade. In fact, some scholars have called Easter the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Creation for it signified the beginning of God's Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven.



Yes, you and I should be celebrating Easter, not just once a year, but every Sunday for the Resurrection is an event that continues to move into our lives, into our world and into our future. We proclaim Christ is alive. He is with us. He

is in us and He is for us. That is good news worth celebrating.



Well our Zambia team just returned from their mission trip on Monday. I understand they learned something about celebrating from our brothers and sisters there. They had a wonderful experience and in sharing their highs and low, one team member described Sunday worship as the most joyful and uplifting experience he'd ever known...a celebration that he didn't want to end. So I ask you in the face of so much poverty, disease and death how can our brothers and sisters in

Zambia celebrate? I think it is because they know that their hope is in God and that Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death on the cross, been raised to new life – giving them a future and a hope. Though they might not yet see the fruits of that future, they believe, they trust and they celebrate.

Those believers remembered not only to celebrate the Resurrection but also to strengthen the Body through Word and Sacrament. As a minority movement living in a hostile environment – subject to persecution from Jews and Gentiles alike, these believers needed the strengthening and encouragement that a gathering could bring. They could not publically worship openly like we do in the west and they didn't have the same access to the scriptures or to 2000 years of church history. For Eutychus and the others, having Paul in town to join their gathering must have been a big deal. No wonder he preached from dusk to dawn, taking full advantage of his visit to teach and to break bread with the believers in Troas.

For in addition to the Apostles' teaching, the weekly service also included the "breaking of bread" a means by which they came together as one Body to be sustained and nourished at the table and to obey Jesus' words, "This is my body..." and "this is my blood" and "do this in remembrance of me." This act of remembrance was a means of making the past event present. A means by which each one would be an active participant – tasting the bread of life and drinking the cup of the new covenant. Breaking the bread provided a tangible reminder that there is only one body and we are one in Christ, sharing together in his broken body and his shed blood.



In a world where we have almost unlimited access to the Word and observe the Lord's Supper only once each month, why bother to gather with other believers on a Sunday morning? Why not spend time with our neighbors or take a day off to enjoy some Sabbath rest or go serve somewhere?

These are good questions and not a few Christians have given church up altogether and pursued instead a more solitary journey or become involved in a small group of like minded believers. The problem with these alternatives is that they fail to honor the fact that like it or no we're part of the family and we have responsibilities. We gather on Sunday not simply for our own edification but for the edification of the Body – offering to God our worship and to our brothers and sisters our prayers and encouragement that together we might be strengthened. And like any family, especially one composed of self acknowledged sinners in need of a Savior, there can be plenty of dysfunction. That makes the church a perfect place to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness – as we learn to value others above ourselves and to forgive just as Christ has forgiven us.

It is also a perfect place to remember that *"Just as the body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ....Now you are the body of Christ and each of you is a part of it."* (1 Corinthians 12.12, 27)



Each one has a part to play, an important role...we need each other and so we re-member and gather to celebrate the Resurrection to strengthen the Body so that we might be sent back into our communities and our world infused with the love of Christ and empowered by the Spirit. For just as God, the Father, send the Son and the Son sent the Spirit so the Spirit sends us to set things right in our broken world.

The Risen Christ is in you. He is in me and He is in us. This same Christ is calling us to join Him in the world.

"The message is that new creation has begun, and you are called to belong to it and to make it happen in the world...Take the scriptures in one hand and the power of God in the other, take a deep breath of the air of new creation which blows through the world on Easter day, and find what *you* can do to make new creation happen. The powers of death and hell will be cross with you for doing so, and you'll face battles on the way. Go back again and again to the fact of Easter; the enemies are a beaten rabble, God's new creation will win the day, and you must be part of it."

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N.T. Wright

Friends, the important thing to remember about Eutychus is not that he felt asleep but that he was raised to life. Like Eutychus we've been raised from the dead and given new life. We too have an opportunity to join God in the new creation, bringing about His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That's what the church is about – it's not a building, a problem to be solved or even an end in itself – rather we **re-member each Sunday to celebrate the resurrection, to strengthen the Body and then to go from this place united in Christ and empowered by the Spirit to make a difference in our world! Let us remember that! Amen.**