

## **DO NOT BE AFRAID!**

Acts 18:1-11

We served as missionaries in China for several years, and while we were there we rode a lot of buses. We would often travel from the city where we lived out to the countryside. And Chinese buses are not like your average Greyhound. Riding buses in China can be absolutely frightening. But I remember one of my first bus rides in China, and the scariest part wasn't the mountain roads or the passing on blind corners, it was actually arriving at the bus station.

So I buy my ticket and get on the bus and since probably 90% of Chinese men smoke, the bus is like a bingo hall, there's a Chinese kungfu movie blasting on the TV, I can smell the fresh side of yak meat from the back of the bus, and people are picking their nose and hocking lugees out the window. And so I learned quickly that if I wanted to survive the several hours on this bus trip I needed to go into my happy place. So I put my iPod on and my headphones in and go into my American bubble. Well, finally we arrive at our destination, and of course I have to unplug my ipod and get my bags and start filing out the aisle, but as I step out of the bus it is just madness. There is this mad throng of people pushing up to the bus. People selling souvenirs and selling pickled chicken feet and trying to get you to go to their hotel or take their taxi, and of course this is all in Chinese and, which I don't understand yet and so this feeling begins to rise up in the pit of my stomach. I feel completely anxious, and uncomfortable and afraid. I'm wondering, "how am I going to do this." And it's just about then that you think about turning around, climbing back up the stairs of the bus and riding to the next stop. But there are other foreigners I've seen riding that bus who, instead of looking like they are going to retreat, wrecklessly charge ahead shoving everyone out of their way.

Not all of us have had that type of experience in a foreign culture, but we've all felt that anxiety and fear as Christians in this world. For all of us there are going to be times, if we are going to be people on mission, if we are going to work and trust and pray that the gospel goes forward in the midst of a culture that is increasingly antagonistic toward God, where we're going to face situations that, depending on who we are, we'll either feel like retreating or wrecklessly charge ahead.

In Acts 18, we encounter Paul in the midst of this same fear, and Jesus gives him a couple of huge promises with.

There is something here in Jesus promises that give Christians a incredible confidence and yet an utter humility in the midst of a culture that isn't interested in

God. We can't be the people who retreat into our Christian bubble out of fear, or the people who cynically and insensitively rant about the state of the world. But what we're going to see today is that:

*Because of Jesus' promises, Christians can be all about Jesus' mission in this world with a fearless humility that defies logic - especially within a culture whose values and language and ways seem increasingly foreign to us.*

But what does it look like to be a fearlessly humble people on Jesus mission, and how in the world do we get there? We're going to really simply look at this through two points this morning. The encouragement to be fearlessly humble in the PLACE you live and fearlessly humble in the PATTERN you live.

1. Be fearlessly humble in the PLACE you live.

*READ VERSE 1*

Now we've been following Paul around on his missionary journeys as he goes from city to city in the Roman empire. Paul's regular routine is to go to the cities, these centers of culture and influence, to proclaim the message of the gospel and plant churches that themselves plant more churches. (Interlude re: gospel growth) And we've seen that as Paul moves further and further from Jerusalem, the concept, an understanding of God is further and further from the center of people's lives.

Paul has just been in Athens which is this center of intellectual culture. Athens is where the universities are, and the art galleries, it's where the philosophers hang out and where the poems are written. Athens is the well from which Greek culture spills out to the rest of the world. Athens is refined. And of course Athens is full of spirituality. Everyone has a belief. There was a temple for every god and even a monument to the god they didn't know. In other words, most of the chariots in Athens had coexist bumper stickers on them.

And now Paul heads 45 miles down the coast to Corinth. And Corinth is not so refined. Corinth is a port city. It's not a cultural center as much as a trade center. Corinth is this melting pot of people from all over the Roman world, trades people and industrious types coming together to capitalize on the commerce and industry flowing through Corinth. Corinth is the Tacoma to Athens' Seattle.

And Corinth is pagan, and its paganism is in your face. Hedonism and sexuality and idolatry are openly flaunted in Corinth. Where in Athens you might find two guys talking philosophy while sipping their espresso, in Corinth those same two guys are getting off work at the docks and heading up to the temple of Aphrodite to hire a prostitute. Corinth is a city consumed with the idols of sex, money and power. And in that way it isn't too much different than our culture today.

God created us hard wired to worship. God formed us with this slot in our hearts for worship, and if we're not worshipping him we are going to try and fill that worship little hole with anything else. And in Corinth, just like today, whether we shape idols out of wood and stone or they are flashing by us on a TV screen, we worship wealth, sex, knowledge, and success. And in that type of environment, the concept of a God that created and holds ownership over all of life isn't exactly attractive.

If you've woken up after a twenty year sleep, I want to inform you that the Christian story doesn't exactly hold central position in our culture anymore. Christians, instead of holding a central privileged place in culture, like the book of Acts, are increasingly relegated to the margins.

And if we're honest, we have to admit that there are times when we're afraid and feel like getting back on the bus, and there are times where we're cynical, and there are times when we feel like just wrecklessly charging ahead and imposing our will on people.

You know that feeling. You might be at work when you are heading toward the water cooler and you hear your coworkers talking about how backward and intolerant Christians are.

The current views of sexuality make it seem like Christians who even hold the view that homosexual relationships are sinful bigots equivalent to slave owners or Klan members. I mean, who wants to speak up and be the guy that wants to bring Jim Crow back? No one wants to be that guy.

Maybe it's not at work, but Thanksgiving with your extended family. How many of you had moments with your family this last week where, out of fear, you avoided certain conversations, or just plowed over people in other conversations, or you just cynically ranted with yourself or your spouse afterward. We all do!

So the apostle Paul comes into this same environment. He comes into Corinth - this city that needs Jesus, and he is afraid. The apostle Paul! Who has been mocked, reviled, driven out of cities, stoned, dragged out of the Lystra and left for dead, beaten

with rods and thrown in jail in Philippi - he is so afraid in Corinth that Jesus comes to him in a vision to encourage him. And here's what Jesus says (v. 9-10):

*"Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent... for I have many in this city who are my people."*

And the truth we are going to see is that *because of Jesus' power to save, we can be fearlessly humble in the place we live.*

This is a fascinating statement from Jesus. Let me tell you first what Jesus is not saying. He's not saying that there are bunch of Christians that Paul doesn't know about armed to the teeth and ready to beat down any pagan that so much as looks at Paul the wrong way. No!

This is a subtle reminder to Paul of Jesus' sovereign power in salvation. That there are people in this city who don't yet know Jesus, but belong to Jesus. It's a reminder of what Jesus said in John 10 - "I have other sheep that are not of this fold, and I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Jesus' sheep are here.

Now, I'm not going to go into a full theological defense of the doctrine of election, but I want to help us to see how Jesus' promise of his power to save makes us fearlessly humble as we walk with Jesus on his mission.

So Jesus says he has many people in this city, but how is Paul supposed to know who these people are? Is Paul supposed to walk around Corinth looking for a halo over peoples heads, or "chosen" tattooed somewhere on their face. I mean, how is what Jesus said supposed to help Paul right here right now in Corinth... Because the reality is that there is no way from the outside to tell which unsaved people belong to Jesus.

In other words, the ones who are going to be Jesus' people aren't just those who don't drink or smoke or cuss. They're not just those who have conservative family values or already like watching Duck Dynasty. In fact, the only way to tell who Jesus' sheep are is by seeing how they respond to his voice.

And here's where that matters! That means that everyone you come in contact with, no matter how afraid you are of what they look like, or how they act, or their beliefs, or how angered you are by their attitude, or how cynical you are about their convictions, might belong to Jesus. And if they belong to Jesus, I can *guarantee* you that when they hear his voice they will respond. And that reality should make us fearless with every person we come in contact with.

But the promise of Jesus' power to save *also* should make us incredibly humble... because it shows us that when we were enslaved by idols and in opposition to God, when we were not his people, he called us his people. His grace broke through our hardness, lifted us up out of sin and death and made us his own. In other words, no one out there is any different from us - everyone is dependent only on the grace of God to save.

When Jesus says, "I have many in this city who are my people," it's like God is saying, "My kids are here." You know, Jesus loves our culture and society a lot more than we do. Our tendency is to look at our culture and either be afraid or cynical or just get the heck out of it. And there is truth that we need to be like Paul and be provoked, be bothered by the idols of our culture, but what God would say to us is this: "Don't fear this place, don't despise this place, because my kids are here."

Brothers and sisters, how would this change how we engage in Jesus' mission in the places we live? As you walk your neighborhood know Jesus words - "I have many in this neighborhood who are my people." Or in your workplace - "I have many in this company who are my people" - or in your family - "I have many in this family who are my people."

Because of Jesus power to save, we should be fearlessly humble in the places we live.

2. Alright, not only does this passage show us that you should be fearlessly humble in the *place* you live, but you should also *be fearlessly humble in the PATTERN you live.*

What does it look like to live on mission with Jesus in the midst of this culture like Corinth. A culture not just ambivalent, but often antagonistic toward the message of the gospel. There are three things I want us to look really quickly at the pattern of Paul's life in Corinth that we need in our lives today. Follow along with me.

a.) Be INTENTIONAL!

*"And he found a Jew name Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade."*

So Paul gets to Corinth, and right away he finds this couple Aquila and Priscilla who had been kicked out of Rome because they were Jewish, and ended up in Corinth. And there are some good reasons to think that they didn't know Jesus. If they were already Christians you'd think Luke would have mentioned it. There might have already been a little Bible study going on, or a prayer meeting, or something, but we don't hear any of that. And were not sure what the exact connection is between them, whether they had mutual friends on facebook, or connected through Craig's list, but Paul goes to see them, and because they are Jewish, and Paul is a Jew and because they make tents, and Paul makes tents, they end up living and working together.

In other words, Paul intentionally arranges his life and his work to engage Aquila and Priscilla with the gospel. Not in a way that is just a one off gospel presentation, but by actually entering into life together in a way that these friends, these coworkers, are regularly seeing Paul's way of life and hearing the message of Jesus.

And Paul's intentionality goes beyond the workplace. Look at verse 4 - "*And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks*". Brian Busching said to me the other day that every new town Paul went in he looked for the first synagogue. We look for the first Starbucks. Paul's heart was overflowing with a love for Jesus that resulted in speaking the gospel to others in every sphere of his life. He intentionally headed to the social hubs, to the places people were engaging with each other so he could engage them with the gospel.

In the midst of a culture like Corinth, intentionality is huge. Without cultivating an ongoing, vibrant, gospel witness within authentic relationship with nonbelievers the gospel will never go forward to a people that want to see it demonstrated, that want to see it lived out with all its implications.

b.) Be RELATIONAL.

*v. 5 "When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia..."*

So Paul is engaged intentionally in his workplace, in the social world at the synagogue, and now we see a group of believers forming together to engage in mission. Silas and Timothy show up and along with Aquila and Priscilla they are doing life and mission together. These guys have basically put together a community group.

And as amazing as Paul was, it's revealing that you never see Paul out doing it on his own. He is constantly surrounding himself with people who play a part in the

mission with him. And look how it is ordinary people doing the mission! These aren't trained pastors and theologians, they are regular people.

In the midst of a culture like Corinth it is crucial that we have the strength of community together - to demonstrate the gospel to the world around us. People don't just want to hear what the gospel is, but want to see what the gospel does. Vibrant relational Christian community does that as we encourage one another and love one another regularly repent and speak the gospel to each other.

c.) Be BIBLICAL.

v. 5: *"Paul was occupied with the Word."*

The NASB says that Paul began devoting himself completely to the word. God's Word was the air he breathed.

Charles Spurgeon was once discussing John Bunyan, the 17th century author of the Pilgrims Progress, one of the greatest works in the history of English Literature. He said this: "that man is a living Bible! Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibling, the very essence of the Bible flows from him... for his very soul is full of the Word of God."

In the midst of a culture like Corinth we need an anchor to guard our hearts from being drawn toward the idols around us. Without God's word being our daily treasure our minds will be conformed rather than transformed. We need truth working on us daily.

Over the last few weeks we've been working on bring together our values as a church into a form that we can communicate quickly and clearly. We all know our vision as a church: to delight in God through Jesus Christ, proclaiming his joy through the gospel to all people. But how we do that is summed up in these three values that mirror what we see in Paul's life in Acts 18. Gospel, Community, Mission.

If we're going to live life intentionally engaging on mission in our neighborhoods and in Tacoma and in Puyallup, we need God's word. And the gospel is the message of whole Bible. All of Scripture is either pointing to, describing, or showing the results of Jesus work in and through the cross, and that's what we need to be about. We also need authentic community to strengthen and uphold one another, and we need to be about mission. Intentionally opening up our lives, breaking the boxes that we tend to put

around each sphere of our lives, and intentionally cultivating relationships that allow us to bear witness to the gospel. That's how mission happens in a world like Corinth.

Well, I guess I could leave you here and just say, OK - now go and be like Paul. But the problem is that being like Paul wasn't good enough for Paul. In spite of arranging his life so he was about the gospel, he was about community, he was about mission, Paul still got afraid. Just knowing what we're supposed to do isn't enough.

Every Thanksgiving we go out to Moses Lake and one of the family traditions while we are out there, with a bunch of the cousins, funny enough, isn't a Turkey Bowl, but a basketball game. I love basketball, and there was one point in my life that I played at a pretty high level. But I haven't touched a basketball for the longest period of my life - it's been a year - since last Thanksgiving. And going into the last few days gearing up for our Thanksgiving game, I knew that my mind was going to know what I should do on that court, but I also knew that my body was not going to follow suit. I was going to need some type of empowering presence to get my body to do what my mind knew.

As we move forward on Jesus' mission, it's not enough just to know what we're supposed to do. We need Jesus empowering presence to do in us what we can't do ourselves. And that's exactly what Jesus promises Paul. Look at v. 9 again:

*"Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you."*

As you walk through the Bible, almost every time you see God send someone out with a purpose, a mission from him, this is his promise - his presence with them. What were Jesus' words to his disciples over and over as he was getting ready to leave them. I'm going to be with you, I won't leave you alone, but I'll send you the counselor, the Holy Spirit. Think of the Great Commission. The GC is a sandwich of Jesus promises. It's starts with this one - All authority in heaven on earth has been given to me - therefore go and make disciples, or as you're going along, be making disciples... and I am what? I am with you always - to the end of the age.

Following Paul's pattern, without Jesus' presence will result in burnout. Essential to intentional life on mission is the presence of the living Jesus by his Holy Spirit - this is the story of Acts. Acts is the ongoing work of the risen Jesus through his Holy Spirit, through his disciples. And we are the ongoing story.



Well, you might say - but Ben, you don't know *my* workplace. You don't know what my coworkers say about Christians. You don't know my family. You don't know my neighborhood... And you're right I don't. But what I do know is Jesus' presence with us changes everything.

A couple of Mondays ago, it was after dinner and I was heading out into the garage to look for something when my 7 year old daughter Ava tailed along behind me. We live in Lakewood and the neighborhood is full of huge fir trees. And our house has a gravel driveway that isn't super long, but relatively long for a 7 year old, and it was a typical fall night. The wind was gusting through the trees, pine needles were falling slowly, there was some drizzle in the air. And I hadn't picked up the mail for that day, so as I was in the garage I opened the garage door and said to Ava - "Why don't you go out and get the mail?" She kind of folded her hands together and started looking down at the ground. So I asked her - "what's wrong honey?" "I'm scared dad" And I can just imagine, knowing the types of things my girls talk about, what we going through her head thinking about walking to the end of the driveway to get the mail out of the box. I mean gigantic flying squirrels jumping at her out of trees. Spiders the size of softballs dangling from limbs, Sasquatches coming at her from all corners. So I said to her, do you want daddy to walk out there with you? You should have seen the change on her face. It's not that the goliath squirrels and spiders and sasquatches went away, but holding my hand down that long gravel driveway changed everything. That's what Jesus' presence with us does as we walk with him in his mission in this world.

But more than anything, what brings certainty to us of Jesus' forever presence with us is the cross. Turn over to 1 Cor. chapter 2 with me. And we're going to start at verse 1. Paul is writing to these very Corinthians that he is here with in Acts 18 and he says this, "*read v. 1,3.*"

Paul is recapping his fear - I was with you in weakness, fear and trembling. But look at what Paul says in the middle of that. In the midst of Corinth, this culture that wanted nothing to do with God, in which he felt weak and fearful, look what Paul says, verse 2, "*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*"

If you want assurance of Jesus' presence with you in the midst of the fears of walking as light in this world, look no further than the cross.

At the cross, because Jesus was forsaken by the father, we will never be forsaken. The cross casts us down in utter humility because it shows me how incredibly

sinful I am - that I needed the death of the very Son of God to redeem me. But the cross also makes me utterly fearless because it shows me that I am accepted and loved by the God of this universe. Ultimately how do we live as a people on mission with Jesus, fearlessly humble in this world? We live under the cross believing the reality of Jesus love and grace.