

December 22, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

Window Sills and the Priority of Preaching

Acts 20:1 – 12

Actually, this sermon doesn't have anything to do with window sills. Luke mentions them so I thought I should as well. What I really want to look at in this passage are just two things – the priority of preaching and the Lord's Supper, or breaking bread as it appears in this passage and other places. This is not going to be an expositional sermon as such since there is little to exegete. The weightier or at least the more lengthy exposition comes in the latter half of this chapter. I know because I spent four days, 12 hours a day last summer going through the last twenty-two verses during our pastor's conference in Eldoret, Kenya; and I'm planning to burn through this section in about thirty minutes.

But I wanted to focus on these two things for a couple of reasons. One is that together with a few other passages, this passage gives us a good sense of what happened when the church came together for worship. That is one of the reasons that we are looking at the book of Acts. If you want to know what authentic Christianity is, Acts is where you start. The other reason we are focusing on this is that preaching and breaking bread are two vital elements that should be at the center of what happens when the church gathers for worship. There are lots of other things that are included in the worship service – we certainly affirm prayers and singing and individual testimonies and others forms of worship. But over and over again, both the Bible and historic Christianity put preaching and breaking bread at the center of the worship service.

So lets go to the text and get into this. Back in verse 21 of chapter 19, Paul had made his intentions to travel to Jerusalem clear to his followers: *Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."* And then there was what Luke calls an 'uproar' in Ephesus over the effects of the gospel, and we looked at that last week. But after the uproar, Paul left for Macedonia and then travels on to Greece where he spends three months. But like everywhere he went, opposition soon came. As he was about to sail for Syria, and then presumably to Jerusalem, a plot against him was uncovered and he obviously felt it was safer for him to head back there via Philippi in Macedonia and then sail to Troas in Asia Minor.

And he gets to Troas with his ministry team and Luke tells us that they spend seven days there. By the way, this is another one of the 'we' passages in Acts, where Luke is evidently present as well. *These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.* Acts 20:5-6 And then Luke records: *On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.* Acts 20:7 And then Luke relates the story of the patron saint of sermon-sleepers – Eutychus – whose name by the way means fortunate – and I guess he was – and wasn't.

I'm not sure why Luke includes this story other than a passion for authenticity. I'm sure this story made the rounds of all the churches though, not because someone fell asleep in a sermon, that's fairly common, but this guy fell asleep, fell out the window, died, and was resurrected. It would however, be a dubious honor I'm thinking to be known as the most famous sermon-sleeper in history. Although sermons have been known to cure insomnia. Hugh Latimer, Bishop of Worcester, later martyred by Bloody Queen Mary, once described a poor woman who had tried everything for a recent onset of insomnia. But none of her doctor's remedies had any effect. Finally in desperation she told her doctor that she would return to the parish church she had been neglecting. 'Doctor, I've slept soundly there the last forty years and I think I could sleep again'.

But as I said moments ago, we're not really concerned this morning with window sills and sermon-sleepers. And I don't think the deeper meaning here is that if you fall asleep during the sermon, you don't have to be afraid of dying. Then again, maybe it is. But in verse seven, Luke gives us one of the clearest pictures in the New Testament of an actual church meeting. He tells us that it was on the first day of the week. The Christian church, from the beginning, has taken Sunday, the first day of the week, as the day to worship corporately. Although there is certainly no biblical command to do so, from the beginning, this seems to be the tradition. And there are good arguments why this is so. One reason might be that Jewish tradition held Saturday as the day of worship and probably in order to distinguish themselves from Jews, Christians, most of whom were Jewish in the beginning of the church, chose the first day rather than the last day. And add to that for the first few years of the church, most Jewish Christians still attended synagogue or Temple on Saturday, so they need another day to meet as the church.

Scripture too, testifies to the significance of the first day of the week and the most compelling is that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. But also, you have Jesus appearing to the disciples on the first day of the week; He later appeared inside the room to the eleven disciples on the first day of the week; the Holy Spirit fell like tongues of fire on the first day of the week; the first sermon was preached by Peter on the first day of the week, where three thousand converts were baptized and joined the church that day; the first day of the week was when the Christians assembled and broke bread; Paul instructs the churches to put aside contributions on the first day of the week; in the Book of Revelation, John records that his vision of Jesus came on the first day of the week; and here in Troas, Paul and his team were there seven days, but it was on the first day of the week that Luke says that they broke bread and Paul basically preached and taught all night long.

So the lesson here, I guess, is that we are supposed to meet as the church on Sunday and stay till early Monday morning, and try not to fall asleep. Which is absolutely not what we do. As Martin Lloyd Jones used to say, 'Most people come to church in order to go home'. We have a tradition and history of meeting on Sundays, but we've sort of lost the aspect of lengthy get-togethers. This is not true in other parts of the world to which I've been. I can remember interminable church meetings when my wife and I were in Russia. Although that may have been just because it was so cold outside that once we all got in and our body heated warmed the place up, no one wanted to leave.

But the fact is, the church has, as a whole, placed a premium on shorter services. All you have to do is look at the service times posted on churches that offer two or more Sunday morning services. One of the lessons I learn from reading those posted times is that you can have as many services as you want, as long as you're done by noon. Now I'm not proposing that we return to the all-day preaching and dinner on the ground concept popularized by the Methodists of the nineteenth century. But I think we need to take a longer look at what we call church today. In some cases it just seems that we are offering a kind of drive-by churching that aims at quantity and not quality. In many instances this is because the centrality and **priority of preaching** has been lost.

This is not a new thing. Preaching the word started out as a central element of church gatherings, but over the centuries emphasis began to be placed on other elements of the service. Papal authority, ritualism, worship of relics and icons had replaced the preaching of the Word of God. Many of the established clergy did not preach at all. If there was preaching, it was usually a simple homily weaving in the sayings of the church fathers and folk stories. Often these were in Latin, which most of the people could not even understand. By the middle ages there were almost no sermons preached in the churches. It wasn't until the Reformation that preaching regained the central place in the church. In fact many historians call this the preaching revival. Men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Philip Melancthon raised the place of preaching in the church once again to prominence with powerful sermons out of Scripture. In fact Calvin once said that where the Word is not preached and heard, there is no church.

We tend to forget that though Jesus' Jesus' ministry included feeding the hungry, healing the sick, loving the outcast, and befriending the sinner, His ministry began and was sustained with preaching. He was always expounding the word of God to His disciples and the crowds. Preaching was also the primary activity of the apostles. It was through their preaching that the church was born in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

We understand that Paul was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. But he tells the Ephesian elders later on in this chapter that he didn't shrink from declaring the whole purpose of God to them. In other words he saw his preaching as central to their understanding of God. He later tells Timothy that there will come a day when people won't want to hear this kind of preaching – they'll just go to get their ears tickled. The place which the apostles gave to preaching and the place it has occupied in the history of the Christian church tell us that God has chosen to communicate with us through His Word, and through the clear preaching and proclamation of it through his appointed ministers.

So why is preaching so central to the church? There are a lot of reasons and I could go on till midnight and somebody falls out the window, but I'll just give you two really important reasons. **The first is that God has revealed Himself in His word.** *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* John 1:1 John doesn't say, 'In the beginning was the song' or 'In the beginning was the drama' or 'In the beginning was the worship dance'. In the beginning was the Word. And that makes the Word the main thing. At the Resurgence Conference this fall, James McDonald – a real man of the Word – came onto the platform to speak. And this was at Mars Hill in Seattle, and they're pretty trendy and like to do things in untraditional ways and be very hip and urban and cool. And the pulpit was kind of off to one side at a very hip angle. And the first thing James did was go over to the pulpit and ask Mark Driscoll, 'What's this pulpit doing over here? The Bible belongs in the center.' And he went on to explain that the pulpit was a symbol of the centrality of the word and preaching in the church.

John goes on to say: *And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.* John 1:14 This Word which is from the beginning is the very Son of God – He is God's communication to the world. If you want to know who God is and what He is like, you have to know His Son, and if you want to know the Son you have to know the Scriptures. Hebrews 1:1 says: *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son.* And then the writer starts pulling out Scripture after Scripture about the Son to prove his argument. And the plain meaning here is that we know God, we know His Son, through the Scriptures – the Word of God.

This is what Paul tells Timothy in his second letter: *All Scripture is God-breathed.* 2 Timothy 3:16 In other words, God has ordained that we hear Him and see Him revealed and understand His work in history through His written words. At the heart of worship, at the core of what we experience as a church when we come together must be a revelation of God Himself through His word. We see this as a pattern. It all over the Old Testament. There are many examples, but one is in Nehemiah chapter 8. *'And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground...the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.'* Nehemiah 8:6-8

In other words, we not only need the reading of the Word of God, but we need someone to give the sense of it so that we understand what we've heard. And you notice this gives rise to real worship. In the New Testament we see Jesus coming to Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry, reading a passage in Isaiah, then sitting down began His interpretation: *'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'*. This by the way was a very typical synagogue pattern: the reading of the word followed by interpretation and application. We've seen this in Acts. In chapter 13 we read: *"And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it."* Acts 13:14-15 And Paul stands up and preaches. God has revealed Himself in His word and preaching the word reveals God to us.

The second thing is that God not only reveals Himself through His word, **God performs His work through His word.** Colossians 1:16 tells us that everything was created by this Word. In the gospels we see Jesus speaking and seas were calmed, fevers were cooled, demons were cast out, sins were forgiven, the blind received their sight, the lame walked and the dead were raised. God works by means of His Word! It is the word of God that gives us new birth: *'...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.'* 1 Peter 1:23 The very faith we need to be born again comes through the Word – *'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God'*. Romans 10:17

The word of God is working in us to equip us to work in this world. Again 2 Timothy 3: *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.* 2 Timothy 3:16-17 **God works by His word to do His works through His people in the world.** His word works in us to grow us and mature us. Psalm 1 tells us that the man who meditates on the word of God day and night, will be, *'...like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.'* Psalm 1:3 We are made holy by His word. Jesus prays to the Father for His disciples in John 17: *Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.* John 17:17 And we could go on and on. But the point is, this is why preaching is so central to the church. This is why we place a priority on preaching.

The second thing I want to highlight in this passage is the fact that when the church came together, not only in Troas, but in every city, something called 'breaking bread' happened. Breaking bread together, or **observing the Lord's Supper** seemed to be a central element in early church gatherings. In Acts 2, at the very beginning of the church in Jerusalem, Luke gives us a snapshot of church life. And in verse 42 he says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Acts 2:42 Here we see four elements that characterized the church. The four things listed here are not four separate things but the four elements that characterized a Christian gathering. The wording suggests that their gatherings were centered around preaching, community, praying together and celebrating the Lord's Supper – breaking of bread. And one of the key things the early church "devoted" itself to was the "breaking of bread,".

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul writes to the Corinthian church and raises the issue of their observance of the Lord's supper. In this passage, he chastises the church for their abuse of the Lord's Supper. And the fact that it was such a problem in Corinth strongly suggests the Supper was held frequently. It probably wouldn't have been such a huge problem if they were only doing it once a month or once every three months. Notice the wording of 1 Corinthians 11:20: *"When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat."* Though they are abusing the Supper, their practice (which is not considered odd by Paul) is to celebrate each time they gather. Even the wording in 1 Corinthians 11:25 *"As often as you drink,"* in context actually suggests frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper. Commenting on this verse, Gordon Fee notes, "This addition in particular implies a frequently repeated action, suggesting that from the beginning the Last Supper was for Christians not an annual Christian Passover, but a regularly repeated meal in 'honor of the Lord,' hence the Lord's Supper."

And then in our passage this morning, Paul, on his way to Jerusalem has stopped at Troas. Here "on the first day of the week" he meets with the local church, and Luke directly states that the purpose of their gathering was "to break bread," That puts the Lord's Supper right at the center of importance of what these Christians did when they came together. The centrality of communion to the weekly gathering is stated casually without explanation or defense, suggesting this practice was common among those Luke expected to read his account. These early Christians met weekly to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

A few weeks ago, all the elders went away to Island Lake Camp to spend some time in prayer and fasting for direction and planning for the church. And one of the things we heard the Holy Spirit saying to us is that we need to have the Lord's Supper, communion, at the center of what we do when we come together as the church. It is not as if we have neglected this. We celebrate communion on the first Sunday of every month. But we feel strongly that this is something that needs to happen more frequently. So beginning in the New Year, we will be celebrating communion on a weekly basis. And we're going to do some things different in how we observe the Lord's Supper.

Putting the Lord's Supper at the center of what we do as a church on Sunday mornings is a means of clarifying the gospel by focusing on the cross of Christ and His return as our hope and joy. It serves as a powerful reminder of what Jesus did in the past, a living symbol of our present relationship with Him, and a potent promise of what He will do in the future. *For I received from the Lord what I also 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 which is for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."* 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

Our mission statement was designed to help us remember who we are as the church and why we do what we do. We are a people who are called to delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people. And one of the ways we do that is through clear, Spirit-empowered preaching of the Word and joyful celebration of the Lord's Supper. Both are meant to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ who left His throne above to come to a sinful world to redeem a people for Himself. Week by week we want to spread the news that the Christ who was born 2000 years ago in a lowly manger, lived on this earth for 33 ½ years, was crucified for your sins and for mine, was buried and resurrected to life, is living today to extend forgiveness and salvation, healing and reconciliation, through His body broken and blood poured out on the cross. I invite you this morning, if you've never experienced the forgiveness and salvation freely offered by grace to trust Christ who died for sinners, and believe in the One who has conquered sin and death and hell and come and receive the assurance of forgiveness and the seal of salvation.

Gracious Father,

We thank You this morning for Jesus Christ our Savior, the Word of God who was with God and who is God and who reveals all Your riches and compassion and lovingkindness to us. We come just as we are this morning – trusting in Your grace and the power of Your Word to penetrate our hearts and minds. O how we love Your Word, Father. It is precious beyond everything on earth and all its temporary treasures. Incline our hearts to this Word and break our bondage to other things. Let us see Your form and face and beauty in it today. Pierce through our souls and waken spiritual life. Confirm the substance of our faith and make us real, through and through. O Father, let Christ Your Word deliver us today from every other attachment and affection into the awesome brilliance and beauty of Your love. Let it lead us to the cross and give us a profound sense of wonder and appreciation for the marvelous things Christ has done for us. Let this word fill us with hope and joy because You have given us right standing with Yourself and we are not under condemnation. Rivet our attention on the sacrifice of Jesus and fuse our affections to Yourself, we pray in the precious saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.