

Keep on

Acts 18:1-11

May 14, 2006

Today's sermon presents quite a challenge! It should provide a faithful proclamation of the scripture text from Acts 18, and, at the same time, address in some relevant way the various special occasions we highlight today: Mother's Day, baptism, the recognition of church volunteers, the recognition of high school graduates, and, of course, the ongoing celebration of our church's one hundred fiftieth year.

And, on top of all that, it should be kept short, because today's worship service is already filled with so many celebrations and we don't want to have an extra long service two weeks in a row!

It's a challenge, but it can be done! It can be done because the theme of the reading from Acts -- the encouragement Paul receives from the Lord as he carries out his calling to proclaim the gospel of peace far and wide -- is relevant to each of the occasions highlighted in today's worship service. The scripture text speaks to Paul's calling, and each of the focal points of today's service is about calling.

Mother is not simply a title, it is a role, a calling. We celebrate today what mothers do: guiding, providing, comforting, supporting, defending, nurturing, loving.

Baptism is about calling. It is about identity, about being marked as God's own children, but it is also about role, about our ongoing vocation to follow where Jesus leads.

Teachers and musicians are fulfilling a calling. They fulfill a calling to use their particular gifts to honor the Lord, and to encourage and edify the Lord's people.

High school graduation is a time to think about calling. Up to now, each of these young adults has always known what's coming next -- the next grade in school, of course! But after graduation ... who knows? It's time to choose or at least to set off in a certain direction. It's time to ask: *What am I called to do?* And I do hope the question will be asked in those terms! Not just: *What can I do that will make me a lot of money?* Or: *What can I do to make my life comfortable?* Or: *What can I do to make a name for myself?* But: *What am I called to do?*

And, finally, the 150th anniversary of our church provides an opportunity to reflect on our calling, to celebrate where we've come from, but also to think about where we are going. That's exactly why I have chosen to preach from the book of Acts during this anniversary year, because it provides a framework for thinking about church: its nature, its mission, its activities, its relationships.

So each of these special occasions is about calling, about being called -- by God -- to live with a sense of responsibility and purpose and direction. But the fulfillment of any calling is always problematic. It requires patience and persistence and hard work and a whole lot of grace ... a whole lot of grace coming in and a whole lot of grace going out!

When we do take our calling seriously, whether it be our calling to be a mother or a teacher or a faithful follower of Jesus, we may indeed be susceptible to doubt, to self-doubt or discouragement, and when things get tough, we may question our

commitments or get stuck in one place or lose heart. Which is why all need encouragement once in a while! We all need somebody to tell us to hang in there, to keep on!

That's what the Lord does for Paul. Now I hardly picture Paul as someone prone to self-doubt or discouragement. He is confident and assured and unwavering in his proclamation of the gospel, whether he is addressing slaves or kings. And yet, wherever he goes, his preaching is met with a mixed response. There are many who listen and believe, but just as many who close their ears and their minds and mount a fierce opposition.

In Corinth, things are no different. Paul begins as he always does, holding discussions in the synagogues, telling Jews and God-fearing Gentiles alike the story of Jesus the Messiah, but he does not get a favorable reception. Many of the Jews associated with the synagogue in Corinth reject his message and oppose him. Paul leaves them angrily, holding them responsible for their unbelief and vowing to go to the Gentiles, which he does.

Is he discouraged? Is he giving up, or at least giving up too soon on an important part of his calling? Does he act too rashly in giving up on his fellow Jews? Is he overreacting?

Consider these facts. There are many who do believe, many who are baptized, Gentiles and Jews. The Gentile Titius Justus apparently becomes a believer, but so does Crispus, a Jew and the leader of the synagogue, along with all his family.

And so a message from the Lord comes to Paul in a vision: *Do not be afraid! Keep on speaking! Do not give up! Why? Because, says the Lord: I am with you, and because, many in this city are my people.* In other words. Paul, you are not alone. You are not the Lord's only witness. It isn't all up to you!

That's a message we all need to hear: *Do not be afraid! Keep on! Do not give up! You are not alone! It isn't all up to you!*

Mothers need to hear it: *Keep on! Don't give up!* It isn't all up to you, but you do have your part to play. You cannot choose for your child, but you can choose to fill your child's body and soul with good things. You are judged not on the basis of what your child chooses to do, but on what you choose to do, not by what turns out, but by your readiness to give faithfully what you have to give along the way.

Chad and Beth need to hear it: *Keep on! Don't give up! You're not alone!* You are called to provide for Paige's well-being, physically and emotionally and spiritually, but there will be others to help you. We will be there to help you! God will be there to help you!

Church volunteers need to hear it: *Keep on!* Not because it won't happen without you, but because you'll want to be there when it does happen!

High school graduates need to hear it: *Do not be afraid!* Don't worry about whether you will succeed or fail. By whose standards are success and failure measured anyway? It's not about success, not about failure, but about finding joy in doing something that matters, something that matters because God calls you to do it.

We need to hear it: *Keep on! Don't give up! Don't be afraid!* We may worry about the future of our church, but the future is in God's hands . The Lord is with us now, and that's all we need to know. We have survived and flourished as a congregation for 150 years because of committed lay people, capable leadership, good stewardship, and because we do have a calling, because we do have something to say. So keep on speaking! Proclaim the good news! The Lord is with us and there are many in this city who are God's people. We are not alone.

Perhaps you need to hear it. After all, the original message recorded in Acts was a personal message, a message addressed just to Paul. So today, in your own particular situation, whatever that is, in your own particular frame of mind, whatever that is, whatever your own particular worries, doubts, questions, or hopes may be, hear this message: *Do not be afraid! Keep on! Do not give up!* The Lord is with you! You are not alone!