

Keep watch
Acts 20:17-28
May 28, 2006

We have come to the end of the story. Today's sermon marks the last in our series of sermons from the book of Acts.

But it's not really the end of the story, is it? We're only in chapter 20 and the book of Acts has twenty-eight chapters! We're stopping in the middle of the story! But even if we did continue to the end of Acts, we would not reach the end of the story. Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome with these words:

For two years Paul lived in a place he rented for himself, and there he welcomed all who came to see him. He preached about the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking with all boldness and freedom ...

Acts ends in the middle of the story. It ends in the middle of the story because its story is an ongoing story. It's an ongoing story of which Paul is a part, of which the leaders of the church in Ephesus are a part, and of which we are a part.

We are part of the story. It is our story, too. And the story of Acts, the story which is our story, too, is the story of Well, you tell me!

It's the story of people brought together by a common experience, a common faith. They were brought together by their faith in Jesus Christ, and that faith was born out of seeing Jesus alive! The resurrection of Jesus is the starting point for the church. The resurrection of Jesus is a validation of everything Jesus stood for, a validation of Jesus' words, Jesus' life, Jesus' way. The resurrection is God pointing to Jesus and saying: *This is it! This is the way! This is the way to life!* When people see Jesus alive and believe, it is a transforming experience. They will never again look at death -- or life -- in the same way.

It's the story of people filled with the Holy Spirit, which means people filled with the power and wisdom and grace of God's own presence, filled with power and wisdom and grace for their own sake, to bring them joy, but filled with power and wisdom and grace, too, for the sake of others, for the sake of those who will find joy through the good news they share. Christians share their faith, not selfishly, to win converts and add to their numbers, but unselfishly, simply to bring joy to someone else.

Christians are called and empowered by the Spirit to be witnesses, to share what they have seen and what they have heard, to re-present Jesus to a broken world, and to testify to the existence of a new reality, a new way of being. Christians know that injustice doesn't win, hatred doesn't win, selfishness doesn't win, greed doesn't win, fate doesn't win, fear doesn't win, suspicion doesn't win, sin doesn't win, evil doesn't win, death doesn't win. We are called to tell the world that good news.

The church's task is not imperialism: conquering the world and establishing some kind of Christian supremacy. The church's task is evangelism: telling the truth, sharing good news, pointing to Jesus.

If we say: *You are lost! You are surely a sinner! The world is going to hell!*, that's not good news. It's not even news, because all of us already know that! This is the good news: *We are lost! We are surely sinners! The world is going to hell! But ...*

But, God loves the world so much, God loves humanity so much, God loves you so much, that ... You can finish the sentence, because the rest of the sentence is the story you have to tell!

This is our story, too. We are God's adopted children. We are Christ's body in the world. We are witnesses to the Jesus who is not dead, but alive. We are citizens of a new realm. This is who we are and telling the story is what we are called to do. At an important milestone in our church's history, our 150th anniversary, it is good for us to remember who we are and what we are called to do.

That's what Paul is doing in the story related in Acts 20. At an important milestone in the history of the church in Ephesus, Paul reminds them of who they are and what they are called to do. It is an important milestone for the church because he, Paul, their founder, their teacher, their pastor, will never see them again. He will be going on to Jerusalem and then to Rome, leaving all the churches he has planted in the care and keeping of local leadership. And so in this farewell speech, Paul reminds them of who they are and what they are called to do: they are God's people, and they are called to keep watch.

Keep watch! *Keep watch over yourselves ...*

It is interesting to me that Paul begins that way, *Keep watch over yourselves*, not watch out and make sure they don't wander off and they don't lose faith and they don't forget about Jesus, but watch out for yourselves. It reminds me of Jesus' own words: *Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the log in your own eye?*

At this milestone in our church's history, the folks we should worry about first are not the folks that aren't here or the folks we think should be here or the folks we might want to be here. The folks we should worry about first are ourselves! *Keep watch over yourselves!* How is your faith, your passion, your dedication, your loyalty?

The future of this church, or more importantly, the future of the ministry and mission of this church, does not depend first of all on finding the right leadership or the right program or the right marketing strategy. The future of this church and its work depends first of all on you. To quote Asaye Barnwell, a member of *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, whom Lynne and I had the blessing of hearing last week in Atlanta: *We are the ones we've been waiting for!* So, *Keep watch over yourselves!*

And, *Keep watch over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care ...*

Keep watch over the flock. Not keep watch over the church, but keep watch over the flock. Not pay attention and work hard to guarantee the ongoing vitality of this institution, but pay attention and work hard to take good care of the flock.

This flock -- this flock -- the flock that is ever-changing, with old faces and new faces. This flock that includes folks like John and Syd and Steve and Connie and Maxine and Helen and Donna and Rex. This flock that includes folks like Jackie and Wendy and Brandon and Danielle and Chad and Susan and Jaden and Paige. If you don't recognize some of the names I have just listed, then you aren't keeping watch!

Paul urges the leaders of the Ephesus church to keep watch, over themselves and over all the flock. He has already set for them a standard, and it is a high standard indeed!

If any of you should be lost, I am not responsible ... for I have not held back from announcing to you the whole purpose of God.

What an audacious claim: *I am not responsible!* But Paul can make that claim because he has done what he says he has done. He has not held back anything of what God has called him to proclaim.

That would be the greatest legacy this generation of the First Congregational United Church of Christ family could leave to the next, that we have not held back anything of what God has called us to say and to do, that no one, no single person in this flock will lose their way because we have held something back, because we have failed to speak the truth, because we have failed to testify to what we have seen and heard, because we have failed to keep watch. And so, on the occasion of our 150th anniversary, this is the parting message from the book of Acts: *Keep watch!*