

Title: Abnormally Normal
Text: Acts 20.36 - 21.6
Theme: The grief of sacrifice
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: The fellowship of the gospel creates a bond that hurts when torn.

Read text:

If I could paint a picture of this text, it would be that of a ship leaving a dock in a sunny, warm harbor, where the water is calm. A small-framed man with a tired face and ruffled hair is waving to a group of crying people on the shore. Way off in the distance, dark and menacing clouds appear to be awaiting. At this point in the book of Acts, Paul's public ministry is basically done and we still have eight chapters to go. He is wrapping up his third and final church-planting trip with this last meeting with the elders of the church at Ephesus. He then heads to Tyre where he spends a week with the believers there, and then continues toward Jerusalem where difficulty awaits.

This is a hard but sweet moment of calm before the storms. I wondered since the text is so obvious in a sense, if I shouldn't just restate the facts as they are, and get right into the interesting details of 21.7-14. But, the way Luke, under the direction of the Spirit of God, records the facts, that is, the words that he uses to describe these two partings gripped me. There is strong, emotional language here. Just look at 20.37-38a. "There was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all...." In 21.1, the verb translated "parted" has the idea of being torn apart or torn away.

Now Cornerstone, I know that when I teach and preach, that I tend to be intense, but my intensity in public preaching is driven by my conviction in private study that the Bible is God's holy, infallible, inerrant, all-sufficient Word that your soul needs above all else. And I want you to see, understand, because I want you to believe God and love God because I want you to know how much you are loved by God. Therefore, sometimes there are truths that you need to be informed of and other times there are truths that you need feel and not just grasp. Therefore, at times, I dig down into the text and other times, like today, I pull back so we can see this account in the story line of the Bible. What is happening right here in this text is actually very unusual. Luke is the artist and the Spirit of God is using him to paint a scene that if studied for any length of time would cause us to be drawn in to observing some details that are in fact very unusual, which should cause the reader and viewer to ask questions about the text.

If we took pictures of our world and lined them up, there would be a certain predictability about them. This picture is not only different it is attractively different. So, let's step back and see why.

The pursuit of efficiency in our western culture reinforces the belief that accomplishing the greatest number of goals is the chief end of man. To that end, we have pursued organization, multi-tasking, energy-drinks, fast food, long days and short nights. We've learned to sacrifice relationships for the sake of success, profit, or achievements. But along the way, something has been lost. We are, after all, people and not machines. Accomplishing the greatest number of goals is itself a hollow, unsatisfying and unachievable goal. There are always more goals. They

never end. The first thing on our “to-do list” is to make our to-do lists. But, we were made for something more. After all, before God was Creator - who made things and people, He was God who was Father, Son and Spirit in a relationship of joy. Creator is not who God has always been. Father, Son and Spirit is who God has always been. And he has been Father, Son and Spirit from eternity past before there was any creation. Before God was doing and making, God was. God was being. God was delighting in a relationship of love, harmony and joy. Therefore, we should understand that our creation, our formation and therefore, our satisfaction and longing is not going to be ultimately fulfilled in doing things, but in relationships and particularly in relationships that reflect THE relationship.

1. Our life together is how God designed us to live.

In the beginning, God created and as the apex of his creation, he created man and then woman. He did not create man, then scratch his head and stroke his beard or twirl his mustache wondering why things didn't seem quite right yet and then get a brain storm and make woman. He knew making just Adam was not the end of creation, but he wanted Adam to know that Adam was incomplete without relationship. It was man and woman that he created in his image, and that image of God in the human race is displayed perfectly in the beautiful enjoyment of the human race with God as being under his authority even in glorious fellowship. Fellowship with God is enjoyed as the creation stays in his lane and does not rebel against the good, wise, gracious and loving Creator. But, alas, we didn't stay in our lane. There are signs along some of the roads in India that say, “Maintain lane discipline.” We did not do that. We rebelled and the consequences have been horrific.

2. Our life of disunity is the fruit of our sin.

Our rebellion broke that relationship with God also broke it with one another. Why does a husband treat his wife like she is discardable, or views her with such disdain? Why can he be so hateful and hurtful? It is his sin and rebellion against God. You cannot love God and be hateful. *“Whoever loves as been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”* (1 John 4.7-12) Our life together in loving relationships is how God designed us to live but what is our new normal is sadly abnormal.

Social distancing is not new. Social distancing started in Genesis 3. The unity that Adam and Eve enjoyed with God was shattered by their sin, but it also drove this wedge of distrust and suspicion between Adam and Eve. We are very aware of this now. After a few hours of being pent up in our homes, by this quarantine we just have to get out. So, we go for a walk and as soon someone sees us approaching them on the road, they immediately go to the other side as if (as one writer said) we are approaching them with a chainsaw dripping with blood. And, if you don't have a mask on, you fear that people are looking at you as if you have already committed murder. And whatever you do, don't cough, right? Heaven forbid you get a tickle in your throat and cough where someone can hear you. If that happens to you, people will be screaming and running for their lives (and then probably coughing trying to catch their breath). Look at us! Look at what this pandemic has done to us and realize this. This is exactly what sin has done to us. It separates us from one another. It makes us suspicious of one another. It causes us to instinctively think more about preserving ourselves than it does helping out one another.

In the moments before their sin Adam and Eve enjoyed delighting in each other, only now they were leveling accusations of guilt toward each other. Rebellion against God always brings separation and loneliness. That is what sin does. It promises a party and delivers a penitentiary. You've heard the hardened and foolish person say that at least in hell I will be with my friends. There is no friendship in hell. Every common grace is removed and all that is left is the worst of your heart and the worst of all others.

What was experienced on a personal level between Adam and Eve was on full display in the beginning of Genesis 4 as Cain murdered his brother Abel and at the end of chapter 4 as Lamech murders a young man. The destruction continues even after the flood, so that when we get to Genesis 11, the world tries to unite in her rebellion against God, only to suffer the consequences of that on a global level. Now, like Adam and Eve the world is separated from itself. Now, the distrust is not only personal, it is cultural, ethnic, racial, social, and linguistic. You don't talk like me. You don't look like me. You don't dress like me. You weren't raised like me. You don't work like me. You don't school like me. You don't eat like me. Apparent differences now generate responses of distrust. The beauty of God's fascinating creation displayed in the human ethnicities all bound together as the human race has been lost and buried under thousands of years of hatred, genocide, slavery, torture, rape and abuse. You cannot understand the story line of the Bible and the setting of the NT and this scene in Acts without grasping the context of racial animosity that existed in the 1st century world.

Therefore, (and this is a big therefore) a significant part of the story of the gospel is not just how Jesus provided the way for our relationship to be restored to God, but also how our restored relationship to God provides the way for our relationship with one another to be brought together. Now, you are ready to appreciate what is on display in this text. What is going on here? What do we see and what do we feel? We see a Jew named Paul who is praying with Jews and Gentiles and they are weeping because they may not see one another again on this earth. They are embracing and kissing. They are sorrowful and trying to wring every bit of relational capital out of these minutes as they accompany him to the ship which, forces their tearing apart.

Many years ago, I went on a trip to India and then to Korea. The kids were young and since it was long before 9-11, my family accompanied me to the gate and waited for me to get on the plane knowing that I wouldn't see them for two weeks. After many hugs and kisses, I finally left them and was walking down the jetway when I heard my youngest scream, "NOOOOOOOO, and then started crying." Later on, Cathi told me that about everyone in the entire gate started crying. But, we can understand that, can't we? That is family. That is a dad and his wife and kids. But, this? Paul is not a blood relative. Paul did not grow up with them. Why such affection? Why is there so much heart-felt and now heart-breaking emotion? The answer is: Jesus and the gospel.

3. Our life together (fellowship) is the fruit of the gospel.

God sent Christ, his Son to rescue us by paying for our sin by means of his death. Christ came to restore us to fellowship with God and for all those whose fellowship with God is restored, there is a fellowship formed among them. This fellowship in Christ, this fellowship of the gospel is

called the church. A local church is an identifiable gathering of believers who have a deep and eternal relationship with one another as the result of our deep and eternal relationship with God through Christ. And this is what is so amazing and so profound. The gospel is so powerful that it takes people who are naturally enemies of one another, suspicious of one another, threatened by one another and it puts us in this blender called the church.

I've said it, probably hundreds of times that every congregation has a choice of whether it is going to be a bag of marbles or a bag of grapes. But, there's a sense in which if that congregation is truly a church that is formed by the gospel and being informed and infused by the gospel, then we don't have a choice because this is what the gospel does. It puts all of us into this blender and hits purée. That is what we see here and it is shocking and beautiful.

It is shocking because way back in Genesis 11 at the Tower of Babel the world was divided by language and race. In Acts 2, the people of God are united by language (tongues) because the Spirit of God has formed one body, the church that is going to be made up of people from every tribe, language and nation. In Revelation 5 the dream is accomplished. Here at the end of Acts 20, we get a little picture of that. Here is genuine affection that knows no racial barrier because our (all races) life together is the fruit of the gospel and...

4. Our life together profoundly affects us. (20.36-38)

Our life together is more than shared experiences. For example, we are sharing together in this pandemic and quarantine. And there is circumstantial unity that is forced upon us. But, when you come to faith in Christ, our life together goes deeper than shared experiences of being together singing, praying, and hearing God's Word. Yes, we go on mission trips, retreats, camping trips and conferences together. Our ABF's meet and small groups meet, and we serve together in a number of ministries. But, our unity is more than the amount of time and the intensity of these times. We are in Christ together. In 1 Corinthians 12.13 we are told, "*For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*" This is what the Spirit of God does to every genuine believer. Every believer is placed into, immersed into, baptized into one body (the church). Our life together is bonded together by the Spirit of God. Our life together is held together by the life of the Spirit. Our life together is living. It is dynamic. It breathes and pulsates.

Therefore, any person who claims to be a follower of Christ, but does not show concern or priority for the body of Christ, may be self-deceived and may not really be a believer. A genuine believer, not only believes, but in believing is made to be part of a body that he or she now truly cares about. That is why we treasure our relationships. What happens to one another matters to us. We want to be together. We want to pray together. We are willing to sacrifice for one another. We hurt deeply when others hurt because we love deeply. It is not that we do this perfectly, but we do it. If the lives of other believers do not really matter to you, if you can take it or leave it, then you don't get it. What we are witnessing on the shore of Miletus is deep bonds that are forged in the furnace of the church by the Spirit of God through the gospel of Jesus. And while Paul will get to the end of his life (2 Timothy 4) and be alone in a Roman prison awaiting his death, he will not be alone nor forgotten either by Christ, nor by these believers, who while they are not with him in person love him, pray for him and will be united with him in glory.

5. Our life together is not more important than the gospel. (v.38; 21.6)

There is a sweetness and comfort from good relationships in the church, when the church is embracing and living out the message of the gospel. Why would Paul leave that? Why would Paul leave Ephesus where he was so loved? The reason he left Ephesus was the same reason why years before he left Antioch in order to go to Ephesus and other places. The gospel.

What is sweeter than loving other believers in Christ and being loved by other believers in Christ? What is sweeter is having more believers in Christ to love and be loved by. That is why Christ came to the earth. The Father loves the Son so much and delights in the Son so much because the Son is so wonderful and glorious and so worth delighting in, that he is worth having millions of images like him to reflect him and enjoy him. The love of God is inexhaustible. There is plenty of love to go around. The more people who come to faith in Christ simply means that the louder and more glorious the singing will be, the more thunderous the applause will be, and the more deafening the laughter will be. Our sweet experiences of fellowship here and now motivate us to go so that more will hear the gospel and be able to experience that now and forever. So, Paul, moves on. The gospel is worth sharing.

6. Our life together is not more important than obeying God.

We will pick it up at this point next week because Paul knows and others know that he has thus far escaped dangerous situations, but that he will likely not escape this next one. Why would Paul knowingly go somewhere where his life is going to be in danger? Do you remember Paul's conversion in chapter 9? God told the disciple Ananias to go to Damascus and find the man Saul of Tarsus because I already told Saul that you would be coming. Ananias asked Jesus if he were sure about this, because this Saul guy had, well let's say, a reputation. Jesus told Ananias to go because "... *he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*"

This is what Paul understood. He was called in this life to go and his going would result in persecution and that he would suffer much. But, the fruit of his going was other believers and these other believers were a gift that he enjoyed and that he should enjoy. But, the gift of fellowship is not more important than obeying God. There is a comfort from other believers, but if God has called us to go and take his name to where the gospel is not known even at a cost, then our life together is not a reason not to go, but a reason to go.

Cornerstone, taking the gospel seriously, will create a sweetness in our fellowship that is tangible, and attractive, but our fellowship here and now is not the ultimate goal, but fellowship in glory that enjoys God is.