

August 13, 2017

Church Planting
Self-Destruct
Acts 21:27-33

Opening words: Did you know, according to *The Christian Post*, 3500 people leave the church every day. That is a sad statistic and there is no single reason why. Let me say this clearly. The reason is not spiritual in nature. People still need Jesus to offer them forgiveness, hope and salvation. The reason people are leaving is more secular in nature. We have looked at some of those reasons in the past. The neighborhood changed, so the faces in the pews no longer matched the faces on the street. The population dropped, making it harder to recruit new members. Society itself changed. In the 1950s, formality was the word. The word today is informality. The high church of yesterday speaks to fewer and fewer. Today's message is not about those things. Today, I want to talk about the self-destructive nature of the church. No organization is harder on itself than the church.

This is sermon number fifty-three in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task. During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Why make a major time commitment to the Book of Acts? Because, Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally and it will be the Holy Spirit who must revive the church again. Human effort is not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 21:27-33. This week's message is called *Self-Destruct*.

Acts 21:27-33 ²⁷ When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place." ²⁹ (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.) ³⁰ The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. ³¹ While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³² He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done.

The great reformer Martin Luther once said, "*For where God built a church, there the Devil will also build a chapel.*" I hate to admit it, but I think that is true. If that quote makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Once again, we find ourselves today in the twenty-first chapter of Acts. Do you remember what has happened in this chapter to this point? Paul has returned to Jerusalem to report on his progress among the Gentiles. The saints in Jerusalem are pleased with his report. However, things in Jerusalem have also changed in his absence. God hasn't just been moving among the Gentiles. God has also been doing some mighty works among the Jews as well. There is no other way to say it: Jerusalem, itself, has changed. You know the truth. You can only move as fast as the slowest person. Some people are slow. Some of the new Jewish Christians are clinging to their old Jewish ways. The law still holds value to them, and they believe Paul has dismissed the law completely. In our previous reading, Paul buys himself some time by compromising. Do you remember that message? There are some secondary things you can compromise on, but one should never compromise one's core values.

In our reading for today, the time Paul bought with his compromise has run out. The scene is not pretty. In verse 27, we are told the unrest began in the temple, but it spread quickly. In verse 30, we are told the uproar spread to the whole city. Paul was the eye of the storm and many tried to kill him. When the Jerusalem police department finds out about the unrest, they race to the scene. Paul is arrested and the investigation begins.

As I wrestled with this scripture this week, I could not look away from the cruelty of the story. Paul deserved better treatment. Just think about it for a moment. No one sacrificed more for the Gospel than Paul. No one labored harder for the Gospel than Paul. No one had traveled more miles for the Gospel than Paul. He had just completed three missionary journeys. In every community he entered, he talked about Jesus and won countless souls. He longed to save the gentile world, and only returned to Jerusalem for one reason, to help this desperate congregation. It was a loving, kind thing to do, but no one recognized his generosity. You can search this section of scripture and never find a word of appreciation. There are very few signs of respect. Instead of Paul receiving a thank-you, Paul receives a beating. The people who should have loved and encouraged Paul hated him. I guess we shouldn't be surprised, because the church can be a cruel place. Can I ask you a question? Have you ever experienced the cruel side of church? There seems to be a church on every corner, but how many true churches really exist?

When I went into the ministry, I thought the key word was *Jesus*. I know it sounds simple, but it is true. Early in my faith development I truly appreciated what Jesus had for me. I was humbled by the simple fact that Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world and died for me. Every Good Friday, I am still ashamed his sacrificial death was necessary. I just could not hear enough or learn enough about Jesus. I thought the word on everyone's lips was *Jesus*. After a few years in the ministry, I discovered the truth. The key word wasn't Jesus. The key words were *power* and *control*. I don't want to sound critical, but it can be a little discouraging. With those two words in hand, we suddenly become the angry mob in the scripture lesson. There is no organization more

self-destructive than the church. Some believed I wouldn't survive in the ministry because I wasn't tough enough. There have been days I thought they were right. How many ugly church fights have you been involved in? How many church fights have you heard about? It is not surprising 3,500 people a day leave the church. People have enough tension and hardship in their lives. Church does not need to be another source of hardship. Church should be a place of love, encouragement and acceptance. If you agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

The challenge we face is breaking this pattern of self-destruction. I would like to say that self-destructive behavior doesn't happen here, but it does. It may not happen in every organization, but I know it happens in every church. What makes us different is we hide it so well. Today, I want to talk about things we must stop doing in order to reach our full potential. Each one has come from my experience. Do you remember my opening quote? Martin Luther once said, "*For where God built a church, there the Devil will also build a chapel.*" If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

History tells us a man by the name of Colonel Davenport was the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1789. One day, the sky over Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought." Every generation has feared the unknown because every generation has feared the future. No organization illustrates that fact more clearly than the church. We love to cling to the past.

In the life of the church we need to stop worshipping the past, and embrace the future. It is the story in the scripture lesson for today. God had done something new through Jesus Christ. Salvation was available to all people. Everyone should have been happy, but that didn't happen. The Jewish-Christians were upset because they were resistant to the change. They liked things the old way and took their frustration out on Paul. Time changes but people don't. There are many fine church members who pine for the past. They remember the good old days and lament over our modern world. You can lament all you want, but the good old days are not coming back. Those good old days stories are suicidal in the life of the church because they mean two things. First, you are telling the world you are irrelevant. In other words, you are out of touch. Second, no one wants to hear your good old days stories but you. People don't care what God did decades ago. However, they are interested in what God is doing today. Can I ask you a question? Are you afraid of the future? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, I was a youth director in Frankfort, Indiana. The church structure was classic downtown church. I attended a Sunday school class that met in the kitchen. The same little group gathered every week. We ate donuts and drank coffee. Weekly, we

solved the world's problems. Every week, the same man said the same thing. He would say, "This community needs a food bank. We have hungry people in this town. The truth is, we have hungry people in this church." One week, I looked around the church and tried to find these hungry people. I didn't find any, but I did find some who needed to cut back on the donuts. One week he said, "This community needs a food bank. We have hungry people in this town. The truth is, we have hungry people in this church." I finally said, "Why don't we start a foodbank right here!" One woman answered weakly, "No! We don't want just anyone in here!" In the life of the church, those are suicidal words. Let me ask you a question: What is more important to you, church property or people?

In the life of the church we need to stop looking inward, and start looking outward. The church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of its non-members. Magnificently maintained and well decorated churches close every year. The mission statement of the church is to develop disciples for Jesus Christ. It sounds easy, but so many other things distract us. One of the greatest distractions we have is our property. Let me ask you the question again. What is more important to you, church property or people? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Do you remember this story? In 1884, a young man died. His grieving parents decided to establish a memorial to him. With that in mind they met with Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University. Eliot received the unpretentious couple into his office and asked what he could do. After they expressed their desire to fund a memorial, Eliot impatiently said, "Perhaps you have in mind a scholarship." "We were thinking of something more substantial than that...perhaps a building," the woman replied. In a patronizing tone, Eliot brushed aside the idea as being too expensive and the couple departed. The next year, Eliot learned that this plain pair had gone elsewhere and established a \$26 million memorial named Leland Stanford Junior University, better known today as Stanford! Today that \$26 million is worth \$635 million! The president of Harvard missed out on the blessing because he was so busy judging. I hope we don't do the same.

In the life of the church we need to stop judging, and start loving. Can I be honest with you? I like each one of you. And I consider each one of you a friend. Can you say the same thing about your fellow church members? Let me ask you this series of uncomfortable questions. Is there anyone in this church you don't like? Is there anyone in this church you don't trust? Have you ever told a story about someone in this church which cast doubt? If you can answer yes to any one of those questions, then you have damaged this ministry. Your thoughts and words against fellow church members are self-destructive. Jesus told us clearly, we are not to judge one another. We are to love one another! If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Last Sunday morning, Kathryn and I were in Nashville, Tennessee. The Music City has a population of 707,000. That number is already outdated because Nashville grows by

100 people every day. (Maybe they are leaving here and going there?) We hadn't been there in years and everything had changed. We spent our time doing three things. First, we visited some historical sites. We visited the home of our seventh president Andrew Jackson, The Heritage. We also saw the Civil War battlefields of Franklin and Stones River. Second, we visited some country music sites: the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Ryman Auditorium, and RCA Studio B, where Elvis recorded. Third, we visited Vanderbilt University and the Scarritt-Bennett Learning Center. Kathryn is a graduate of those institutions. For her it was a time to reminisce and marvel at the passage of time.

One of the places she wanted to see was the West Nashville United Methodist Church. As a seminary student, she spent two years there as a student intern. During that period, that congregation was alive and well. She shared several happy memories as we drove there. The joy was cut short as we drove closer. My first clue was, I couldn't find that church on my GPS. It is painful for me to say that I never stepped into the West Nashville United Methodist Church. When we found the building, we discovered the church had closed. We drove around the building silently because there was nothing to say. In a city that is growing by 100 people a day, the church closed. I don't know why it closed but it closed. Maybe the neighborhood changed? Maybe they fell in love with a certain worship style, or maybe it closed because of self-destructive behavior? This is the most terrifying fact of the whole experience: If it happened there, it could happen here. The great reformer Martin Luther once said, *"For where God built a church, there the Devil will also build a chapel."*