

August 5, 2018

Church Planting
Mum's the Word
Acts 26:24-29

Opening words: By now you should know my task. During the summer months, I am preaching through the Book of Acts. I began in 2013, and I hope to finish this year. I have called this entire series, *Church Planting*. The reason I have made this major time commitment to this New Testament book is, I am trying to reconnect with the Holy Spirit. Let me be blunt. We need a revival. Never forget it. Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. This is sermon number sixty in the series.

Today, we find ourselves in the twenty-sixth chapter of Acts. Much has already happened. Even Paul's three missionary journeys are completed. The storyline we are in started in the twenty-second chapter. Paul had returned to Jerusalem with a love offering to help the needy in the Golden City. It should have been a happy homecoming, but it wasn't. The new Jewish-Christians were against him because they believed he had demoted the Old Testament law. The Jewish community was against him because he was promoting the resurrection of Jesus. Let me say this clearly. The people didn't just find Paul annoying, they hated him. A group of approximately forty had taken an oath to kill him. Their scheme was uncovered, and Paul was sent to Caesarea for his own protection. When he arrived, Paul stood before Governor Felix. The issue was spiritual maturity. Two years later, Felix was replaced by Festus, who granted Paul's request to go to Rome. That takes us to today's reading, Acts 26:24-29. I have called this message *Mum's the Word*.

Acts 26:24-29 At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."
²⁵ "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."
²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"
²⁹ Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

English Christian evangelist Leonard Ravenhill (1907-1994) once said, "*Any method of evangelism will work if God is in it.*" I hope you don't forget that quote, because it is true. If you can remember that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twenty-sixth chapter of Acts. Those were hard days for the Apostle Paul. He had done nothing wrong, yet he had been held by the Roman authorities for two years. His request to go to Rome had been granted, but he is still

waiting to leave. However, Paul is not alone. It was a difficult time for everyone in today's reading. It was a hard time for Governor Festus. He was required to write a summary of Paul's case for Rome, but Paul had done nothing wrong. To make matters more complex, his supervisor, King Agrippa, was in town. Traveling with him is his sister, Bernice. Festus tells King Agrippa Paul's story, and the king requests to meet the apostle himself. Just prior to our reading, Paul addresses the king and does the predictable. He tells us about God's plan of salvation, including the greatest life that has ever lived, Jesus. Paul tells them how he had come to know Jesus. Paul tells them what a difference Jesus had made in his life. King Agrippa doesn't just listen, he is intrigued. He is close to accepting Jesus as his Lord and Savior, yet he is still so far away. In verse 28, Agrippa asks Paul an interesting question. This is the question, "*Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?*" Paul answers in a profound way in verse 29. He says, "*Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am.*" However, Paul's answer is not limited to his surroundings. He was not just interested in the salvation of those in the scene. Paul was interested in everyone's salvation. Paul knew he couldn't enjoy heaven until everyone was in heaven with him. How could you possibly enjoy heaven, if one of your loved ones was missing? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" This is the truth. It is not just Paul's story. It is our story as well.

Evangelism is one of the primary functions of the church. There are many verses in the New Testament which encourage us to share Jesus with the people in our lives. The most famous of all the scriptures dealing with evangelism is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). Do you remember the scene? Jesus is leaving the disciples. Jesus's earthly ministry is over. The last miracle has been performed. The last lesson has been taught. The disciples' feet have dried and been dirtied again. The last supper has been cleaned up. Jesus has been executed, buried and resurrected. Jesus's forty days in his resurrected state have passed. There is nothing else to do but leave. The Master is near Galilee on a mountain top with the eleven; Judas Iscariot has not yet been replaced. His final words are straightforward, "*Go and make disciples of all nations.*" Everyone is to be baptized, demonstrating to the world that Jesus is their Lord and Savior. The point Jesus is trying to make is clear. We are to be telling the world about Jesus and winning souls for the Kingdom of God. Evangelism is one of the priorities of the church.

Through the eyes of God, there is no excuse for not evangelizing. Sadly, it is one of the things we do very poorly. In my time in the ministry, the mainline Protestant church has become more interested in marketing than we are in evangelism. I believe, it is one of the reasons the mainline Protestant church is struggling today. We have forgotten our purpose and live in evangelism-free times. This is a sad fact: according to the Barna Research Group, only 5% of Christians have ever shared their faith. That leads me to an interesting, yet uncomfortable, question: When was the last time you shared Jesus Christ with someone else? If you that question makes you uncomfortable, say, "**Amen!**" The question that must be answered is, why? Why are we so uncomfortable sharing our faith with someone else? There is no single answer. There are several answers.

Some believe we are not sharing Jesus because we are **confused**. Some believe sharing some aspect of their church is evangelism. Many find it easier to talk about their church than to talk about Jesus. It is easy to promote the next fundraiser. We have the best ham loaf in town! Our dinners are a good deal because we include a free cookie. Our youth go on annual mission trip. It is good for them to see how the less fortunate live. Our music department is heavenly. We have the best choir, hands down! Our church regularly collects food to feed the hungry locally. Our church is having a concert and all the veterans will have to stand up at the end. Then, we will all sing God Bless America! Do I have to go on? Do I really have to go on? The problem is not a shortage of church talk. The problem is a shortage of Jesus talk. It was Jesus who saved your soul, not the institutional church. There is no other way to say it. Some people are confused. They think talking about the church is the same as talking about Jesus. They are related, not identical. That leads me to an interesting question: When was the last time you told someone what Jesus means to you?

Some believe talking about Jesus is **politically incorrect**. That means, evangelism itself is politically incorrect. Society tells us not to talk about religion or politics. There is only one problem with that line of thought. We speak about politics regularly, but we seldom speak about religion. You know it is true. I do not have a Facebook account, but my wife does. I use her account to check the church's Facebook account. Occasionally, I will look at her items. When Barack Obama was elected President in 2008, the losers expressed their opinion on Facebook. For eight years, we heard everything negative about Obama on social media. Christian people expressed their opinions in unchristian ways: Obama was weak and was ruining our country. It was ugly. When Donald Trump was elected President in 2016, the losers from the other side expressed their opinion on Facebook. Once again, Christian people are expressing themselves in unchristian ways. It is ugly. They say, Trump is weak and is ruining our country. Can I ask you a question? If we are not supposed to talk about religion or politics, why do we spend so much time talking about politics? Why do we spend so little time talking about religion? Why do we say next to nothing about Jesus? Some don't talk about Jesus because they are afraid of being politically incorrect. Let me ask you the question again. When was the last time you told someone what Jesus means to you?

I believe, we don't talk about Jesus because of old-fashioned **fear**. Some are afraid they lack the Biblical knowledge. (What was Lot's wife name?) We are afraid of losing our friends. We are afraid of being mocked. We are afraid of looking too fundamentalist. Some are afraid of becoming "that guy". However, this is the greatest fear: some are afraid to talk about Jesus because they just don't feel qualified. This is the good news for today: You are qualified. You do not need a Ph.D. in evangelism to be qualified to talk about Jesus. All you need to be qualified to talk about Jesus is to be genuine. Don't force the door open yourself. Pray that God gives you the opportunity to share your story in a genuine way. In the scripture lesson, Paul waited two years for that opportunity, but when the moment came, he seized it. If you genuinely appreciate what Jesus has done for you, say, "**Amen!**"

I have a person in my life who is more of an acquaintance than a friend. He is a friend of a friend. He has a good heart, but he is hard to be around. He is opinionated and rough. He is stuck in 1972 and hates everything that has happened since 1972. For some unknown reason, I like him. To his face, I call him Mike. Behind his back, I call him Big Mike, because he is big. One night, I was with Big Mike and he was complaining about his son. His son is always trying to preach him into heaven or out of hell. Not holding back, he expressed his opinions and filled the air with questions and harsh words. He told everyone, he was going to heaven because he would do anything for anyone that he liked. He looked at me and asked, "Russ, do you think I'm going to heaven?" I answered, "Mike, I don't know. I'm not the judge. However, orthodox Christian theology teaches us the only way into heaven is accepting Jesus." I told him what Jesus means to me and I ended by saying, "Mike, I hope you are going to heaven because it wouldn't be the same without you." His harsh words stopped, and he said, "Thanks, do you really want to spend time in heaven with me?" I said, "I want to spend eternity in heaven with everyone." I do not have a Ph.D. in evangelism, but my words were genuine. I really do want everyone to be with me in heaven. How could you enjoy heaven if one of your loved ones was missing? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Let me end with this story.

Several years ago, I was on a mission trip to Russia. We were in the city of Vladimir, northeast of Moscow. The team was made up of good people, including a young couple who had recently graduated from Youngstown State. They were sent by their church. Like everyone else on the team, they collected things the orphans needed, socks and underwear. However, their church also sent with them something they called "Gospel Blocks." I didn't think much of them at first. There were nine or twelve in each set. On each side of the individual block was part of a larger scene. When the blocks were aligned properly, a different scene of Jesus's life was displayed. If you turned them one way, it was the birth of Jesus. If you turned them another way, it was the Sermon on the Mount. If you turned them another way, it was the Last Supper, or Jesus praying in the garden. There was the crucifixion and the resurrection. I didn't think much of those Gospel Blocks, until I saw how the orphans responded to them. When the orphans, who were laughing and playing, saw them, they became respectful towards them. A teenage boy grabbed a set and sat alone in the corner and studied each scene. When some of the Americans walked over to him, he smiled and said, "This is Jesus." Then, he leaned over and kissed his set of blocks. It wasn't the physical blocks that impressed the boy, it was Jesus. The boy knew there was something special about Jesus. It isn't just true of an orphan in Vladimir, Russia. It is true of everyone.

There is something about Jesus which touches our hearts. There is no other way to explain it. It must be God, preparing the way so our genuine words about Jesus will be accepted. Leonard Ravenhill wasn't wrong. He once said, *"Any method of evangelism will work if God is in it."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**