

August 26, 2018

Church Planting
You Can Do It!
Acts 28:11-16

Opening words: One week from today, I will finish this sermon series, *Church Planting*. I have been preaching through the Book of Acts during the summer months since 2013. I have never hidden my purpose. I have made this major time commitment to Acts, because Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. I am trying to reconnect to the Holy Spirit because we need a revival. Without the Holy Spirit, we have no future. Without the Holy Spirit, we have no church.

Today, we are in the last chapter of Acts, so much has already happened. Let me summarize the entire book briefly. It all began with Jesus ascending, and the Holy Spirit descending on the original eleven disciples. Once Matthias was selected to replace Judas Iscariot, Acts tells of the evangelistic work of the disciples, now Apostles. Once Saul is converted, the focus of the entire book shifts to him. With his new passion, Saul becomes Paul. He is determined to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, so he goes on three missionary journeys. Each one was longer than the one before. One day, he heard how the believers in Jerusalem were struggling, so he begins to collect a love offering to help. He returns to the Golden City with the money, but he wasn't welcomed. Everyone seemed to be against him. The Jewish Christians were against him for demoting the Old Testament law. The Jewish community was against him for promoting the resurrection of Jesus. He had done nothing wrong, but he was arrested and incarcerated for his own protection. In time, even the Roman authorities were against him because he was causing them more work. Paul's only saving grace was his citizenship. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to have his case heard in Rome. His trip to Rome was difficult. On that journey, Paul finds himself in the middle of a great storm and is shipwrecked. He winters on the island of Malta to eliminate another storm. That takes us to our reading for today, Acts 28:11-16. Let me call this message *You Can Do It!* This is number sixty-three in the series.

Acts 28:11-16 ¹¹ After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. ¹² We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. ¹³ From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. ¹⁴ There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. ¹⁵ The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged. ¹⁶ When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

Anne Frank once said, *"Everyone has inside of them a piece of good news. The good news is you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!"* Maybe one of the reasons we know Anne Frank is, she was so encouraging. Can I ask you these two questions? Do the people in your life find you encouraging? Have you ever needed encouragement? If those questions make you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the twenty-eighth chapter of Acts. In almost painful detail, the author gives us the details of Paul's journey. They spent three months on Malta. No one sailed in the winter because the waters were too rough. That means Paul and his shipmates would have stayed on Malta until late February or early March. Then, they headed for the city of Syracuse, the leading city on the island of Sicily. They stayed there three days, then they headed for the town of Rhegium, a town on the coast of Italy itself. Then, they sailed another two hundred miles to the town of Puteoli, on the north side of the Bay of Naples. It was the chief port of Rome, which was seventy-five miles away. It is in that place Paul meets what the author describes as *"brothers."* We do not know their names, but we know they played a major part in Paul's life for a short time. Paul spent a week with them. They were the ones who took Paul to Rome. The text tells us clearly, Paul appreciated these men. Verse 15 says, *"At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged."*

Don't just jump over that word, encouraged. It isn't just there to take up space. It is there to express Paul's condition. Just think about it for a moment. Paul had endured so much. Paul had changed too much. Early in the faith, he walked away from his promising future. He walked away from everything he knew. He had to wrestle with the fact that he had persecuted Christians and live with that guilt. He endured three missionary journeys filled with all kinds of adventures. He endured the ugly crowds in Jerusalem and years of incarceration. He endured the adventures of the sea, including a hurricane and a shipwreck. He endured the hardship of travel and the loneliness of being away from home. Paul must have been physically and emotionally tired. The one thing Paul needed was encouragement, and God provided these brothers to fill the void. Webster defines encouragement as *the action of giving someone support, confidence or hope.* So, let me ask you the questions again. Do the people in your life find you encouraging? Have you ever needed some encouragement? Can I state the obvious? We seem to have a shortage of encouraging people. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

One of the great names in British history is the Duke of Wellington. He was a military genius and will always be remembered as the one who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Those who served under him knew he wasn't an easy a man to please. He was demanding, and not one to shower his subordinates with compliments. Yet even Wellington realized that his methods left something to be desired. In his old age, a young lady asked him what, if anything, he would do differently if he had his life to live over again. Wellington thought for a moment, then replied. "I'd give more praise," he

said. Isn't it too bad Wellington waited so long to learn the significance of encouraging others? But, this is the question you must answer:

Why is encouragement so important? Just like in the scripture lesson for today, they are not just empty words. Psychologists tell us, encouragement is important because we are hard on ourselves. How many people do you know who long to do something but never try, because they are afraid of failure. They don't try, because they aren't smart enough. They don't try, because they don't feel like they have the right skill set to succeed. They don't try, because they think they aren't good enough. They don't try, because they are hard on themselves. It is one thing to try and fail. It is another thing to never try. How many things in your life haven't you done because of self-doubt? Paul is near the end of his journey. He is near Rome, but he isn't in Rome. He needs a push to finish the journey, and God provides the brothers to encourage him. The greatest influences on your life are not those who have discouraged you. They are the ones who have pulled you to the side and have said, "You can do it". I know that is true, because it is all part of my story. Some of you know my story.

It wasn't until I got through graduate school that I learned I have a learning disability. In 1988, thirty years ago, I served a small-membership church outside of Medina, Ohio. Weekly, I stood in front of the congregation and struggled reading the scripture. One Sunday, a retired teacher told me she thought I had something called a binary condition. I didn't know what that was, but I wrote it down. On my next trip to the optometrist, I told him about my binary condition. He said he never heard of such a thing, but he tested my eyes. When the exam was over, he told me I did have a problem with my eyes. Well, it isn't a problem with my eyes, it is a problem with the muscles around my eyes. When I read, my eyes don't focus on a single line. My eyes work against each other and jump from line to line. When he told me of my condition, I just said, "Wow! All these years, I thought I was just dumb." He said, "Russ, you aren't dumb. Your condition is severe, how did you get through seminary?" I said, "I don't know. I guess I'm just stubborn." As I look back on my life, I wish I would have known about my condition earlier.

When I was young, I tried to hide my inability to read, and it caused me pain. When I was in the third grade, my teacher's name was Kellogg. That was the year I took my first reading test. Mrs. Kellogg read our scores out loud. I was in the third grade, but Mrs. Kellogg told the entire class I was reading at a first-grade level. When she read my score, the whole class laughed and the guy next to me said, "You are dumb." When I was in the sixth grade, my teacher's name was Montgomery. When it was time for reading class, everyone was required to read a single paragraph. Everyone else read flawlessly; I couldn't even read a single sentence without a mistake. Everyone would laugh at me and call me dumb. When I got ready to graduate from high school, my counselor, who only talked to me once in four years, told me I wasn't college material because my reading level was so low. I heard her say, I was dumb. When I told my parents I wanted to go into the ministry, my mother told me I wasn't intellectual

enough. My father said, "Russell, you can't even read." What I heard my own parents say was, I was dumb. To this day, I have other people read the scripture in worship because I can't. I'm afraid you might think I am dumb. Please don't ask me to include heavy liturgy in the worship service, because I just can't do it. So, when my optometrist said, "Russ, you aren't dumb," it was like pouring healing ointment on my open wounds. However, I will tell you, those discouraging words only had a short-term emotional effect. It was those who encouraged me who had a long-term effect. If you have ever received discouraging words, say, "**Amen!**" I have told you this story in the past several times, but I am going to tell it to you again for two reasons. First, you don't seem to mind listening to the same songs countless times. Maybe the same is true with my story? Second, the encouraging words in this story saved my life.

The most challenging period in my life was my seminary days. I was a full-time student and pastored a small-membership church about an hour south of Lexington, Kentucky. I did seasonal work on a tobacco farm and worked any odd job I could find. Yet, despite my labors, I was surrounded by debt. I had no help and there was only illness at home. My debt grew daily and I was falling farther behind in my school work. Driving home from school one day, I became overwhelmed with my situation. In a moment of true emotionalism, I decided to quit school and move back home. I didn't really know what I was going to do, but I was going to quit school, forget my dream of being a pastor, get a real job with a real paycheck, and get out of debt. I don't remember why, but instead of driving home, I drove to a parishioner's house. She was a woman who loved me unconditionally. For a short period of time, I was closer to her than my own mother.

Her name was Norma Marcum. She lived on the shores of Harrington Lake near Danville, Kentucky. Mrs. Marcum was a product of her area. She and her husband Glen had next to no income. She was rail thin and always had a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. In Central Kentucky, if you don't consume tobacco in some form, then you aren't a true American. I went to her home several times a week, and I never knocked on the door. On that day, I just walked in. Mrs. Marcum was in her usual position, sucking on another cigarette. She yelled at me from the other room, "What are you doing here?" When she saw me, she asked another question, "What's wrong?" The words came out of my lifeless tired body, "I can't do it anymore. I'm going to quit school, move home, get a job and get out of debt." Mrs. Marcum just shook her head and walked into the kitchen. She reappeared a couple of minutes later with a sandwich, ham and cheese on white bread, heavy on the mustard. When I had finished the sandwich, Mrs. Marcum looked at me, put her cigarette down, sat across from me at the table, and took my hands. She said, "Listen to what I am going to tell you, you dumb Yankee. Someday, you are going to be a great man. Go home, get some sleep and tomorrow just try again." She made me promise. Listen to what I am about to say. I don't tell you that story because I think I am great; you know better. I tell you that story because it reminds us of the power of encouragement. I am convinced I wouldn't be in the ministry today, if it wasn't for Norma Marcum's encouraging words. The ministry was my destiny.

The Apostle Paul had traveled all that way and he was tired, too. The brothers showed up and encouraged him to finish his destiny. Who in your life needs encouragement, so they can complete their destiny? Do you remember the words of Anne Frank? She once said, *"Everyone has inside of them a piece of good news. The good news is you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!"* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**