

Looking Back and Moving Forward

Fourth Sunday of Easter; Series C

Acts 20:17-35

Every once and a while it is helpful to *look back before moving forward*. During the summer months while I was on break from college and Seminary studies, I would often work with two of my brothers hanging and finishing drywall in the area around Lansing, Michigan. My older brother owns his own business and so for about three to four months the three of us would put in long days with some pretty demanding physical labor. We would climb up and down stairs, scaffolding, and ladders. We would climb in and out of small closets and other confined spaces. One part of the day we could be hanging twelve and fourteen foot sheets of drywall over our heads. We would often have two to three job sites in one day.

The three of us worked hard, we did good work, and we had a great time doing it together. Of all the memorable moments that we shared in our workdays, there is one that I want to bring to your attention for our purpose this morning. It was the moment right after we finished a job and were about to walk out the door to another. I can always remember the satisfaction I felt in being a part of a job well done. *I can always remember a brief instant in which I looked back before moving forward*. I would look back and review the work that we did. I would do one last “quality control” check. I would take one last moment before walking out the door likely never to step foot in that house or building again. *Looking back before moving forward*.

This Sunday in our Church year calendar is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. We heard the Gospel reading about Jesus as our Good Shepherd who leads us and guides us firmly to the hand of our Heavenly Father where we rest safely and securely, never to be snatched or plucked up (Jn 10:28-29). We learn more about Jesus in the reading from Revelation. He is the Lamb of God by whose blood we are cleansed of our Sin before God and one another. He is Lamb who has bled, died and rose again to become our Shepherd who leads us and guides us to the living waters of Holy Baptism where we receive the merit of his work on the cross and his rising from the dead personally (Rev 7:17). Through his resurrection victory, we have the certainty of eternal, resurrection life in his name. And in our reading from the book of Acts, St. Luke gives us a privileged look at an emotional scene between a faithful under-shepherd and a group of elders at the Church in Ephesus. This is the reading I want to take a closer look at this morning before we move forward from this Divine Service and into the rest of our week. As we take our closer look, it is my goal that we trust more firmly and continue to receive more faithfully our Lord’s care for his Church, you and me, through the faithful work of under-shepherds that he calls to serve flocks of his fold.

St. Paul is that under-shepherd that we learn about in our reading. He had labored quite hard for the Ephesians for the sake of Christ, the Good Shepherd. We hear about his hard work not only in the Book of Acts but also in his letter to the Ephesians that he wrote while in prison toward the very end of his Ministry. In our reading from Acts 20 Paul says farewell to the Ephesians that he had grown quite close to before he sets sail to continue his missionary work westward. He tells them bluntly that he will likely not see them again. And so in the first part of our reading Paul takes the time with the leaders of the Ephesian congregation to *look back* and review his missionary work at Ephesus and his time with the Ephesians as their under-shepherd and overseer.

Paul emphasizes three characteristics of his leadership while he looks back and reviews his Divine Call as their under-shepherd. Three characteristics that should be true of any relationship between an under-shepherd of God's Church and the beloved sheep he has been called to serve. First, Paul says to them that he has endeavored to serve them in all humility (Acts 20:19). Similar to our Lord Jesus who came to earth "not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28), so also Paul sought to serve the Ephesian Christians by making certain that he was serving *the Lord* with all humility. Later in his letter to the Ephesians Paul can even say, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8). Among the Ephesians Paul the under-shepherd, by the grace of God, "walked the talk" and exemplified the very servant leadership of Christ, the Good Shepherd.

The second characteristic of his ministry that Paul emphasizes as he "looks back" is the fact that he did not "shrink back" from preaching and teaching the full truth of the Gospel and the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:20, 27). He believed and taught what the Church has always believed and taught, that Biblical Christianity is truth. Out of love for the Ephesians He did not waiver in proclaiming and confessing truth even when it appeared unpopular and unprofitable to do so. Yet, he also spoke this truth in love (Eph 4:15), care, compassion, and with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:16-22). Judging the reaction of the Ephesian elders at the news of his departure from Ephesus, Paul's approach was well received. The Ephesian elders walk over fifty miles south from Ephesus to the port city of Miletus just to hear what he had to say before he set sail to Rome (Acts 20:17). And when he spoke and said his goodbyes there was much weeping, embracing sorrowfulness and godly affection (Acts 20:37-38). Among the Ephesians Paul the under-shepherd spoke the truth of God's salvation for the whole world through Christ. He did so with love and respect and in turn he was greatly loved and respected.

The third characteristic of his ministry that Paul emphasizes as he "looks back" is the fact that the message of the Gospel he preached is for all people, not just Jews or Israelites (Acts 20:21; 1 Tim 2:4). It is for those who feel unloved, who have no hope, who think that their lives are beyond repair. The message of the Gospel is for those who are desperately searching for someone and something to trust in for meaning, identity, and security in their lives. For God so loved the whole world that he gave his only Son, his Good Shepherd (Jn 3:16). Among the Ephesians Paul spoke the Gospel of grace for all people through faith in Christ.

Paul gathers the Ephesian elders and takes a moment to "look back" at his Ministry with the Ephesians and he emphasizes his approach: 1. He served with all humility 2. He did not shrink back from speaking the truth of the Gospel in love 3. He proclaimed the Gospel of God's love and grace for all through Christ. Then St. Paul moves forward to the next place that the Lord Called him to serve. In faith, the under-shepherd follows the Good Shepherd to continue the same faithful work—*looking back and moving forward*.

As we move toward reaching our goal that we "trust more firmly and continue to receive more faithfully our Lord's care through the faithful work of under-shepherds," I would like us to remember that the Divine Service is the time and place, each week, that God has given to each and every one of us as his holy children and disciples to *look back before moving forward*. We gather together to look back to the 2000 year old event of the cross and the empty tomb to receive God's service of grace and forgiveness. We hear the Word of God and receive the Sacraments where God delivers that

past act of forgiveness, life, and salvation to us in the present. Through a Pastor and under-shepherd God unites you to himself and his plan of salvation for all. We come together to hear the truth of God's forgiveness of our pasts, presents, and futures through the work of Jesus so that we can be free to move forward in love and service to others, living and speaking the truth in love, not shrinking back but doing so in all humility.

Many of the people that we come in contact with on a daily basis move forward each day without hope. We were reminded of this with the Boston Marathon bombing this past Monday. Spectators could observe many runners moving forward toward the finish line and experience an event, evil, that forced them to reevaluate their lives. The Apostle Paul speaks of living the Christian life as running a race. He says to the Ephesian Elders in our reading, ". . . If only I may *finish my course* and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). Elsewhere the Apostle says, "I have fought the good fight, *I have finished the race*, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). So the bombing at the Boston Marathon should lead us to ask this question of ourselves and of others, "*How is the race being run?*"

Many that you will encounter on a daily basis will get up in the morning and look back in regret, in guilt, in shame, and they will carry all of that with them throughout each day. And they are burdened by that heavy load. They are looking for something or someone to lighten it for them. They need the good news of God's free gift of forgiveness through Christ. He is the one that has carried our burden, guilt, shame, and all Sin and nailed it to the cross, putting it to death and leaving it buried in the tomb from which he rose. The world needs the hope that the Gospel brings. They need those who are firmly rooted in the joy and hope of Christ to share him even in our daily callings and stations of life. Martin Luther once described the Divine Service on Sunday morning as the place where the people of God gather to receive from the Pastor a big bag of God's forgiveness. As we go forward in our lives, we live in the rhythm of emptying that bag throughout the week, dishing out God's forgiveness, and then coming back on Sunday morning to *look back*, have that bag filled once again, in order to *move forward*. By God's grace, may we continue to *move forward* in the in faith through the faithfulness of God. Amen.