

Steady, Forward Progress!

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:9-15

We all know the story of the tortoise and the hare. It is a childhood classic that we tell our kids to teach them the importance of taking our time in life with things and people. “Slow and steady wins the race” we say. Classic stories are classics for a reason. They have meaning and application that transcend one particular time and place. I bring this story to mind for you in this time and place in order to illustrate God’s advancement of the Gospel message in this world. *Steady, forward progress. Geographically and individually God steadily* advances the message of grace alone through faith alone in Christ. This is his promise that you can count on!

Do we count on this promise? I think that it is often easy for us to doubt and question it. We long for our relatives to know the peace of the Lord and the comfort of the Gospel. In our righteous longing sometimes we can get impatient and perhaps question whether God is still at work in this world. We long for people to know the Lord and become members of our congregation so that we can continue to be a vibrant parish. In this righteous longing we may get discouraged if the Church is not growing as fast as we would like it to grow. We may think that we need to try newer methods. We may doubt whether or not we are being relevant enough. All along, where the Gospel is being preached in all its truth and purity and where the Holy Sacraments are being given faithfully, God’s promise stands—*steady, forward progress. Geographically and individually God steadily* advances his Gospel.

Let me give you a present day example of the advancement of the Gospel. There is a man who has a form of cancer and was traveling in and out of the hospital and the ICU. He is currently undergoing intense radiation treatment. This same man had no meaningful understanding of the Gospel and no relationship with God, the Heavenly Father through Christ. In fact, he was quite hostile toward Christianity. He told his devout, faithful, Church-going sister that he wanted no part of her religion. “Don’t push that stuff on me,” he said.

In the midst of this man’s battle with cancer and his strong convictions, a certain Pastor started visiting his sister while she was caring for her ailing brother in the hospital. This Pastor was providing pastoral care for her as a favor to her Pastor who is in a different state. This local Pastor visited once or twice a week for a period of weeks to check up on and pray with the sister. Meanwhile, the brother looked on. Then one day the ailing brother asked if he could join them in prayer. This simple prayer started a holy conversation between this brother and sister. The next time the pastor saw the ailing man was at Church on Easter Sunday. Shortly following that day the man told the pastor that he wanted to know the Lord more. He asked the pastor if they could go through instruction in the Christian faith so that he could eventually receive the Lord’s Supper. As the Pastor, the ailing brother, and the sister began meeting, the two sons of the man became curious and started joining their class. And so as the Pastor, the ailing man, the sister, and the two sons continued instruction in the teachings of the Christian faith, one of the sons mentioned that he had never been baptized and asked the Pastor to baptize him. One household at a time, God advances his Gospel.

We question if God is still at work in the world. We doubt as to whether or not the Gospel is still relevant. In spite of all of our doubts, questions, and concerns, the message of the Gospel still breaks into people's lives and hearts and transforms them—*steady, forward progress. Geographically and individually* God advances his Gospel.

The previous contemporary example of the *steady, forward progress* and advancement of the Gospel picks up where our reading from the book of Acts left off. In our reading, God uses the Apostle Paul to advance the Gospel both *geographically* and *individually*. God Calls Paul and his companions to advance the Gospel *geographically* from the western part of Asia, present day Turkey, to the Eastern part of Europe in Greece. Through this reading we learn about the first European converts to Christianity. Through this reading we learn how those of us of European descent came to hear and believe the Gospel! Indeed, God advances the Gospel *geographically. Steady, forward progress.*

While in Greece God also uses Paul to advance the Gospel *individually* to a woman named Lydia. God opens Lydia's heart to hear and believe the Gospel. Through Lydia the Gospel is spread to the rest of her household as they hear, believe and are baptized. One household at a time, God works through people to advance his Gospel. He advances the Gospel *individually. Steady, forward progress.*

One hearer at a time, one household at a time, and through one person at a time God continues today the work that we witnessed in the past through the mouth of Paul, the open ears and heart of Lydia and her household, and the open waters of a baptismal font. God continues to work for the *steady, forward progress* and advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He continues to spread the Gospel *geographically and individually* to your ears, to your heart, and for your household. He will continue!

God is able to continue his plans and promise today to advance the Gospel because he allowed the plans of men to once prevail. Though it was the plan of men to do away with Jesus by nailing him upon a tree, it was the plan of God to use it as a perfect sacrifice to forgive the sin of men and advance his Gospel. Though it was the plan of men to conceal the body of Jesus in a tomb with soldiers and a stone, it was the plan of God, the Father to raise his Son from the dead to resurrection life, never to die again. In this God was at work to advance the Gospel and bring victory over all the enemies of God. Through the work of a person, the person of Jesus, God advances the Gospel *geographically and individually* for you. Now you hear. Now you are baptized as God's child. *Steady, forward progress!*

In high school and college I ran cross country. In college, during the cross country off season the runners were encouraged to run for the track team in order to maintain their fitness. There was one time that I participated in a relay race. I have to admit, I was nervous. What made me nervous, however, was not the race itself but the fact that I would have to effectively receive and then hand off a baton. Of course I was also expected to do this "on the move" and with a show of grace and finesse. "What if I drop it," I thought?

God's advancement of the Gospel is somewhat like a relay race, isn't it? The "Gospel baton" is passed from person to person, place to place, and congregation to congregation. We receive what has been handed down in the Church and we continue toward the finish line of the return of our Lord. Along the course God uses people and their proclamation of the Gospel. We may at times be concerned that we might mess it up. "Am I relevant enough," we might ask? We may have these kinds of questions and doubts. Pastors might have these doubts and questions. All along God is at work through his Holy Spirit to use the faithful, devoted efforts of Pastors and others to make certain the baton is passed. *Geographically* and *individually* God *steadily* advances the message of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This is God's promise that you can count on! *Steady, forward progress!* Amen.