

Sermon- With Gratitude to My Flock and Sanctuary

Scripture: Eph 1:15-19

Sunday, March 12, 2023

Our journey through the book of Acts has taken us from the birth of the church and the emergence of Apostle Peter's leadership and ministry to Apostle Paul. We looked at his entry into the story, his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul's entry into the life of the church, his two missionary journeys and the start of his third and final journey. This third journey started with Paul staying two years in the city of Ephesus. While he was there, he preached powerfully, did many miracles and we are told all of Asia heard the Gospel because of Paul.

By the time we get to chapter 21 Paul is in Jerusalem. Once again, he gets into trouble, riots break out and he is brought to trial first in front of the Governor of Judea Procurator Felix. Felix could not figure out what charges to write up against Paul, so he sent Paul to Caesarea to be tried by his successor Festus. When Procurator Festus would not find anything against the Roman law to charge Paul with and because King Agrippa and his sister Bernice were visiting at the time, he requested King Agrippa hear the case and Paul's defense. King Agrippa too could not find anything unlawful that Paul had done and he told Procurator Festus that Paul was innocent. But because Paul had appealed to Caesar he had to be sent to Caesar. If not, he could have been released. But Paul was ready to lay down his life for the cause of the Gospel. So, he was not interested in being released at this point. His aim was to go all the way to Rome and exercise his right as a Roman citizen to be tried by the Emperor himself. And in the process his goal was to share the Gospel directly to the Emperor of Rome.

So from Caesarea, Paul was sent to Rome. I have a map here that shows the journey Paul took to finally reach Rome.

Once he gets to Rome he is under house arrest. But he also is given a fair amount of freedom. He could stay in his own rented apartment. His needs are supplied by the churches he had started. Those two years were like a Sabbatical for Paul. He was free to receive visitors and he was free to write. Those two years where the most productive for Paul wrote Ephesians, Galatians and Colossians in that apartment. It was an opportunity for him to reflect on the people he had met, the leaders of the churches he had raised and he was able to reflect on what God had done and was doing in the church.

In all these letters you can see Paul express his gratitude to the people of the churches that he founded and the people he brought to Christ.

Since we spent a lot of time last few weeks looking at Paul's time in the city of Ephesus I thought picking a passage that reflects Paul's feelings about the church of Ephesus would go well with what I want to share today. Paul writes in Eph 1 verse 15.

Every since I heard about your faith in Jesus Christ and the practical ways you are expressing it to your fellow-Christians, I thank God for you

(and I never give up praying for you.)

As I read these words today, I want to reflect on my time with the members of Argentine Mennonite Church and the practical ways you have expressed your faith in Jesus Christ.

There are many things I could share but let me highlight a few.

Firstly, this congregation has been one of the most diverse congregations I have ever come across. AMC has had people who are rich and poor, Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian Indian, educated and not so educated, traditionally Mennonite and completely non-Mennonite, young and old, formally dressed and informally dressed, able bodied and disabled. I can't think of a category of people that AMC has not been

able to welcome. To have diversity in a large congregation is easy. But to have diversity in a small congregation means that anytime you have a handful of people together you have diversity even in that setting. That is what we had here at AMC.

The second thing that I think is remarkable about AMC has been its ability to stay true to kingdom values and the Mennonite Confession of faith. As a small church it is easy to compromise and go with the flow. But this church is nothing if not a stubborn holder of the original faith and values of the Mennonite Church. This is important and needs to be remembered and celebrated. It was one of the reasons I came to AMC in the first place. Let it be remembered that this was a church that respected the authority of Scripture and an Anabaptist witness as long as it stood on Metropolitan Ave.

The third thing I think is remarkable about AMC is its founding story. This church was the spiritual center of the children's home which provided a place for orphaned and homeless kids to be nurtured and educated till adulthood. To start such a ministry took, sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, a deep commitment to serve the less fortunate and extremely hard work. And it worked. At its peak the children's home hosted about 40 kids and ran from 1924 to about the 1970s. So that is a good 50 years. In that time it served 100s of children who would have otherwise not had a future. Because this ministry is in the DNA of AMC, even when there are no kids in our congregation, we still have a ministry to young kids. There has even been a wonderful VBS I think every year that I have been here except for the Covid years. Remarkable if you think about it. Through Venture Club, this ministry to our neighborhood kids lives on. That tells you that the spirit present at the very founding of the church is still alive and I hope will live on in the legacy of AMC.

The fourth thing that makes AMC special is its generosity. How does a church of a handful of people support a pastor even a part-time one? How does AMC support ministry to the homeless and support those in need in the neighborhood, and New

Stanley Elementary and needs across the world be it Africa or Turkey or Ukraine or wherever people are hurting? I don't know how you have pulled it off. But you have done it. We have done it. And this is a source of joy for me.

The fifth thing that I will always be grateful for is the fact that you all have not just been the flock of Jesus Christ entrusted to me, but you have been the sanctuary of Christ's love that I went to when I was going through a difficult time. The enemy was strong and has many tricks up his sleeve. He thought he could knock me down several times. But he did not account on the strength and support of God's people and His church. You loved on me, gave me some weeks off when I needed it, listened when I needed to talk, ate dinners with me, helped me move and the list goes on. You even supported me as God opened a new chapter in my life with Sonia. And though everything you have faithfully prayed for me. Know that I will never forget your goodness towards me and my family all the days of my life.

The sixth thing that makes AMC special to me the worship and sharing times. AMC's worship leaders are as simple and humble as they come. But you pull from a repertoire of hundreds of hymns and contemporary music. And when these hymns and refrains are sung and accompanied by the piano and guitar, they are the musical expression of a long and hard-earned faith. And that is something that goes straight to one's soul.

And the sharing in our church has always been deep and real and sometimes even raw. That's where we have leveraged the strength of being a small congregation the most, I think. When the mic is passed around someone would always pick it up. And when I experimented with the Discovery style sermon, you were brave enough to pick that up too. The downside is, it is hard to sleep when you are so few and the mic can come to you at any time 😊 But you embraced the format and were willing to engage. Thank you church for indulging me and being willing to engage.

The seventh think that makes AMC special is the quiet labor force of this congregation who are always willing to slip in and do what needs to be done with the least bit of fanfare. Whether it is cleaning the church or rebuilding some cabinets or mowing the grass or calling the utility company or setting up the potlucks, the quiet workers of this church looked around, figured out what needed to be done and then went about doing it without skipping a beat. Know that for all your behind the scenes labor on behalf of God, your reward awaits you in heaven.

I don't want to pretend that we are the perfect church. We have plenty of shortcomings that we are well aware of. But when I reflect on my 9 years as pastor of the church on the corner of Metropolitan and 37th, the thing that overwhelms me is what a big heart this church has had. And that is why when I read the words that Paul wrote to his church in Ephesus, I wanted to borrow them to express what I feel for each of you and all those who have been part of this church and all those who have preceded us into Christ's presence. I quote,

¹⁵ Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere,^[a] ¹⁶ I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, ¹⁷ asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom^[b] and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. ¹⁸ I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance.^[c]

¹⁹ I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him.

In the days to come we have much work to do to make sure that the legacy of this beautiful church lives on. This is a task I wish to do to the best of my ability and I commit the results to God.

God is calling me to equip myself for something new. I don't know exactly what form it will take. But next Sunday I will share with you the things I am wrestling with and where I sense God calling me to in the years to come. I wish you will continue to keep me in your prayers for God's protection, guidance, capacity as I seek to serve God with everything He has given me. Let us pray.