

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Reach: Those to Come”

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Acts 16:1-5

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We continue in this series REACH, going through a pivotal stretch in the life of the early church in the Book of Acts, Acts 15-16. Along the way of course, we’re touching on aspects of our REACH Campaign, updates for our building and our missional focus with Olive Tree Early Learning Academy, but more importantly, we’re exploring how these early Christians were led by the Spirit in considering those who weren’t there yet and how the church might be shaped not just by what God had already done but by what God would do.

This week, picking up where we left off, we follow Paul as he returns to a place he had been before, a place where he had nearly been killed. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, we praise you for this testimony of the enduring impact of courage in faith, of seeking your kingdom in all our steps. We pray by your Spirit you would lead us as well in courage and in faith, to trust in the godly guidance of those who have come before, as well as to be of faithful presence with and for those to come. Guide us by your Word, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I do wonder what it must have felt like for Paul to come up to the gates of Lystra. It was a small city in southern Asia Minor, but this hadn’t been the first time Paul had been there, and I would guess he took special notice of one certain spot outside the city: where he had nearly died. See on his last stop here, a few years earlier, some powerful things had happened. A miraculous healing. Adoration from the city’s people (not all of it good, but they addressed it). Preaching the gospel. But then some folks had followed them from a couple of their previous stops, and they

hadn't taken kindly to what they had been preaching. These folks riled up the crowd so much that they turned on Paul, stoned him, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead. That was the last time Paul had been to this city, and now he was back, presumably seeing the place where he had been left for dead.

I wonder what would have possessed him to come back to such a place, a place so fickle that the crowd would sing his praises and then shortly after try to kill him, in echoes of the crowd that praised Jesus and then cried out for his crucifixion. Why would he come back? Why not just shake the dust off his feet at the place, not risk another brush with death, and just move on to the next town down the line? Why? In short, because Paul was far more concerned about those to come, for the sake of the gospel of Christ and the glory of God, than about his own preferences, his own fears, maybe even his own grudges. And consider the impact, not just for him, but for Christ's church, made because Paul went back.

When he went back into this city of Lystra, he met a young disciple named Timothy. Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother who had converted and a Greek father who had not. It seemed the Spirit had been at work in Lystra since Paul had last been there. If it were me, I'd have been tempted to think the place was a lost cause, but the Spirit had been at work, nurturing the rise of faith in the new church formed there, and in this particular household.

Paul wanted Timothy to go with him in his missionary journeys and has him circumcised. (There's a lot more that could be said about that development, suffice it to say, it showed just how committed they both were, not wanting anything to be an obstacle for someone to hear the gospel of Christ.) So Timothy sets out with Paul and Silas, going from town to town. We ended the reading today with the words in v. 5, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily," which almost feels like an understatement of the kind of impact Timothy made alongside Paul. He's with him in much of Paul's second and third missionary journeys—we're at the start of his second right here. He's sent out on his own at times, multiplying their impact, and that impact reverberates even now.

Consider even just the pages of Scripture. Obviously, the letters of Paul shaped the early church and continue to shape the church. Not sure if you've ever added it up, but the so-called Pauline letters make up about a quarter of the whole New Testament. And of course, Paul is front and center in those. But what's often overlooked is how present Timothy is through his writings too. Over and over, Paul names Timothy as a fellow co-worker, as one who was with him, sending greetings, including two letters addressed to Timothy directly, 1 & 2 Timothy. That letter of 2 Timothy paints a powerful picture of an aging Paul mentoring the younger Timothy to carry on in the ministry after he was gone. About half of Paul's writings have Timothy at least in the background like that. Then, almost a third of Paul's writings name Timothy not just as someone

who was with Paul but as a co-author of the letters. Add it all up and you have this man Timothy in the picture behind, in front, and throughout about 80% of what Paul wrote. All because Paul determined he would go back into a city in which, the last time he was there, the people had tried to kill him. Most folks would have written that off, taken a safer path, but Paul was more concerned with how the Spirit was leading him, and wasn't going to pass up a chance to see how the Spirit might be drawing in those to come.

Friends, we've been talking a lot about "those who aren't here yet." It's engrained in the DNA of the church to counterintuitively be more concerned about those whom God could further draw in than about who or what the church already was. It's in our DNA here. You've seen the words literally etched in stone on the church sign, "Inwardly Strong, Outwardly Focused." The focus is not on ourselves. Even in something as practical as our building, the focus is not on the impact it could make on those of us who are already here. It's on those who aren't here, not yet. And that's so important for us to remember as we head toward something like next week, Commitment Sunday, because I know you've been praying, I know you've been discerning not just what's convenient to do, not just what you wouldn't miss, but what God is leading you to do.

To talk more about this, let me direct your attention to one more video—this is the last one we'll show—and we'll hear from Susan and Lee Hyde and then the Co-Chairs of this campaign Bee and Bob McCallie. [Show video.]

There's a story, one that kind of gets bounced around, called "The King's Birthday." An aging benevolent king was about to have a birthday. This king was beloved by his subjects. He was fair, he was kind, he was powerful. He sought the good of his subjects, of his kingdom, before his own. So the people decided they were going to throw a grand birthday celebration, and as a part of it they'd present the king with a grand gift, a barrel of the finest wine the people could get together. Nobody on their own had all this fine wine, but together they did, so the plan was for each household to bring their best, to put it all together, for one grand gift to the king.

Then one person started thinking, "You know, I know the Smiths down the road are going to bring their best, and I know the Johnsons around the corner are going to bring their best. I know they can do a lot more than I can. So what difference does mine make? Maybe I'll just hold back. Who's going to know?" So instead this person took an empty bottle and just filled it up with water, and when all the people came together to put their wine into the big barrel, this person just waited their turn poured the water in that little bottle, thinking, "Won't make a difference."

The day of the birthday celebration came, and the people celebrated the king, a huge party, lots of fun. Then the people surprised the king, telling him that they had put together a barrel of their finest wine for him to enjoy. The king said, "Thank you. Thank you. Well this isn't just for

me to enjoy, it's for all of us to enjoy. Let's enjoy it now." The people begrudgingly agree, but they insist that the king go first.

So the king goes over to the barrel. It's got a little tap on it. He brings his glass up to it and fills up a glass. But to everyone's astonishment, it wasn't wine. It was water. It seemed everyone had thought like that first person thought: that everyone else would bring their best.

Friend's you've seen it, you've read it, you've heard it over and over, but in this REACH Campaign, it will take EACH of us. Not just in terms of reaching a financial goal, but for this effort to truly be something that rededicates and renews our focus as a church not on ourselves but on those to come, it will take EACH of us.

It's hard to do. It's easier to consider what *we* like, what *we* prefer, what will serve or what has served the church we are now. But church at its best has always lifted up as more important the impact of faith upon those to come.

If you go into the Spitzer building, many of you may have already noticed names carved into the bricks alongside the sidewalk. Or if you go downstairs to the Kingdom, there's this tile mosaic on the wall. They were part of the construction of that building over twenty years ago. Each brick, each tile has a story behind it. It represents an individual, a household that said years ago, we're going to commit to the yet unknown impact of faith that something as practical as this building can serve.

Just last week, we were sitting down for a meal, and Jack out of nowhere brings up the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," you know. Frances and I look at each other puzzled and ask, "The 23rd psalm, do you want to hear it?" Jack says, "I already know it." Even more surprised, we look at each other and then say, "Can we hear it?" So Jack goes to the other room—I don't know why he went to the other room—but then start to finish, he recites the 23rd psalm.

I'm humble bragging now, of course—you know, that's my boy. He then shortly went and kicked his brother or something, I'm sure. But here's the thing. Frances and I didn't teach him that. Maybe we should have, but we didn't. You know where he learned it? In preschool. In SHEEP. Specifically, where? In the Spitzer building.

So now I see all those bricks along the sidewalk and all those tiles in the mosaic downstairs, and I don't see generous donors—they were and are generous donors, but that's not what I see. I see people who made an impact in the faith of my son by bringing their best.

Imagine what unknown Timothy's could be impacted now.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.