

Sermon: "Expect the Unexpected"

Sunday, May 26, 2019

Baccalaureate Sunday

Scripture Reading: Acts 16:9-15, John 5:1-9

Christian Ko Choi

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

John 5:1-9

Starting in Acts 15, we are told of Paul's mission and testimony to the Gentiles. What started out to be a mission with Barnabas as a ministry partner, their vision and calling of the ministry has created a chasm in their relationship. Soon, Paul found himself with Silas and recruited Timothy on their way. Hear now the word of the Lord.

Acts 16:9-15

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us,

saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

John 5:1-9

Tonight's gospel reading comes from John, highlighting the Sabbath healing that takes place. Later on the chapter, when the Jews begin to question who healed him, the man that was healed didn't know, "for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there." (v13). Hear now the healing story of John 5:1-9.

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids-blind, lame, and paralyzed, *waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.* One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath.

Sermon: "Expecting the Unexpected"

Text: "On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there." Acts 16:13

Although this message is especially tailored to the graduates that we are celebrating this morning, may this also serve us as a reminder.

It is a joy that I get to speak front of the people who are celebrating their milestone, full of hope, dreams, and potential. It is not often that one gets to share a wisdom or a saying that is paired with such event. I will admit that I cannot give a material gift like that of a billionaire who recently forgave the educational loans of the graduating class, but I will give valuable Word of God. Like a meal when served with a complimentary wine that can bring out the savory flavor to be remembered, I hope and pray that his message on your Baccalaureate Sunday will accompany you for the years to come.

We like to say and believe that when we plan for something and worked very hard at it, there will be moments when we reap the benefits and rewards that are due our way. Sometimes those are true, having the ability to enjoy the fruits of labor that reciprocates the amount of effort that was invested. Today's passage from Acts and gospel of John, however, highlights what many of us has experienced in our lives: unexpected outcomes. Sometimes our plans get derailed, other times placed in a backburner, and sometimes - which is frustrating - it yields a different outcome than what was envisioned. Let us take a closer look at today's passage from Acts.

Paul has a dream that must been so real that convinced his prophet partner, Silas, and his spiritual son, Timothy, to act immediately to the vision that Paul had - a man of Macedonia pleading with Paul to come

over and help them. With their mutual conviction that this is what they were called to do from God, they set sail, looking for the fastest way that can get them to Philippi. One can sense their urgency, as the Bible explains their travel itinerary. To accomplish the task, they did what modern day traveler must do when traveling a great distance; go to the nearest airport (for them, seaport) and look for the fastest way there, regardless of how many stops and transfers they had to make. After making an overnight stop at Samothrace and additional stop at Neapolis, they arrived at their destination. They looked for days that matched the description of a man who was in Paul's vision, but could not find him.

Paul must have been expecting to find this person and already having shared the gospel in his house, which meant that they were being fed and housed, addressing their needs. Instead, they are still roaming the streets to find this person. Were they wrong?

What just took place in this story? First reminder for success in our lives is for us to be not afraid of failure and that we do not make the failure the end of the story. Based on the vision that Paul had, through his conviction, he and his spiritual brethren took steps to answer the call. They had a plan. They executed the plan exactly, but their result was not what they expected. Their spirits were crushed. Doubts started to flood in. All the energy and effort seemed to be wasted. They were probably thinking similar sayings that are still around our modern times: When bad times come, they come in bunches; or bit more positive saying - failure is the best teacher for success. They could have simply turned around and said this was not meant to be, but they turn back to the Lord to find the unexpected treasure that was waiting for them.

On a Sunday morning, they are changing what they are looking for: rather than a man in the vision, now they are looking for a place for prayer. They are looking for a place to worship and seek the Lord. They went outside the town and headed to the river, where they heard there was a place of prayer. Instead, they find a group of women gathered there. Remember that unlike the modern times, women did not have any place in society, any power nor authority. God inspired Paul to share the gospel anyway. It was Sabbath after all, and this was the spot people said to be a place of prayer. Unexpectedly, a powerful woman with authority and influence in upper society named Lydia stood up and said her household will be baptized today, and Paul and his spiritual brothers in arm did not know what to do next. After they baptized Lydia's household, Paul, Silas, and Timothy still found their needs unmet, until Lydia persuaded them to stay at her place.

We cannot expect all the good and bad unexpected things that will take place in our live. We can, however, learn to expect the unexpected grace of God to carry us each moment of our lives. Even in our failures, God is cheering for us, for the bigger plan is at hand. God has taken every step with you so far and God does not plan to forsake you, even through the darkest valleys. It is not God's desire to see us fail but wants us to grow and reach the potential that God has planned for each one of us.

In his new book, *Crushing*, Bishop T.D. Jakes says, "it's imperative that our life's painful detours be hidden from us, lest we forfeit the entire trip toward our future because of our discomfort with being diverted."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we are led to our personal failures of achieving our plans in order to experience the unexpected grace of God and the impact we will have in God's Kingdom building process. But if we were to know the

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<sup>1</sup> Jakes, T.D. *Crushing; God Turns Pressure into Power*. Large Print. Faith Words : Hachette Book Group. New York, NY. 2019 ed. Pg 13.

'life's painful detours' ahead of time, we will most likely not want to go through the failures, not want to grow, and be content being where we are. As Martin Luther said, "This life is not godliness, but growth in godliness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way." Always remember that although we are God's masterpiece, but we are still being formed into one that will spend eternity with God.

Second tip for success in our lives comes from our John passage. We need to be patient. It is our dream to be successful as soon as we can be. Magazines talk of the youngest person to become a self-made millionaire or to graduate from college, or to have some type of success, but true success is not measured in dollar figures, in number of degrees, or fame. It is measured in character and intangibles. What is my basis for this? In 1 Corinthians 12, spiritual gifts / talents are shared with us. All things that can be done by individuals that carry that ability. However, the chapter ends with a verse that says, "I will show you a still more excellent way." And begins chapter 13, the purpose and intention of how one uses the materials and gifts through love. When love is defined, (I think to be a list of importance from most important to the least), it starts with love is being patient. No person's legacy will be around the amount of money that person has earned in the lifetime, but what their character and actions they have done with resources around them.

Back to today's gospel passage. There is a man who has been ill for 38 years. That is a long time. How do I know? I will turn 38 in few days. I cannot imagine being ill my entire lifetime. This man was at a pool called Beth-Zatha, translated as "a house of mercy". He knew that certain seasons, the pool would stirrup and whoever enters the pool would be healed. This man has been there many years where he had to watch others being healed but not himself. He remained in the Beth-

Zatha, for he wanted to receive the mercy and gift of healing. In our faith, we confess that we are broken people, in need of God's mercy and healing. May it be physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, or combination of these, we need to first acknowledge that we are not perfect and have weaknesses. As a result we have broken relationships, broken marriages, broken careers, even broken churches / selves. Lot of times, people settle for brokenness and replace them with something other than God. Drugs and many form of addictions, hopelessness, self-harm/blame/pity, and the list goes on. We want to change our situations, the world we live in, and others around us to be better. Many of you young adults dream about how to change and impact the world in a positive way. Jesus, who could have healed this man whenever, decided to wait. Jesus knew this man was there for a long time and knows that he wants to get better but asks him anyway. "Do you want to be made well?"

Why did Jesus ask that question knowing that he wanted to be healed? In fact, the man doesn't even answer, but Jesus heals him anyway and this man doesn't even know that it was Jesus who healed him! This man was expecting for an angel of God to come down from heavens to stir the waters so that he can get into the water to be healed – maybe fight his way into the water. But this time, it was the Son of God, in human form that came as the angel – the messenger – and not by stirring of the waters, but through a command. This man, who has witnessed many healings by the previous ways was shown the unexpected grace of God through the words, "stand up, take your mat and walk." All this man had to do was to do the unexpected: be patient and believe that he will get better, will be healed, as the name of the pool suggested and have witnessed. In other words, have hope and faith in the Lord as we wait patiently.

What do these two passages have in common? As the title of this sermon suggests, we need to expect the unexpected grace of God. This leads to the third point of the message: we need to change our mind of how God interacts with us, cares for us, leads us, forgives us, show mercies to us, and most importantly how God loves us. To be able to expect the unexpected grace, we need to free God of all the limitations in our thoughts and let God be God: being fully omniscience, omnipotent, and omnipresent in our lives. God will work through our strength, God will work through our weaknesses and failures, God will work through us even when we don't think we are worthy. God is always seeking an intimate relationship with all of us, and God's mercies are always flowing. As we grow spiritually to expect the unexpected grace of God, what David said of God in Psalm 23 will also be true to all of us.

“Surely your goodness and love will follow me all days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”<sup>2</sup> Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 23:6