

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

November 22, 2020

“Giving in Is Not Giving Up”

Part X of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit”

Acts 28:17-31

George C. Anderson

The movie, *Shanks Redemption*, lives in my television set. I flip through the channels and there it is. Unless I’m in a hurry to find the Carolina basketball game, I almost always stop and watch for a bit. Having seen the whole movie, I find nearly every scene I stumble on worth watching.

- It might be the scene when the inmate, Andy Dufresne, explains to the corrupt prison guard how he can help save him money on his tax return while that guard is holding him upside down off a roof ready to drop him to his death.
- Or when Andy, knowing he will be punished, sneaks into an office and plays over the prison loudspeaker system a recording of *The Marriage of Figaro* so the inmates can be reminded there still is beauty in the world.
- Or when the warden realizes that Andy not only has escaped, but has sent evidence of the warden’s crimes to the local paper and that the officers he sees entering the prison from his office window are actually there to arrest him.

With the caveat that some scenes are brutal, this is a movie in which you can drop in and out of because each scene has its own fascination.

The book of Acts is like that. With our Sermon Series, *Catching Up With the Spirit*, I would say that we have not so much *covered* the book of Acts as *sampled* it. We have dropped in on this



story and then that one, and each time were rewarded with that story's—that scene's—ability to fascinate.

But it does help to have read the whole book. That is especially true this morning because our passage is the book's conclusion, and the conclusion of Paul's story. The one who was introduced as a persecutor of Christians is now the Christian who is persecuted. He is under house arrest in Rome. Let's remember what he has been through:

- his first hunting down Jesus-followers only to become one of them;
- his years of study and growth in the faith;
- his partnering with Barnabas and then their falling out;
- the history-changing agreement he helped work out at the Jerusalem Council;
- his sermons and debates in synagogues and on the streets;
- the times he was shipwrecked, arrested and stoned;
- his run-ins with Jews, merchants, Romans,
and a snake while stranded on an island...

He's lived a life... and for what?

No less than to *win the world to Christ*. He preached, taught, and, yes, debated with Jews in synagogues and Gentiles on the streets so as to share the good news of God's reconciling love for the world: that no one—regardless of race, gender, or social status—is beyond God's reach. Now he wants Jews to remain Jews and Gentiles to remain Gentiles but he wants the world to know that we can live in harmony if we will find our unity in the love and grace God has shown in Jesus. Then we can be kind, moral, compassionate and just.

Does it surprise you to hear that *Paul failed*?

Oh, certainly we can laud his achievements. He convinced Jesus' disciples to accept Gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ even without their first becoming Jews. And over his four missionary journeys around the Roman Empire, he has established church after church. But while many have heard and believed the Gospel, **more** have not—and many of them have become hostile.

And within the churches he established there are tensions among the believers

- between the Jews and Gentiles... *again*,
- between those who have money and those who do not,
- between the super-spiritual (the spiritually "woke") and those they look down on.

Just to put the finishing touches on what I am saying, Paul, who is a Jew with a mission to Gentiles, is under house arrest because both Jewish and Roman leaders conspired to constrain him.

But even under arrest, Paul won't give up. Jews from near and far come to hear him and debate him, and Paul gives his witness with passion and even some frustration. Listen... and listen for the Word of God:



²³ After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. ²⁴ Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. ²⁵ So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

²⁶ ‘Go to this people and say,
You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

²⁷ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.’

²⁸ Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.

³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Can I get by with another movie reference? *About Schmidt* is supposed to be a comedy. I guess it is because it is often funny, but the movie is also very sad.

The movie begins with the retirement of Warren Schmidt who has spent his entire career working as an actuary for an Omaha company called *Woodman Insurance*. At his retirement dinner, his replacement gives a speech about how difficult it will be to fill Warren’s shoes and how he may need Warren’s help with old clients. Moved by those words, Warren returns to the office the next day to help with the transition. He is not only brushed off by his replacement but finds all of his files in a dumpster. The rest of the movie is about a road trip he takes hoping to find that he still matters to the family he neglected all those years.

The text for this movie could be a Thomas Merton quote: “[We may spend our whole life climbing the ladder of success, only to find when we get to the top that our ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.](#)”¹

Richard Rohr drew on that quote in his book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Rohr agrees with Merton, but also wants to cut some slack for those who begin their lives trying to prove themselves in the world. We have to start out that way. How else do we find out who we are? How else are we going to find the early energy to do something significant and

¹ As quoted by another monk, Richard Rohr, in his book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.



important in our lives? How else are we going to succeed in anything... or fail? We have to climb that ladder, even though it is a project doomed to fail.

No, that's not quite right. Rohr wouldn't say, "doomed to fail," but rather "doomed to fall." We are mortal and it is inevitable that we will fall short of our best aspirations. The question is not whether we fall, but instead if our inevitable fall is going to break us or make us. If we end up disillusioned,
or feeling that we have been cheated in life,
that some kind of bargain with the world or with God has been broken,
or that God has let us down because the world has let us down—
those we have trusted have let us down,
because we have let ourselves down...
if we end up cynical or mean,
the fall has broken us.

But the fall can make us, Rohr suggests, when we fall into God's grace. When we realize that all we have at the end to save us is God's grace, then we can reach that time when we can really live authentically, regardless of when we achieve or fail.

The Gospel of grace is what Paul has been preaching his whole life. He never gives up the fight to convince others. And sometimes, despite what he believes about grace, he can get carried away.

We see that in our passage, don't we? Paul knows his time is short. Even if he lives until he dies a natural death, many more years are behind him than before him. He also suspects what church tradition later tells us happens. Probably as a result of Emperor Nero's attempt to wipe the Christian movement out, Paul is later beheaded.

When Paul looks back over his life, he knows that he has won more opponents than converts. His is a minority report. He's famous though. And Jews come from around the world to see him. In their conversations, we see that Paul is not going to give up... not even under arrest. He knows the Torah and the prophets better than most of those who come, and he so wants them to understand that he is not denying any of it. He wants them to know that Jesus is the embodiment of the love that is behind the Law of Moses and is the embodiment of the justice that the prophets demand.

And as with his whole life, in this conversation he wins some and loses more. Some believe and more don't, and they start arguing with each other.

Paul even loses his temper. He does what we have all seen happen and, if we are honest, we have done ourselves. Paul yells at the backs of those who are leaving. He throws scripture at them. "Isaiah was right about you. Isaiah said, 'some will listen and not hear, look and not perceive, and it will be because their hearts are dull, their ears are deaf, and their eyes are shut.' Well, the Gentiles are listening, and that's why the Holy Spirit is moving away from Jews to Gentiles."

I'll grant that the book of Acts is probably wrapping things up by explaining why the Gospel moved with more ease among Gentiles than Jews, but I don't think this is Paul's best moment.



- Remember first, that some of the Jews who visit him do believe and accept what Paul is telling them, so obviously the Spirit is moving among Jews.
- Remember second, that Paul is under house arrest because Roman rulers put him there. His message runs into Gentile walls as well as Jewish ones.
- Remember third, that Paul's whole message is that in God's grace, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, for all are one in Christ Jesus.
- Finally, remember the last two verses of our passage and the book of Acts, the two verses about the next two years—probably the last two years—of Paul's life.

³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Though Paul is confined under arrest, he welcomes all, preaching and teaching boldly and freely. I see a change in Paul after his debate with those visitors and before those last two verses. I see someone who has come to fully accept his circumstances and has peace. He welcomes guests and shares his joy. Paul knows that some will receive and some will reject, and that he probably will never be free of arrest again, but Paul doesn't give up because he doesn't have to win. He has only to offer a witness to the grace that has won him... and might, just might, win others.

When this pandemic first hit this past February, I was teaching a class on James Davison Hunter's book, *To Change the World*. We had to shut the class down after two sessions, and it was a huge disappointment for me because I was never able to get to the overall point that Hunter was making... a point I thought was very important as we then faced an election in a highly divided and polarized world. I saw so many putting their hope and happiness in the hands of some agenda or another.

The book, you see, is about the ways American Christians have tried to win America. I won't go into the detail, but he talked about how conservatives have tried to take over the reigns of power in the culture so the church can have complete freedom to convert souls... and have failed. He talked about how liberals have tried to cooperate with the reigns of power in the culture to enforce a social agenda of equity and justice... and have failed. And he talked about those who have tried to stay out of it... and have failed at that, because it is impossible to live apart from what is going on in the world and irresponsible to try.

And then he got to his point. Of course we fail. Our gospel is not worldly success but the power of the cross to save sinners. We get lost in our righteous causes and we begin to think that the only acceptable outcome is to bend the world to our will. But we will fall short, and one reason we will is the moral failure already within us. We fall short even in the good that we do.

The best we can do, Hunter says, is to do what Paul did in his confinement, and that is to continue to witness and strive for the justice and peace that we will never fully achieve.

That does not mean we give up. Oh no. We have to strive to be better, to do better, to better our world—to promote dignity, to fight against injustice and corruption, to promote the



moral rule of Law in personal and communal life. But we do so because we are called to it—called to make a witness. So what if we witness to a grace that falls on deaf ears and dull hearts. It is still a grace that claims and saves us, gives us joy. And when we fail, we only then prove that we have taken up the cross of defeat to witness to God’s final victory of resurrection.

Hunter closes his book by saying that “Christians, at their best, will neither create a perfect world nor one that is altogether new; but by enacting shalom and seeking it on behalf of all others through the practice of faithful presence, it is possible, just possible, that they will help to make the world a little bit better.”

This Thursday, we will celebrate Thanksgiving. It will be for many a Thanksgiving confined within the frustrations and stresses of a pandemic. Many will not be able to gather with all the loved ones who normally come together on that day. It will be like we are under house arrest. And we will observe the day still stressed by the world’s news.

But our passage asks us, “why should that stop us from giving thanks?” For even in the confinement of our humanity, we can give thanks for God’s grace that claims us as we are and calls us to live and hope for a better, if not perfect, life, family, community and world. When we don’t have to win, it is amazing sometimes what can be won... in our own hearts, in some of those we know and in parts of our world.

