



Acts 21:1-15
Believe
Surrender to Jesus

Rev. Brian North
February 3rd, 2019

This last week I have felt a little like Paul and his journeys described in this morning's passage, because Brad Hurte, Gwen, and I were in Colorado Springs for our denomination's annual National Gathering. So after our Annual Meeting last Sunday ended at 1:30, I went home to get Gwen because she'd taken the kids home. We then left our house at 1:50 and drove to Sea-Tac, got the car parked, took a shuttle to the airport, got on a flight that departed at 3:55 for Denver, from there got a shuttle that took us to our rental car, then took the rental car to Colorado Springs, spent a few days there walking back and forth between the hotel and the church where the conference was, and then did the whole trip in reverse. And so this morning, I want to share a little of that experience as it relates to today's theme in our "Believe" sermon series we're in.

The National Gathering is an annual a conference that ECO (A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians) leadership organizes for pastors, church staff, elders, and other ministry leaders, to equip and encourage us to help our churches flourish. Over 900 attended this year. There are always 4 or 5 keynote speakers, plus a few other speakers that we all hear in the main sessions as well, and then another 40 or more break-out sessions led by pastors, ministry leaders, Christian non-profit leaders and others as they share on a wide range of topics, all designed to help the churches of ECO flourish.

Let me give you a sampling of things. One of our keynote speakers was Rich Stearns, the just-retired President of World Vision. He challenged us all to be centered on the great commandments to love God and love neighbor, and the Great Commission, that we go and make disciples; There were breakout seminars on all kinds of topics including Theology; on the intersection of Faith, pop culture, technology and media; there was one titled, "Whole Life Discipleship for Believers from a Muslim Background;" Racial Reconciliation; One was titled, "Getting Your Corporate/Legal/Fiduciary House in Order;" another was titled, "Clarity Changes Everything: How Clarity on the 5 Irreducible Questions of Leadership Can Transform Your Congregation." There was one for pastor's spouses, titled, "The Unique

Journey of the Pastor’s Spouse.” Each year, the conference is like this, and it’s always encouraging, challenging, and inspiring, and I wish everyone from Rose Hill could go.

This year also included a pre-conference “pastors and spouse” retreat that was attended by 250 people. The theme for this year’s conference was “Locally Grown” and the thing we were encouraged to consider throughout the week and as we lead our churches is to take our next flourishing step – as a disciple, as a church leader, and as a church. Really, it’s a conference that encourages us to do exactly what today’s belief statement is about: Staying dedicated to God’s purposes. That is our theme statement for today: **“I dedicate my life to God’s purposes.”** And it happens when we surrender ourselves to Jesus, which is the title of the sermon. This builds on last week’s theme of keeping God’s purposes in focus...of having clarity on God’s calling in our lives, not letting things distract us, and keeping Jesus at the center of our lives, focused on Him.

So today, in continued response to God’s grace and goodness and love, our response goes even deeper, to say that we are dedicated to God’s purposes. We’re giving time and effort, and energy. And that’s a lot of what the conference was about. Helping church leaders consider their next steps...consider how they’re going to lead and guide their churches in spending their time, energy, and effort so they would make disciples and build up the body of Christ right where they are, flourishing in their local community.

This passage is about Paul’s journey to Jerusalem. He is dead-set on going there. Every step he takes, every move he makes, He knows God is watching Him; and he’s completely dedicated to going where He believes God is calling him. This is all because Paul has completely surrendered to Jesus. **Paul’s life is completely dedicated to bringing honor and glory to Jesus, and telling the world about the love of God in Christ.** Jesus is central to everything he does, and his dedication to Jesus is born out of his surrender to Jesus.

So often, when we think of “Surrendering” our lives to Jesus, we think of a

one time act, as it is in other kinds of surrenders. When a military unit or a criminal surrenders, it's a one-time thing. You raise up the white flag, throw your weapons down, raise up your hands, and it's done. But for us, it's a daily surrendering. It's not a one-time thing that we do. There is a first time, for sure. But it's ongoing after that. Jesus himself says, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).**

But the journey to that first surrendering to Jesus can be a long and winding road for some people. It's a process, sometimes with a lot of different people helping to lead someone to their first surrendering to Jesus. This past week I met someone who is on her own journey, and I believe it will one day end with surrender to Jesus – perhaps soon. She's not quite there yet, though she's closer than she was just a few years ago, and I'd like to share her story with you. This will take a good chunk of the rest of the sermon, so this is definitely a different kind of message than usual. But I believe you will be blessed, encouraged, and challenged in your own surrendering to Jesus and His purposes. So, this was just after a four-day conference encouraging us church leaders in ministry. I was coming home really tired, but pumped up by all that I heard, and anxious to pour over the notes I took (had to do hadn-written thanks to a laptop battery that's not working right) and get them onto my computer and organize them and add on other things I remembered but didn't get down...and I still had a sermon to write. And then I met Jennifer.ⁱ

She was sitting next to me on my flight from Denver to Seattle on Thursday evening. She was probably about my age, and used to live in Kirkland. **In fact, within a couple minutes of our conversation, we discovered that until about 18 months ago when she and her family moved out to Monroe, they lived about 6 blocks from our house.** When I described my house to her as being almost right next to Spinney Park, and that we had a homemade sign with directional signs labeled and pointing to various locales that are near and dear to us, she said, “Oh! I know your house! We used to walk our dog by there regularly.” With the Highlands neighborhood in common, we immediately struck up a bit of a friendship. She found out I was a pastor, and amazingly, that didn't cause the conversation to end right there as it sometimes does.

I asked her some questions about her family, including her son and daughter. And what I found out was that her son, Syd, the younger of her two, died about a month after he graduated from Lake Washington High School, in a tragic accident in the summer of 2017. You may remember it. It had extensive media coverage because of the circumstances around the accident, including the role of alcohol in the accident, the fact that Syd had fallen out of a car window onto the freeway, and that the driver of the car drove off and left him there on 405. The driver was later found by police.

So, before this 3-hour flight was even 10 minutes old, I learned that I was sitting next to the mother of this young man, whose death I remembered, and happened less than five blocks away from us right here. The rest of the flight was consumed in conversation that largely centered around this tragedy: how she found out when the police came to her house, her grief, how she's coped and even healed, how her husband and daughter are doing (not nearly as well as her), the amazing community of people that surrounded them at his death and continue to do so, the memories of her son and the people who have shared with her how he impacted their lives, and more. She shared a lot. I also couldn't help but asking about the tattoos that were on her hands and wrists, which I then found out were only the tip of the iceberg as she described the others that were up and down her arms – including one on her right bicep in memory of her son. She was amazingly open to talking, and only once showed any teary emotion.

One of the things she said that had really encouraged her in her grief was a weekly grief support group she was participating in at an area church. And a couple years earlier before his death, she had attended a 12-step program for work-alcoholics, something she struggles with. She and her husband also knew their son was involved in under-age drinking, and for a time she brought him to an AA group – right here at our church. Through the 12-step workaholics program that she participated in she came to realize something about herself – and it's continued with the grief support group – ...she has come to realize that she's not agnostic as she thought she was. (Agnostic = “can't know” whether God exists or not.) She had grown up going to church. She had a grandfather and an uncle who were both pastors.

She went to church some into High School, but the fundamentalist views of her grandfather and her uncle, and the way they shared their faith and talked about Jesus with her, turned her off to the Christian faith, and she walked away from God and the church after High School, not quite turning to full-blown atheism, but agnosticism.

Through her workaholics program, 3 or 4 years ago, however, she began to have her eyes opened to God. She told me that at first, she didn't feel right joining in with the others in reciting their "creeds" that included statements about God and a Higher Power. She said she "felt like a hypocrite" – which I thought was pretty ironic since Christians are about the only ones in society who get that label applied to them. But slowly ("fake it 'til you make it" she said!), God has opened her up, and she's come to some sense of belief in God. **She said that she believes God exists, that God is love, that God hears prayers, and that God is with her in her grief.** That's pretty darn good theology! In fact, as an expression of her faith, she said that the fact that I, a pastor from the neighborhood she used to live in, was sitting next to her, was not an accident. She even used the word "providential" to describe what most would call "coincidental."

And, she said that while the death of her son was a terrible tragedy because of a number of bad decisions that he and others made, she had a strong sense that this could be used for good; that it was even her responsibility to take the message of his death out into the world to help others stay on a straighter and narrower path than her son had, and to come along others in their times of grief. She's already reached out to a couple people she's come across who have lost children recently. She understands what they're going through. Some of her son's friends have told her that they have changed their social partying behavior because of his death. In about a month, a memorial sign will be placed along 405 where he died, just north of NE 85th Street, that may help remind others to drive safely and soberly.

Toward the end of our conversation, **I asked her this question: "You've talked a few times about spiritual things, and you're attending a grief support group at a church...Are you a part of a church in any other kind of way?"** She isn't, she said. But there wasn't a cold disdain for God and the

church. This tragedy hasn't caused her to turn her back on God even more. In fact, it's done quite the opposite. She's clearly open to the hope and healing God brings us, and I would say she is journeying toward a relationship with Jesus. It's been a long and winding road, but she's on the way to a relationship with God.

And here's what she said about God, at least a couple of times (un-prompted by me): **"I believe God exists, I believe He is love...but I don't really know how to define who God is."** Of course, the Bible tells us that "God is love" so maybe she's pretty close. And as a pastor who believes that Jesus is "...the way the truth and the life" as Jesus himself says, and that he is not only the definition of God, but *is* the living God come to us in the flesh... Given all of that, I wanted to see if she might even take that step of faith right then, and fully surrender to Jesus. But because of her previous experience with her grandfather and uncle, who drove her away from Jesus, I was hesitant. The fact that she'd even have a conversation with a pastor was pretty good progress, I thought, and I didn't want to push too hard. But I didn't have the sense (Holy Spirit?) that just listening was enough. I felt God had put us next to each other on that plane, and the purpose of His that I needed to be dedicated to right then was to help her to take another step toward Jesus.

So God opened my mind to figure out an appropriate way to encourage her to consider Jesus as the crystal-clear "definition" of who God is. I asked her, "You have a Bible at home, I imagine, right?" Based on what I knew of her, I figured she would. She said she did. **And then I said, "If you want to know who God is, I would encourage you to read the Gospel of John."** That's all I said, as far as inviting her to know Jesus. If other Christians have previously gotten in the way of her following Jesus, I figured: why not encourage her to hear from God's word directly herself? Why not invite her to encounter Jesus personally in Scripture, rather than through some messed up effort of my own? Maybe I should have opened my Bible and read something to her right then, or shared something from memory... I don't know. But this is what I thought seemed appropriate. She seemed open to my suggestion. She didn't make a promise that she would read it... but she had a certain thoughtfulness and openness in her response when I made the

suggestion, and I think she will read the Gospel of John.

And I think one day, she's going to surrender to Jesus. It's been a long road for her thus far. In spite of the ups and downs, she keeps walking down the path before her, and I firmly, firmly believe that God is with her in the midst of it. In fact, even she said that very same thing: That God has been with her in the midst of her pain, grief, and her daily journey through life.

People like her are all around us. They're in our neighborhoods. They're in our places of work. They're in our schools. They're in our church. They might not have yet surrendered to Jesus, but that doesn't mean God isn't drawing them down the path, one step at a time, toward Him. He's going to work in different ways to make that happen, including through people who have surrendered to Jesus and follow him like you and me.

That's why we need to re-surrender to him every day, so we would be dedicated to God's purposes, which include reaching people like her. Is that a purpose we're dedicated to? God himself is so dedicated to that purpose of reaching people that He sent His son, Jesus, to live, die, and be raised from the dead, so God would be defined for us, and we would know how much he loves us, and so we'd be in relationship with Him. God loves *you* that much. That may be news to you, but it's true. Drawing people into relationship with Him, and inviting people to surrender to Him, is a core purpose of God; it is central to who He is. I pray that you know that deeply in your life. Let's be dedicated to that same purpose. It's the path He wants us all to walk down as we flourish for Him. We don't have to go from city to city and country to country like Paul did. We don't have to travel to Colorado Springs or anywhere else. We can be "Locally Grown" as the theme of our conference was, and live into His purposes right where we live, work, study, and play. Let's just keep going forward, one step at a time, flourishing for Jesus every step of the way as we surrender to Him and live into his purposes for us each and every day.

As we wrap up this morning's message, I invite you to join with me in this statement of belief about our relationship with God, and affirm our dedication to His purposes: **"I dedicate my life to God's purposes."** Let's

live into that for ourselves, and for people like Jennifer and so many others who need to know who God is. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Even though the major event from her life that I share in the message is well-documented online in various media outlets, I've changed her name here.