

A New Depth Acts 7:55-60

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three weeks I have introduced you to three sister congregations in the North American Lutheran Church, each of which started within the last three years.

- Each is a formally chartered and recognized congregation in the NALC.
- That means each is entitled to the same privileges and standing we have.
- They are eligible to send delegates to the convocation, to vote on constitutional amendments, to call a pastor – all the things we as a 108-year-old church get to do on a regular basis and maybe even take for granted.

This morning I want to introduce you to a ministry that is not yet that far into the process. It does not have status as a congregation in our denomination and is likely several years from it. It is a church plant. What is a church plant? Well, it works this way:

- Someone, often a pastor but not necessarily so, feels called by God to go into a city or section of a city where there is a lack of a solid Christian congregation.
- There are a host of demographic studies available to help in that discernment process.
- The pastor goes into that area and begins to build relationships. For example, one church planting pastor I know volunteered to head the committee that was generating support for an upcoming school levy. Because he was always in the news, he got to meet a lot of people and build a lot of relationships.
- At some point you begin to hold a Bible study – maybe several Bible studies – seeking to attract people who are interested in knowing more about God and the Bible.
- You meet with them, build relationships with them, and hopefully at some point they start following Jesus and growing in their relationships with Him and maybe even become willing to form the core group for a new church.
- You are quite literally starting from scratch. You are planting a church.

That's where today's focus is – on a church plant. Meet "The Feast."

- The church planter in this case is Pastor Jill Stillman.
- She is based in Herkimer, NY, which is about 15 miles southeast of Utica, or about halfway between Syracuse and Albany.
- Pastor Jill currently hosts one Bible study every Saturday afternoon at 3 p.m. at Salvatore's pizza restaurant.
- Her weekly gathering consists of a simple Bible study followed by a communion service for those who are interested.

When I asked if she had any pictures I could share with you, Pastor Jill responded that because they are not yet a formal church, they haven't had any "picture worthy" events. It isn't even necessarily the same group of people that come from week-to-week. There is no "core group" committed to this effort yet.

She thanked me for reaching to you, but didn't think her Bible study matched what I was trying to accomplish with these introductions. But I politely disagreed. I told her we wanted to pray for her and for the Feast. Here is her response:

This ministry/mission could certainly use your (and your congregation's) prayers. We are in a very economically depressed and dechurched/unchurched and somewhat Christian-hostile area, so it's been a tough slog.

A tough slog. I don't about you, but I hear a bit of discouragement in that line. Will you join me in praying for "The Feast" and for Pastor Jill?

Now, let me define three of her terms here because they will lead me into the sermon:

Dechurched people are those who were formerly either very, somewhat or minimally active churchgoers, but have not attended (or watched online) a church service in the past six months, excluding a special event such as a wedding or a funeral. COVID created a lot of dechurched people.

Unchurched people are those who have never really been to church but it also includes those people who have grown cold to the idea of church. Many unchurched people have experienced shame, guilt, and judgment from a church, and they really don't want anything to do with it.

Christian-hostile people are openly opposed to the idea of Christianity. There is more than a coldness to the idea of church. There is an intensity in their dislike for the church. As you pray for Pastor Jill, remember that she senses the hostility about Christianity around her.

In the Book of Acts there were no dechurched or unchurched people. The church hadn't been around long enough to have them! But there most definitely were people who were "hostile" to the first Christians. That hostility forms the background to the first reading today.

- It is in the environment of hostility to the Christian faith that we are introduced to Stephen.
- He comes onto the scene about 2 years after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.
- I think Stephen probably followed Jesus as He taught and performed miracles. I think he was probably in the upper room when Pentecost happened, but I can't verify that on the basis of Scripture.
- I do know that Stephen became a part of the leadership core of the new church when he was chosen to be one of the very first deacons (Acts 6). In that role he was commissioned with the feeding of the widows so that the Apostles could be free to preach and pray.
- His passion for the Lord, though, led him to speak publicly about his faith, and those speeches riled the anger of the religious authorities.

We sometimes forget that the initial persecution of the Christian church came from the Jewish religious authorities. The Romans don't start persecuting the church for another 40 years or so, but for most of the book of Acts the persecution you read about came from the very people these Christians used to worship with in their Temple and synagogues.

- Saul – who would later become the Apostle Paul following his own salvation experience – was a Jewish Pharisee, persecuting under the authority of the Jewish religious leaders.

Christianity was clearly a threat to the Jews. It challenged everything they practiced and believed. And they did not sit quietly by while the gospel was proclaimed. They became increasingly hostile to the Christian faith, so hostile that in our reading today Stephen is executed.

But that persecution, as violent as it became, did not stop the faith. Instead it had three UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE #1: THE FAITH OF THE CHRISTIANS BECAME DEEPER

Look at the depth of Stephen's faith:

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:59-60)

Could you do that? When I read this story that's the question I asked myself. In those circumstances, how would I have responded?

The country of Sudan has been in the news these past several weeks as the two most powerful generals in the country battle each other for primary control. This is a power struggle issue, not a religious one.

- But in the early 1990's there was a religious struggle going on – one that resulted in a lot of bloodshed.
- Arab Muslims were raiding the country slaughtering Christians for no other reason than their faith.
- In 1993 an American journalist went into southern Sudan to interview a group of children from a Sunday school. Many of their relatives had already been killed.
- The journalist asked, "Would you ever consider converting to Islam? Or would you prefer to die for your faith?"
- The children replied, "We will always remain Christians because that is the truth."
- The journalist reported later "As they spoke, their faces seemed to glow with light, just like Stephen's."

You see, the forces of evil try to stop the message of faith, but there is an unintended consequence that naturally results when they do. Every time faith is challenged, it grows deeper.

- The challenges you face, the hostility of our current culture, don't stop Christianity. It makes it stronger. It makes you stronger.

James put it this way in his epistle:

Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete... (James 1:2-4)

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE #2: OTHER PEOPLE SEE YOUR FAITH ON DISPLAY

Look at verse 58:

Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:58)

When Stephen was being pelted with stones, when he prayed to ask for forgiveness for those who were killing him, a young man named Saul saw the whole thing. And he loved it!

Just two verses later we read:

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. (Acts 8:2-3)

Fueled by that, his actions got even worse...

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. (Acts 9:1)

But then Saul had this tremendous encounter with the risen Christ, and his life was changed dramatically. He became Paul – writer of most of the New Testament.

The early church father Augustine made this observation:

The Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen. (Augustine)

No matter how hard he tried, Saul could never forget Stephen's faith. When we stand up for our faith, people see it ... and they can never forget it.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE #3: THE GOSPEL SPREADS

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (Acts 8:1)

The goal of the hostility was to eliminate the faith. But the actual result was that Christianity spread. All of those Christians who fled for safety from Jerusalem took their faith with them. James will call them:

... the twelve tribes scattered among the nations ... (James 1:12)

When the Communist party came to power in China in 1949 it began to persecute the church, so the church went underground. In 1949 there were 4 million Christians in that country. In the early 2000s the church was allowed to emerge again. When it did, there were 38 million Christians. Today Christianity is the fastest growing religion in China. Last estimate is there are 44 million Christians there.

Under pressure, the gospel spreads.

APPLICATION

When Jesus began His preaching ministry He outlined certain characteristics of Christians. We call them beatitudes. You know them: Blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers and so on.

The last one on that list of beatitudes says this:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)

In an environment where people respond with hostility to the gospel, the blessing of God reigns.

- Perhaps that could be our prayer for Pastor Jill... that she might know the blessing of God, and the joy that accompanies the blessing.

Are you feeling that your faith is challenged by others? Be blessed! Be joyful! Be amazed at how God uses that to:

- Strengthen your faith
- Impact those around you
- Spread the good news to others

Amen.