**Acts 20:28-32** April 22, 2018

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*Acts 20:28Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. 32“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Have You Thought About Your Legacy?**

Some of you have moved around quite a bit in your lives – around the world, half a dozen states. Think about the favorite place you ever lived. I don’t mean for the perfect weather (San Diego), or the excitement (New York City), or for the scenery (the Pacific Northwest). I’m talking about the people, and I don’t mean the people in general like, “They’re so friendly here.” What was your favorite place to live because you were surrounded by like-minded, fun, sincere people? These people meshed with you, your family so well that if you could have lived the rest of your life in one place, that would have been it. When and where was it for you? hFor the Apostle Paul that may have been the city called Ephesus.

But in our reading, we find the Apostle Paul in a hurry. He was trying to cover the thousand or so miles from Greece to Jerusalem in a couple weeks, which was no small thing back in the day. But there was more to it than that. Paul had an appointment in Jerusalem. God had recently revealed to Paul that when he would finally get to Jerusalem, he would be arrested.

So Paul hurries to what might be his death on a wind-driven boat along the rocky coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. One day they put in at a place called Miletus. And Paul thinks about the place very dear to his heart: Ephesus. It’s just over there, about 25 miles north, a day’s walk. Oh, he wishes he could go!

Ever been there? On your way to an uncle’s funeral up in Minnesota, you drive down an interstate three miles from dear friends of yours, who at some point in your life were your best friends. You used to play cards with them, go out to dinner with them, but now you haven’t seen them in a decade. You wish you could stop. You think, “If they ever knew that I passed three miles from their house and didn’t stop, they’d feel like, ‘Don’t they care anymore?’” So you pass by the interstate exit, shame-facedly trying not to even look at the sign (even though they will never know), promising yourself that next time you will stop – half-realizing that you probably won’t have time next time either. Been there?

That’s where Paul was: twenty-five miles from the people dearest to his heart, twenty-five miles from Ephesus. He had spent three years there, which was the longest Paul ever stayed anywhere! He had had a chance to sort of put down roots for the only time in his ministry. And no friends are better than those you make in hardship. That was Ephesus. Ephesus was a city dominated by worship of the Greek goddess Artemis. The Greek historian Herodotus took out his notebook and put her temple in Ephesus on the original seven wonders of the world list. At the end of Paul’s three years, worshipers of this Artemis finally had had enough of his mission work. They rioted and drove Paul out of the city, and he was forced to leave his much loved congregation. Now that he was back within walking distance, he wanted to connect, to encourage, to find out. What was going on? Had things calmed down? Were the Christians melting away or were they thriving? But he was in such a hurry! So Paul sent a messenger over land to Ephesus to ask the church elders to come, and the next day there they were, sitting in that hotel room or living room—whatever—listening to what their shepherd would say.

Paul’s concern is his legacy. Like a parent, he wants the Ephesian Christians to succeed. He would have moved heaven and earth for them, if he could, but he can’t. So he tells them what he wants them to remember.

Now I need you to think about something in this picture. Where do you picture yourself in this room? Whether we realize we do this or not, when we hear a story, we usually subconsciously put ourselves somewhere in the story. Where are you in this room with Paul and his Ephesian friends? Are you one of the Ephesian elders sitting on the couch? Are you a eavesdropper outside the door? Where are you? The message changes a bit when you take a different seat in the room.

I would like you to imagine that you are Paul. (This might seem a kind of minor point, but this is very important.) You have gathered some of the most beloved people in your life together in this room. This might be the last time you are going to speak to them. You had seen them at church week after week, for a few years. You have shared the Gospel with them. You have buried their dead, baptized their children, gone to their wedding banquets. Look in those familiar eyes, the laugh wrinkles and the worry wrinkles that you know so well. What do you want to say to them in your last chance to speak to them? What do you want your legacy to be?

There are a lot of things that we might say. You might tell a couple jokes and tell them to not take life too seriously. That’s good. A good laugh can iron out a lot of rough spots. Maybe you would encourage your loved ones to be tough and hard working. No one can argue with that. Whatever you might think about successful people, one thing you can almost never say about them is that they are lazy or wimps. You might say, “Take time with people because you will never say, ‘I wish I had spent more time at the office,’ but just about everyone says, ‘I wish I had spent more time with my loved ones.’” That’s good advice. And according your own personal philosophies, I am sure that you could come up with some really good advice to leave as your legacy.

But what about this-world legacies? If your legacy is that your kids all make $200,000 a year, but not a one of them shows up at church on Sunday—what was that Jesus said? *“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”* (Mt 16:26). If your legacy is a well-rounded, well-loved pillar of the community for whom the whole town gathers at his graveside, lines the streets for the processional, flies the flags at half-mast, and writes books the year after his passing, but all that success came at the expense of bringing that child to and seating him on the Savior’s lap—what was that Jesus said? *“I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full”* (Mt 6:2,5,16).

Let’s get serious. Have you thought about your legacy? I may be talking about your legacy with kids, or grandkids. Or I may be talking about your legacy in this family of believers gathered in this building whether as a leader or a servant of others. Or I may be talking about your legacy with your neighbors. Christ Jesus our good shepherd has enlisted us as his under-shepherds, ones giving spiritual care. None of you over the age of 5 or so can say that you don’t have a place to leave a legacy.

When you have a chance to say your last words to the most beloved people of your life, do you want at least part of your legacy to be that they continue in the Lord? Of course you do. That is at least part of why you are here this morning. But it takes work.

Let me give you examples. Here is a legacy.

A certain man spoke of days before electricity in his grandfather’s farmhouse. Way back then, when the large farming family went to bed at the same time, his grandfather stood downstairs in the light of a kerosene lantern with his hands folded in prayer on the buffet at the bottom of the stairs and he prayed. He prayed out loud the evening prayers for the entire family. He prayed loud enough so that all the family in their beds could hear his prayer and pray along with him. This man was no pastor or preacher, he was just an a farmer who got up the next morning to milk the cows. That is a spiritual legacy I could long for! Not a legacy to Fred Piepenbrink (that was the farmer’s name), but to his Savior who had saved him and guided him and to whom he entrusted his family and life every night.

Here is a legacy. In the 1990’s and 2000’s a church in a small Wisconsin town sent out taped sermons every two weeks to anyone who asked. One of the recipients was another pastor who served a dual parish, multiple churches. So most Sundays, while driving to shepherd God’s people in the dual parish Lutheran congregation, he himself was shepherded with God’s Word through Pastor Eugene Koch’s preaching. That pastor still, every few weeks, listens to his sermons. Not a legacy of Pastor Koch, but a legacy to our Savior who was Pastor Koch’s rock in life.

And you can think of the legacy of the Christian teachers and pastors, and, if you were so blessed, concerned Christian parents. Think about those people whose legacy is the fact that you are here this day, that you know your Savior from sin. Yet not one of them wanted that legacy to be about them. They wanted it to be about your Savior.

A Christian legacy is not about us. No more than the Apostle Paul wanted his legacy in Ephesus to be about him. We sin too often, we fail day by day. We could have done more. We could have done better. We are no self-deluded self-congratulators. Our hope is not in *our* legacy, but that God will use us, frail and imperfect as we are, to communicate a legacy that brings glory to Jesus, and eternal life to people.

If any of those examples make you feel bad, I suppose they should. How many of us live up to what we wish we would do, spiritually, for our near and dear ones? Much less do we live up to what God wants. But you feel remorse about something in the past, know this: It is never too late, in light of God’s gracious forgiveness, to change your legacy. And I really mean “Never.” As “Exhibit A” I point to a man on a cross. Not Jesus, but the one on the cross next to Jesus. Remember that one who in his last moments looked on his Savior and believed in him. Had he been a good father, a faithful friend, a contributing member of society? Almost certainly not! Yet Jesus was pleased to forgive him. *And* God was pleased through him to work a spiritual legacy which has given hope to millions over the centuries. A spiritual legacy that says, “Yes, if Jesus can forgive him, he can forgive me.” God can change our greatest folly into the greatest good, for us and others.

Having thought about your spiritual legacy, put yourself in Paul’s shoes as I read more of the story from Acts, chapter 20:

*17“From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. 18When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day… 19I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested… 20You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house… 22And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me…*

*28Keep watch over yourselves… Be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.*

*32“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified…” 36When he had said this, [Paul] knelt down with all of them and prayed. 37They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. 38What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship. 21:1After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea.*

Have you thought about your legacy? Amen.