MULTIPLYING LOCAL CHURCHES
BY PLANNING AND PARTNERING FOR PROCLAMATION
Romans 15:14-33

INTRODUCTION

Every November my three brothers and I and our brother-in-law along with all of our sons and one of our daughters travel hundreds of miles, spend significant amounts of money and engage in strenuous work for the purpose of pursuing and hopefully bagging some of Wisconsin's wily white-tail deer. The eleven of us leave behind our work and schools and homes and many modern conveniences to live together in a 22 by 24 foot one room cabin so we can sit for long hours in very cold weather and then tramp across many miles of tangled wilderness in the hope that we might spot and kill a deer. We plan and partner together because we share a mutual affection for one another and for the hunt.

In a similar way every local church as the family of God is united in our affection for Jesus and each other and by our common purpose to engage in the tough work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to all the peoples of the world. In our passage this morning Paul describes that unity of purpose that exists within the church as we plan and partner together to insure that this glorious good news is proclaimed to the world so that all of God's people out of all the nations of the world are gathered into the church. While this passage is a very personal reflection by Paul upon his own life and ministry, yet this text sets before us the things that characterize God's work in and through local churches so that the gospel of Jesus spreads rapidly and is honored among more and more people.

You can see in vv. 14-15 & 19-24 that Paul's chief concern is that the gospel of Jesus is preached and loved in the church in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire. His purpose in describing his own call and ministry to this church is to motivate them to join him in this great work. Obviously he, as the apostle to the Gentiles, has a particular role to play in that work which is his alone. However, he directly (vv. 14, 23-24, 30-33) and indirectly (vv.25-28) appeals to them to join with him in this passion for the progress of the gospel. When we remember that Paul's method for fulfilling his call from Jesus to preach to the Gentiles was to preach the gospel in urban centers and then gather the believers into local churches with appointed leadership we are right to see in this personal appeal to the church in Rome a pattern for how God intends to grow his universal church by growing and multiplying local churches. <u>This passage is a call to us as a local church to join in God's global church planting movement.</u> God is going to gather all his people out of the nations of the world by local churches multiplying themselves regionally and across cultural boundaries. This passage describes the characteristics of those local churches who successfully multiply themselves.

MAIN POINT
Local churches grow and multiply as they are…

I. Persuaded of the Triune God's power through the gospel (vv. 15-19)

As we saw a couple of weeks ago when we looked at v. 14, God expects all the Christians in every local church to become disciple-making disciples. In v. 14 the three marks of mature Christians in a mature Christian church are; 1) people who are full of goodness, that is, people who are generous and kind and doing good for others; 2) people who have a full understanding of the good news of Jesus; and 3) people who are able to teach that gospel and the way of life that flows from it to others. If it is true that this church is so mature, so complete in their knowledge of the gospel, then why did Paul feel it so necessary to write his letter to the Roman church which is a comprehensive description of that gospel? In v. 15 he tells them that he has written to them so boldly because he wanted to remind them of that gospel which they and he believe together.

These two verses at the end of this amazing letter tell us that every local church is to be preoccupied with the message of God's forgiving of sinners who believe through the crucified and resurrected Jesus by the regenerating and life giving work of the Holy Spirit. As I live with myself and my family and as I live with you it is apparent that most of the relational and emotional distress that we experience in our lives is the result of our not knowing and loving this good news of God's saving grace. The experiential knowledge that I, hell-deserving sinner that I be, am loved by God and forgiven of all of my sins and guaranteed a glorious future in the fully restored new heavens and new earth is the life transforming power of God. It is this knowledge of God's love in Christ that motivates us to forgive those who sin against us, to patiently and joyfully bear the sorrows and sicknesses of this life, to take the initiative to turn off the TV and the computer and invite someone over for dinner, to give away our money in the cause of Christ, to be missionaries, to take the risk to share the gospel with our neighbor, to pursue our rebellious teenager with love and a thousand other acts of Christian love. The reason that Paul expects the members of this church to teach the gospel to each other and the reason he wrote this letter to an already mature church is because it is the gospel alone that saves and transforms sinners.

You can see that the power of the gospel to save and change sinners is the motivating force in Paul's life in what he says about his own ministry in vv. 16-19. He says in v. 16 that the reason he took the initiative to write this authoritative letter to a church he did not start and which he had never visited was because God, as an act of unmerited favor, had appointed him to be Jesus' servant, his special envoy to the Gentile world. The goal of his service to Jesus, his priestly duty is to make the Gentile peoples an offering that is acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Paul is using OT language and an OT word picture to explain what his life is all about. In the OT system of worship, it was the priests' duty to make sure that the animals and other offerings that were sacrificed were acceptable or holy. In addition, it was the duty of the priests to determine what people were acceptable or holy enough to enter into the temple court and participate in the worship in the temple. It would have been an act of the highest dishonor to God to permit a non-Jewish person or an unclean Jewish person into the temple or to offer an unclean animal in sacrifice.

What Paul is saying is that he, as the servant of Jesus Christ and by the proclamation of the good news about Jesus, is making unacceptable people acceptable to God. However, while he is the human mediator or priest, the actual making acceptable is a work of the Holy Spirit. This is an astonishing word picture that Paul uses here. He stands in front of the Holy of Holies, the place where God lives and by the gospel turns unclean and repulsive people into acceptable, holy sacrifices to God. He declares that Christ has suffered and died to pay the penalty of sin and to wash away the filth of sin from all who will believe. He explains that all who repent of their sin and trust in Christ have been made acceptable to God by what Christ has done, not because of anything they have ever done. This act of cleansing or of making unholy people holy is accomplished by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. The Holy Spirit does not work apart from the proclamation of the gospel and the proclamation of the gospel only makes sinners holy because the Holy Spirit is making it effective.

Paul goes on to make another astonishing claim in v. 17. The ESV says that Paul, in Christ, is "proud of his work for God." The next verse shows us that what Paul is proud of is not his work but Christ's work through him. Paul looks at what has happened as he has traveled around the Roman Empire, telling idol worshipping, sexually promiscuous, superstitious, greedy, self-righteous, racist, Gentiles the good news about Jesus and has watched these wicked people be transformed before his eyes to become men and women who trust Jesus and obey him. By what Paul has said and done God-ignorant, God-despising, rebellious people have been turned into men and women who love God and love to obey Jesus.

Paul says that his speaking and acting were actually the speaking and acting of Jesus himself. The resurrected and glorified Jesus is now working in the world through his church. We are Jesus in the world, both corporately and individually as we faithfully proclaim this gospel. It is Jesus calling out through us to his scattered sheep to come home. When we see sinners repent and embrace Christ it is not we that did it, but it is the risen Jesus. When you are speaking to your child about Christ, it is Jesus making his appeal to your child through your mouth. When you shovel your elderly neighbor's sidewalk it is Jesus serving your neighbor through you. Paul

glories in his speaking and working because Jesus is speaking and working through him. The only reason any of us speak or work is because Jesus works in us. The only reason our speaking and working makes any difference is because Jesus makes it effective.

Every person in here that is a Christian is a Christian because they heard the gospel through human lips or human pen and yet every person in here that is a Christian knows that the reason that person spoke and the reason you believe is that Jesus Christ spoke to you through the human and he gave you faith. None of us worships the human instrument, whether the person who spoke or we who believe. We only worship one person, the great Triune God who is the agent and author of our entire salvation. When you hear a great piece of music played on a piano, you don't praise the piano. When you see and admire a great painting, you don't say thanks to the paint brush. When you watch a great movie, you don't pay tribute to the camera. It is not the instrument that has the skill and power, but the one who wields the instrument. So as we see people transformed by the gospel we don't praise those who speak it but the God who saves by it.

Jesus Christ is speaking and acting in the world through his church, his people and is leading disobedient people to obey God. We proclaim and we work full of the joy of knowing that our speaking and working is the work of Jesus by his Spirit and will produce the effect of bringing more people to obey God. People do not change by giving them a list of rules to obey. People change when their hearts are ravished by the love of God for wicked sinners who trust in the suffering and now living Son of God. Thus local churches will grow and multiply as we are gripped by the fact that it is only the good news of God about Jesus that saves and transforms sinners. Here is the question for us: are we gripped by the gospel or by the political controversy in our state capital? Are we gripped by the gospel or by our retirement plans? Are we gripped by the gospel or by our favorite sports team? Are we gripped by the gospel or by our health? Are we gripped by the gospel or by how people treat us?

II. Partners together for the gospel (vv.20-29)

In vv. 19b and 23a, Paul makes another shocking claim. He says that he has so fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ in the area between Jerusalem and Illyricum that there is no more work for him to do in this region of the world. If you will look at the map on the screen you can see the area Paul is describing. The red arrow points to Jerusalem and the green arrow points to the region of Illyricum. Paul is describing an area of land about the size of the U.S. east of the Mississippi River. Paul is saying he has fully proclaimed the gospel throughout a land area equivalent to one-third of the U.S. How in the world can he say that? What does he mean?

In vv. 20-21 he tells us what he means. His goal has always been to preach the gospel where the gospel has never been preached before. His commission from Jesus Christ was to go and preach to Gentile people who had no knowledge of the gospel, where no church existed. He does not say that this is what every Christian is supposed to do. In fact, when he says his goal was to not build on anyone else's foundation he is acknowledging two things. First, other people are also engaging in this work of going into the regions of the world where there is no church in order to start churches through preaching the gospel. Others are laying the same foundation he is laying among unreached peoples. Second, he knows that others must build upon the foundation that he lays. In fact, this is the exact point he makes in 1 Corinthians 3 when he explains that the church is God's building and that he laid the foundation, which is Jesus Christ, and that now others are coming behind him and building on that foundation.

When you build a building an order or sequence must be followed. The digging of the hole and then the laying of the footings or foundation is the first and most important part of the building. The foundation determines the size and shape of the rest of the building. You cannot build a building without a foundation. However, if all you have is a foundation, you don't have a building either. Once the foundation is laid, then other workmen must come in and put up the basement walls, install the plumbing, frame the building, put in the electrical, etc. It is the same in the Christian church. Paul, as a pioneer missionary, is the excavator and the one who lays the

foundation for the church by going to places where the church does not exist and proclaiming Christ and thus forming local churches in places where no church existed before. Others then come and build on that foundation. Therefore, when he says there is no more place for him to work in these regions, he means that throughout this geographical area there are enough local churches begun that the gospel will be lived and proclaimed sufficiently so that the entire region will be reached with the gospel. This is the goal of cross cultural missionary enterprise, to establish a healthy local church in a particular location so that it will reach the entire region through multiplying itself.

In v. 21 Paul says that the reason he must go to places where Christ is not known is because of what God said in the prophet Isaiah, chapter 52. It has always been God's intention to include among his people, representatives from among those Gentiles who have never heard about him. This goes all the way back to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 when God told Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through his descendants. The church is always sending representatives of Jesus into the peoples of the world who have never been told about Christ. Not everyone goes but every local church is to be concerned about and involved in making sure that some are going among the unreached peoples of the world.

You can see in vv. 23-24 that he aims to enlist them in this partnership for the gospel. He tells them that now that he has fulfilled his responsibility in the eastern part of the Roman Empire and since he has long wanted to visit them, he plans to do so on his way to Spain, which is on the western edge of the Roman Empire. His objective in stopping to see them is so that they will help him on his way to Spain. This word translated "help" usually refers to material and financial help for traveling missionaries in the NT. If you look at v. 32 you can also see that Paul's expectation is that when he comes to Rome they will refresh him. He views the church in Rome as the last resting place before he goes into the wilderness to proclaim Christ. He is seeking to get them to partner with him in his work of planting churches in Spain by providing for his material needs.

In vv. 25-28 he interrupts his direct appeal for their help by explaining to them why he is not coming to see them immediately. At the time he wrote this letter he was about to embark on his journey from Corinth to Jerusalem in order to deliver the financial gift he had collected from the Gentile churches he had planted in Greece and Macedonia for the poor among the Christian Jews in the church in Jerusalem. But notice he doesn't simply inform them of what he is doing. He tells them two things. <u>First</u>, the Gentile churches in Greece and Macedonia were <u>eager</u> to give money to the poor in the church in Jerusalem. <u>Second</u>, Gentile Christians have benefited enormously from the Jewish Christian church. The gospel came to the Gentiles from the Jews and through the Jewish Christian church. Thus Paul says the Gentile churches have a moral obligation to give financial help to the financially destitute church in Jerusalem. Why does Paul tell them this? He is implying that this church, which is primarily made up of Gentiles, should take a collection and send it to the church in Jerusalem as well. Paul expects local churches to be concerned about the propagation of the gospel throughout their region and beyond their region and for every local church to be concerned about the church around the globe.

This is not optional. Every Christian and every local Christian congregation is to be working together for the gospel. We are co-workers with God for the proclamation of the gospel and the multiplication of local churches both here in our neck of the woods and around the globe. We are to partner with those God calls to take the gospel across cultural boundaries and we are to partner together to plant other churches in our own region so that all of Christ's lost sheep might be found. We are part of a global movement of God to spread the knowledge of his glory throughout all the peoples of the earth. I call upon you to give of your time and money to help our missionaries and to help our church make disciples and plant other churches in our area of the world. We are going to be discussing our plans to plant churches in our region at our congregational meeting in April. Please plan on being there so you can be a partner in this work.

III. Praying for the success of the gospel (vv.30-33)

In v. 30 Paul urges them to join in his struggle to promote the gospel by praying for him. The reason they should pray for him is because both they and he belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and thus both they and he can freely approach God the Father and expect him to answer because of Jesus. Jesus is his Lord and their Lord, his savior and their savior, his mediator and their mediator. They are members of the same team, the same family, engaged in the same work, thus they should pray. But also they should pray because they share together in the love which the HS has poured out into each other's hearts. This is love for God and love for other believers. Prayer is motivated by love for God and others and is an expression of our love. Asking our heavenly Father to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ is an act of love.

What does he want them to pray? First, he wants them to ask God the Father in the name of Jesus by the love of the HS to protect him from the unbelievers in Jerusalem. While we should always be prepared to suffer for the name of Jesus, we are not masochists. We don't seek to prove that we are Christians by intentionally provoking non-Christians or by intentionally suffering. It is right to ask God to protect us. This prayer presumes that God rules over non-Christian hearts and wills. If God does not rule over human hearts then there is no point in asking God to protect Paul. God's sovereign rule over all things, including human hearts and wills, is the foundation of our prayers. It is because he can do whatever he pleases that we can pray. Second, Paul asks them to ask God to cause the saints, the Christians in the Jerusalem church to accept the gift he brings from the Gentile churches. Paul is well aware of how Jewish Christians view him and his law-free gospel. He knows they are suspicious of him. Thus he knows that the only way they will accept a gift from unclean Gentiles is if God so works in their hearts to persuade them that all people are made acceptable to God, not by keeping the law but by trusting in Jesus who kept the law and bore the curse of the law for everyone who believes.

Do not miss that Paul ends his prayer request by asserting that his ultimate concern is that God's will be done. Paul is earnestly asking his heavenly Father to protect him from persecution and to cause the church in Jerusalem to embrace the gospel of God's grace and thus accept the financial gift and yet he is prepared to be persecuted and to have his gift rejected, if that is God's will. What Paul shows us about prayer here is so important. You have to pray. God wants you to pray. He is your Father and he yearns for you to ask him to care and provide for you like a child asking his or her father for help. However, in all of our asking we are submissive to God's will. We know that we do not always know what is best. If you don't know the story of how God answered this prayer of Paul and of the Romans then I would encourage you to go read Acts 21-28. God did work so that the church received the gift and God did protect Paul from the non-believers but in a way that Paul would never have imagined. Paul and his Roman friends prayed and God answered according to his own wise and perfect will which included Paul enduring great suffering on his way to Rome.

I appeal to you my brothers and sisters to join our missionaries and our leadership in our struggle for the gospel by praying to God with us and for us. I urge you through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Holy Spirit to ask our heavenly Father to open doors for the gospel in our community so that we are used by God to bring lost sheep home to God. I urge you to ask God to show us how and where he wants us to plant churches in our region of the world. I urge you to beseech our heavenly Father to raise up men and women in our church who will give themselves to missionary work and to the work of planting churches in our region. No longer remain on the sidelines, join the fight by prayer for the success of the gospel.

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