

EMPOWERED FOR THE FUTURE Acts 20:17–38

INTRODUCTION

There is a particular kind of goodbye that only comes once or twice in a lifetime — the kind where you know, with real certainty, that you are looking at someone for the last time. Most goodbyes aren't like that. Most goodbyes are "see you soon," said without a second thought. This is not that kind of goodbye.

Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, and he knows what's likely waiting for him there — arrest, hardship, possibly worse. On the way, his ship puts in at Miletus, and rather than sail further to see the Ephesian church himself, he sends word ahead and calls the elders to come to him. He doesn't have time to go to them. So he gathers them at the shore, and he says the hardest sentence a pastor can say to people he loves: "I know that none of you... will ever see me again."

I want you to notice what Paul does not do in this moment. He doesn't panic. He doesn't scramble to hold onto control of a church he's about to leave behind. He doesn't try to engineer every detail of what happens after he's gone. What he does instead is something much harder and much more mature: he prepares them. He spends his final hours with this church not managing their future, but equipping them to carry it without him.

That distinction — between anxiously clutching a future we cannot control and faithfully preparing people to carry it forward without us — is, I think, the whole sermon this morning in miniature. And I believe it is a distinction every congregation eventually has to learn, including this one, in whatever season it currently finds itself.

A few weeks ago I told you about the disappointing, uncertain season of planting Gateway of Hope in Houston — the verbal yeses that never became real ones, the discouragement of showing up week after week without much to show for it. I didn't finish that story then, because it didn't belong there. It belongs here.

What I haven't told you is how it ended, or how long I fought against it ending.

For almost a year before I actually left, I believe the Lord had already put it in my heart that my season at Gateway of Hope was coming to a close. And I resisted that with everything in me. I loved that church. I had invested more of myself into it than I had into almost anything else in my life. I could not understand what God could possibly be doing by moving me on. I tried to outrun it. I stood in that pulpit every week. I led worship. I loved on those people with everything I had. None of it made the sense of calling go away.

When I finally said okay — when I finally told the board I had taken a new position that would require me to be away often — I still wasn't ready to let go completely. I remember explaining to them that I needed to relinquish day-to-day control, but that I could still remain pastor, still preach at Gateway of Hope once a month, still lead a group of associate ministers from within the congregation. I had built myself an arrangement where I could say I had surrendered without actually surrendering anything at all.

The board was patient with me while I explained all of that. Patient, until one of my deacons asked a single, honest question: "It sounds like you are trying to let go while still holding on." That deacon knew, better than

I wanted to admit, that my stepping away — really stepping away — would place the future of that congregation into real question. He asked it anyway, because it needed to be asked.

Finally letting my surrender be a full surrender is the hardest thing I have ever done in ministry. Harder than the year of resistance. Harder than the uncertainty of not knowing what would happen to a congregation I loved once I was no longer holding any part of the wheel. I had to commend that church to God, and to the word of His grace, and mean it completely — not commend them to God while quietly keeping one hand on the door.

I did not get to control what Gateway of Hope became after I left. I had raised up leaders, I had poured what I could into them, and then I had to do the hardest thing a shepherd ever does: hand the flock to God, and to the people God had prepared to carry it, and walk away trusting a future I would never fully see. I think about that congregation often, still, from a distance — the way, I imagine, Paul must have thought about Ephesus for the rest of his life.

So let's walk through this farewell together, and let it teach us three things the Holy Spirit empowers every generation of the church to do: to model before we hand off, to guard what must never change so that everything else can, and to entrust what we were never meant to keep for ourselves.

I. EMPOWERED TO MODEL BEFORE WE HAND OFF (vv. 17–27)

Before Paul gives the Ephesian elders a single instruction about what to do after he's gone, he does something worth noticing. He doesn't hand them a manual. He reminds them of a life they already watched him live.

"You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time... serving the Lord with all humility and with tears... I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable... teaching you in public and from house to house." Three years of showing up. Three years of tears, of hard conversations, of not softening the truth just because it might cost him something. He isn't telling them what leadership should look like in the abstract. He's reminding them what it actually looked like, because they watched him do it.

That matters, because healthy succession — in a family, in a ministry, in a church — was never primarily about a plan on paper. A plan can be written by anyone. What can't be handed off on paper is a pattern of life someone has actually watched you live. Paul isn't leaving Ephesus an org chart. He's leaving them three years of memory: how he treated people when it was hard, how he stayed even when leaving would have been easier, how he told the truth in love rather than trading it away for comfort.

You don't have to look far to see this pattern already at work here, because this congregation has already lived a small version of Acts 20 in its own recent history.

When I arrived at St. John's, I was not stepping into a vacuum. I was stepping into fifty years of a single pastor's faithful ministry — fifty years of a particular rhythm, a particular style, a particular way of being church together that this congregation had known for longer than many of you had known anything else. And then, suddenly, you were being asked to learn an entirely different voice, an entirely different pace, an entirely different way of leading. That is not a small adjustment. That is closer to grief than to change, and I think some of you felt exactly that, even if no one used that word out loud at the time.

We didn't pretend that transition was easy, and we didn't rush past it either. Instead, we spent real time in what I've come to think of as our own Nehemiah season — walking the walls of this church together and being honest about which ones were standing and which ones had fallen into disrepair. That meant naming unresolved conflict that had been sitting quietly beneath the surface for years, sometimes decades. It meant grieving, together, the parts of this church's life that had grown weak or gone unattended, without pretending those walls were fine when they weren't. It meant relearning something most of us had quietly stopped doing: praying before we planned, instead of planning and then asking God to bless it after the fact. It meant learning to listen for the Lord's voice not just privately, in our own devotions, but in each other — trusting that God might be saying something to this church through the person sitting three pews over who saw things differently than we did.

And it meant making some genuinely hard choices. Some of that season involved real pruning — relationships, patterns, and ways of doing things that had to be honestly examined and, in some cases, released, because they were no longer bearing fruit, even though letting go of them was painful. None of that was comfortable. Some of it, frankly, still isn't fully resolved. But this congregation did it. You sat in hard places. You had honest conversations you could have avoided. You let the walls be inspected instead of insisting they were fine.

Nobody handed you a manual for how to walk through fifty years of one pastor's ministry into something genuinely different. What happened instead is that you watched each other do it — imperfectly, honestly, sometimes painfully, but faithfully. That is exactly the kind of inheritance Paul left the Ephesian elders: not a flawless record, but a pattern of honest, humble faithfulness that people actually watched him live. St. John's has already left that same kind of pattern for whoever comes next, whether we've thought of it in those terms or not.

I think about that often as I think about this congregation. None of us know exactly what shape St. John's future will take. But I do know this: whatever comes next, it will be shaped far more by what this congregation has actually modeled — how you have shown up for one another, how you have loved your neighbors without asking anything in return, how you have stayed faithful through a hard season — than by any document anyone writes about it. We are not just planning a future. Every week, we are modeling one.

II. EMPOWERED TO GUARD WHAT MUST NEVER CHANGE, SO EVERYTHING ELSE CAN (vv. 28–31)

Paul's tone shifts here, and it becomes urgent. "Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God... I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise individuals speaking distorted things, to draw away the disciples after them."

Notice carefully what Paul does and does not ask them to guard. He doesn't tell them to preserve every custom exactly as it has been. He doesn't ask them to keep the church looking, structurally, the way it looked while he was there. What he tells them to guard is something much narrower and much more important: themselves, the flock, and the truth of the gospel entrusted to them. Everything else — form, structure, even leadership itself — is capable of changing. The one thing that cannot be negotiated is faithfulness to Christ and genuine care for the people He has placed in front of you.

I think this is one of the hardest and most necessary lessons for any church to learn, especially a church with a long history like ours. It is easy, without ever saying it out loud, to quietly begin treating the way we have always done something as though it were itself the gospel — as if changing a structure, a form, or even a name would somehow mean losing what actually matters. Acts 20 will not let us make that mistake. Paul's charge to Ephesus was never "stay exactly as you are." It was "guard the gospel and shepherd the people, whatever comes."

That is a word I believe St. John's needs to hear clearly as we move toward a season of real discernment about what our future holds. We will need the wisdom to tell the difference between what must be guarded at all costs — the gospel of Jesus Christ, love of neighbor, faithful worship, honest community — and what has simply been the *shape* our faithfulness has taken so far. A shape is not the same thing as the substance it carries. Wineskins can change. The wine cannot.

We have actually already lived this once, together, as a congregation — and what strikes me most, looking back, is how little turmoil it actually caused. When St. John's became Open and Affirming, I half expected the kind of hard, drawn-out conflict so many churches go through over that question. That is not what happened here. This congregation brought it to a vote, and you embraced it almost unanimously, with remarkably little debate at all.

I don't think that ease was an accident, and I don't think it means the decision wasn't significant. I think it means something more encouraging: this congregation's grip on what actually matters — the gospel, love of neighbor, the conviction that every person is made in the image of God — was already secure enough that changing the shape of who we fully welcomed didn't feel like a threat to any of it. You didn't have to loosen your hold on the substance to embrace a new shape. Because the substance was never in question, the shape was free to change quickly, clearly, and almost unanimously.

I raise that not simply to revisit an old decision, but because I believe it is exactly the muscle this congregation will need to use again as we look toward whatever comes next for St. John's. We have already proven, together, that we know how to ask the hard question — is this something we must guard, or is this simply the shape our faithfulness has taken so far? — and to answer it with courage rather than fear. That is no small thing. Not every church has that memory to draw on. We do.

III. EMPOWERED TO ENTRUST WHAT WE CANNOT KEEP FOR OURSELVES (vv. 32–38)

And then comes the turn — the real heart of this farewell. Paul says, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified."

Notice exactly who Paul commends them to. Not to a successor. Not to a five-year plan. Not even to the elders' own strength or wisdom, considerable as it clearly was. He commends them to God, and to the word of His grace. Paul understands, in this final hour, something every faithful leader eventually has to understand: the church was never his to keep. It was always God's to build. His job was never to secure its future by his own effort. His job was to be faithful with what God had entrusted to him, and then, when the time came, to release it back into God's hands.

I think of my own deacon's question again right here — "it sounds like you are trying to let go while still holding on." Paul, at Miletus, is not doing that. He isn't leaving Ephesus a phone number, or a promise to check in monthly, or a plan to keep one hand on the wheel from a distance. He commends them to God and walks to the ship. That is what full surrender looks like, and it is every bit as hard for us as it was for me, and I imagine, if we are honest, every bit as hard as it was for Paul.

He closes with a final word — quoting Jesus directly, words not even recorded anywhere in the Gospels themselves, preserved only here: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." One last time, before he walks to the ship, Paul models the very posture he's asking them to carry into the future without him: open-handed generosity instead of self-preservation, trust instead of control.

And then, Luke tells us, "there was much weeping... They embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they accompanied him to the ship." Nothing about that scene is neat. It is love and grief and trust, all held together at once, with no tidy resolution in sight. They don't know exactly what comes next for the Ephesian church any more than we know exactly what comes next for ours. What they know is that they have been prepared, and that they have been commended into hands stronger than their own.

CONCLUSION & INVITATION

Over these last several weeks we've walked with a lot of people who couldn't see very far down the road. The founding Women's Guild in 1915, keeping a ledger and packing relief boxes with no way of knowing what St. John's would become 108 years later. Paul in Corinth, discouraged and uncertain, told by God that a harvest already existed that he simply couldn't see yet. And now Paul again, at Miletus, handing a church he loves into hands he trusts more than his own, walking to a ship without knowing exactly what waits for either of them next.

Every one of those stories is really the same story, told a different way. Faithful people, doing the next right thing in front of them, and then entrusting what they could not control to a God who could already see the whole road.

I believe that is precisely the invitation in front of St. John's this morning, and in this season. Not to have every answer about what comes next. Not to control every outcome. But to keep modeling faithfulness for whoever comes after us, to keep guarding what actually matters while holding loosely to the shape it takes, and to keep entrusting this church — the way Paul entrusted Ephesus, the way those eighteen women entrusted a congregation they'd never see reach its second century — to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to build up what we cannot build by ourselves.

So let me leave you with three questions this morning, one for each of these movements.

What are you modeling right now, for whoever comes after you — in your family, in your work, in this church — whether or not you've ever thought of it as modeling anything at all?

What is worth guarding no matter what changes around it — and what have you perhaps been guarding that was only ever the shape faithfulness has taken so far, not faithfulness itself?

And what do you need to entrust to God this morning that you have been quietly trying to carry, control, or secure by your own strength?

Paul walked to that ship not knowing exactly what would happen to the church he loved. He walked anyway, because he trusted the One he was leaving it with. May we have the same courage — to model well, to guard rightly, and to entrust fully, whatever the future holds.

Let us pray...