

## “Keys to the Kingdom”

Acts 20: 17-36

We finish up our journey with the Book of Acts today and in our text, we get Paul’s farewell speech to the group in Ephesus. And like all good farewell speeches, Paul tries to fit everything in before he goes. He wants to leave the church and its members comforted but inspired, at peace but passionate about the Gospel, loved but liberated to share the good news. And the way he does all of that is by giving them the “Keys to the Kingdom”, keys that even today help us become the church and the people that God calls us to be.

Paul simply reminds the leadership of the church and us as modern day disciples that all we need to remember on our journey of faith, regardless of the ups and downs that we may face along the way, is that we will be far happier giving than getting.

That seems so simple when we think of it really. We like to think of faith as some complicated issue, something that we will never quite grasp, that stays mysterious throughout our lives but Paul boils faith down to just a few simple words: We will be far happier giving than getting.

And the funny thing about it is, that even when we do try to complicate faith, in reality, when Christians are asked why they go to church, why they do the things

they do, why they are people of faith in the first place, one of the first things Christians will say is that God has blessed them in so many ways, that God has transformed their lives in so many amazing ways, that they can't help but share a bit of that same extravagant generosity and grace with others.

Just think about it for a few minutes. Think about the moments in your life when your faith was most alive. Think about the moments in your life when your faith seemed to be the most real for you. Think about the moments when you have felt the Kingdom of God most present in your life. What were you doing? Was it on a mission trip? What it serving at one of our Community Dinners? Was it at the Rummage Sale? Or was it by simply sitting with someone and listening to their story?

And these are just to name a few. But my guess is that the moments when our faith felt most alive for us was when we were making a connection with someone else either through service, through worship, through conversation, or through fellowship. Regardless of what we were doing, my guess is that we were building relationships with someone else, not for our benefit, not to gain something, certainly not for power or prestige. We were simple making a connection because that person wasn't just someone off the streets any more. They were our brothers or sisters in faith, created in the image of God, loved and embraced as God's very own, now seen as more alike than different.

in that moment, in that connection, in that relationship, the Kingdom of God truly became real for us, became present for us, became known to us as people of faith, not as a place in some far off distant time and place, but close by, in our midst, filling us with the power and peace of God's love and peace.

in that moment, in that connection, in that relationship, the Gospel didn't just seem like words on the page of a book, but instead seemed alive, and truly did have the power to transform the world for all of God's creation.

in that moment, in that connection, in that relationship, God was real for us, was alive for us, was here in our midst, and was not just some deity who created the world and then left us on our own.

in that moment, in that connection, in that relationship, we truly experienced the keys to the Kingdom.

The great thing about Paul's farewell speech is that it doesn't tell us that in order to become the church or the people that God calls us to be, we need to be better than the other churches in town or have more members filling our pews. He doesn't tell us that we need to be more secure in our faith than other people we may meet along the journey. Paul doesn't tell us that the keys to the Kingdom are a call or an invitation to be perfect or holier than thou. He simply tells us that the Kingdom of God is most present for us when we give rather than get. He simply tells us that the moments when our faith feels most alive are the moments when we

are in true relationship with each other, are the moments when we see each other as God's very own, are the moments when we reach out and connect with one another, are the moments when we share the extravagant grace that God has showered upon us as God's children.

Paul simply says that the keys to the Kingdom are an invitation to constantly experience the Kingdom of God in our midst by giving rather than receiving, giving of our time, giving of ourselves, giving of our gifts, giving of the grace that is showered upon us each and every day to bring healing and reconciliation for all of God's children, to help build up the Body of Christ here on earth, to help create a place at the table where all are welcomed and accepted as God's very own, to help finish the work that God began when God gave of God's only son so that we might live.

Paul tells us that our calling as followers, as disciples of Jesus Christ, is not complicated. All we have to do in order to become the church, the people, the community of faith that God created us to be, is remember that we are partners in the life-giving work and transformative ministry of Jesus Christ and to remember that we will be happier giving than getting.

In this farewell speech, Paul simply reminds us that the keys to the Kingdom are an invitation to remember that our faith, our calling, our new life transformation is not all about us. It is about the extravagant generosity of God that

fills our lives and inspires, liberates us and fills us with a passion for the Gospel that we can't help but share this blessing with others.

Paul reminds us that the Keys to the Kingdom are all about sharing God's grace and love with our brothers and sisters.

And as I have been thinking over our last year together as church, I know that we are happier giving than getting. I know that we have truly felt the Kingdom of God near us when we were serving together, not just because I have observed it with my own two eyes but you've told me.

For example, our community dinners. Sometimes I think we feel guilty because it seems like we have gotten more out of this ministry of hospitality than the ones we have served. Just come to the kitchen beforehand or stay after one time. Our members are talking and laughing with each other, checking in with each other, connecting with each other, and yes, having a great time cooking and cleaning together. But that is only part of the benefit of these dinners.

Do you realize that next month, we will have been holding these dinners for a year, not missing a month, not even at Christmas or Thanksgiving time. And do you also realize that we have probably served over a thousand meals over this past year, take out and eat ins?

Through these dinners, we have given more than we have gained. We've served our community. We've served a group comes from the Midway School

Apartments, just to have the opportunity to get out and meet others and eat together. We've served a frazzled mom who was coming home from picking her son up from orchestra and just didn't feel like going home and cooking that night. We've served seniors in our community who have needed help stretching their dollars. We've served others who just wanted to come and eat with their friends. And each time we've served, through the thousands of meals, we've experienced the Kingdom of God in our midst. And that 's being the church God calls us to be.

And our giving doesn't stop there. I could name project after project: loads of love, collecting school supplies, Christmas families, our Rummage Sale but it is our newest adventure that is once again reminding us as a community of faith that the Kingdom of God is in our midst through the gift of music.

As we all may know, this congregation approved the proposal to change Melissa' title from choir director to Director of church and community music and we began to plant the seeds of the Kingdom. And this past Thursday, we experienced the beginnings of growth. Melissa went to Northside's Open House to promote the new community children's choir and I think both of us honestly had expectations of maybe 5 or 6 kids to start with and then having some more conversations about where to we go from here. But I opened my email on Friday morning to a message from Melissa that left my jaw dropping open and tears in my eyes. We have 15 to 16 kids sign up for the choir and the possibility of more as the

word is beginning to spread in our community. And that's not all. Gifts of donated music is coming in from two different sources and we may have a lead on an accompanist.

I know this is just the beginning and we still have a ways to go to figure out funding and some other important items but I was blown away. 15 to 16 kids interested in a community children's choir! This is beyond what I had even hoped for as we begin visioning this out at the beginning of the year.

That's the Kingdom of God in our midst. That's being the church God calls us to be.

It is realizing and embracing that as a community, that as people of God, as a church, we are happier giving than getting, that we are happier serving our brothers and sisters than serving ourselves.

Now the next question is-How else is the Kingdom of God calling us to serve? How else are we going to live out the keys to the Kingdom in our ministries and in our lives? How else are we going to be the church God calls us to be?

I don't have all the answers but I do know that I am excited about the journey.

May we always hold to the Keys of the Kingdom while we become the church, the people, the community that God created us to be. Amen.