

“Scattered”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
July 23, 2018**

Epistle Testament lesson: Hebrews 2:10-15

Gospel Testament lesson: Acts 8:1-8

Yuri and I woke up one morning during our travels and decided to hike the Zuma Canyon Trail in Malibu, Calif. We drove to the trailhead using our handy, dandy Google Maps and parked the car. Walking down the trail we came to a sign that said Loop Trail, 1.5 miles, with an arrow pointing left. Another sign said Canyon View Trail, 3 miles, with an arrow point forward. We decided to do the Loop Trail.

After all, I had a friend from LA meeting us at the rental house in about an hour. Otherwise we would have, of course, hike the 6 miles out and back on the desert Canyon View Trail, no problem.

So, Loop Trail it was. We set off and after climbing and climbing and climbing up the side and deeper into the canyon, the trail finally began to turn a bit to the right. “Few,” I thought, we’re headed back. But then it turned to the left and continued all the way across the canyon, opposite from where we were parked.

Luckily, I saw yet another sign that said “Canyon View Trail” and it was headed in the direction we needed to go. Did I mention that Google Maps was useless at this point because, you guessed it, no signal in the canyon.

My bright idea was to follow the Canyon View Trail (which we saw a sign for at the start). I mean, it seemed to be going in the direction we needed. Whereas the Loop Trail we were on? That seemed to be going some other direction. I was starting to wonder if we’d ever see the car again.

Luckily, Yuri at this point said, “Hello, we’re on a loop trail! That means if we stay on this trail we’ll get back.” Of course, she was right, and I would have led us in the wrong direction-despite all the signs- with very dire consequences. As stupid as I felt thinking I knew better than the posted signs, I tell you this story now because it shows us that when we are away from home, it’s easy to get lost, or confused, or thrown off track, and end up heading in the wrong direction.

In our reading from the Book of Acts this morning, we see that the disciples are “scattered throughout the countryside” after first Jesus and now their companion Stephen are put to death by a society that thinks it knows better than all the signs that did pointing to Jesus as our one and only savior and salvation.

In this Bible passage we see that our role, our calling in life is to go out from our familiar places and lead people to a deeper faith, a closer relationship with the church, a more confident dependence – not on the wisdom and might of the world – but dependence upon God.

The problem is people often don't get it -they don't see the signs pointing in a better direction- when they look at God, the church, and people who go to church, people like us who give of themselves to the church – financially, through time and talents, and by being there with compassion and mercy. They see our faith as foolishness, our participation as a waste of time, our giving as nice but not something they're prepared to do.

What they don't get – these people who are not interested in church – is that it's all a package. It is faith that leads us to participation in church, which leads us to giving of ourselves, which leads us to greater faith, which creates a community you can rely on to be there for you, as a reflection of God's loving, abundant, joyous presence in our lives and in the world.

In this first sermon of the sermon series titled Traveling Mercies, we see that the apostles of Jesus and the other disciples did not just sit there waiting for people to come to them. They traveled around looking for people, people who hadn't heard about Jesus, people who needed the care and compassion of a good-hearted stranger, people who were lost in a world of dominance and uneven playing fields, people who thought they had nothing to contribute to society.

Now, it's not easy to put yourself out there where you might be called to make a meaningful difference in someone's faith life. It's easier to spend our time tending to our own needs. And heck, life is so busy and complicated nowadays that we can hardly keep up with our needs, the needs of our families and those we count as family.

What would it take for us to reach out beyond our normal circles to actually encounter someone in need of the Gospel message? What would it take to mention your faith in Jesus and your love of God to someone in need? What would it take to set aside your busy schedule –let something go for a moment – to come along side someone in prayer or just for a friendly, unexpected visit? How can we better reflect Christ in our day-to-day choices?

For the disciples of Jesus, it took serious upheaval in their own, personal lives. That's what moved them from their usual circle of friends out into a world of need. The Book of Acts tells us that "severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem," and this is what had them scattered throughout the countryside.

Living in a world set against the teachings of Jesus is not easy – or safe. And sadly, we live in just such a world. We live in a world where it's hard to know for sure how our faith beliefs fit in with the political and social realities of today.

There are people of good conscience on both sides of hot-button issues such as of abortion, guns, immigration, national defense, economic policies, our country's role on the global stage. And what we see in the Book of Acts is that when these issues start pushing in on our lives, our faith, our sense of basic decency, that's just when the world needs us most. We may not face physical death like the earliest disciple. But we face a spiritual and moral death – a type of truth decay.

The good news is that just like it was for the disciples of Jesus' day, God can and will use the pressures we face, the infighting we see, the misguided ways we cringe at to send people of good conscience out into the world, people like you and me, with God's help.

Every time we leave our homes, God is sending us out on behalf of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Truth of God's divine power, God's unconditional love, redemptive spirit, and faithful presence. The only question is how will you come to grips with and share what you know to be true in your heart. How will you bless this world in such a way as to bring more people closer to God, trusting in Christ, and coming alongside this community of faith?

The ushers passed out a slip of paper as you came into worship this morning; if you didn't get one find one or borrow half of someone else's slip. Take out that slip of paper now. Find a pen or pencil (there are some in the Fellowship Pads and pew racks, and maybe even in a few purses and pockets out there).

Now think of one person you know who may need to hear a bit more about Jesus, experience a deeper sense of God's presence, experience the blessings of coming alongside a community of faith. Write that person's name on the paper. Do that now. OK, when you've done that, fold the paper and keep it handy for when the offering plate goes by. I'm going to collect those slips of paper (without looking at any names) and put them on the communion table for the next several weeks.

Each week we will pray that you find the opportunity – take the opportunity – to engage with that person on behalf of Christ, Whatever that might mean to you; however the Holy Spirit might lead you.

Acts tells us that “those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word (of God).” They freed the captives and raised up the lowly. And says Acts, “there was great joy....” Where is God calling you to bring great joy in an otherwise angry, combative, hurting world? Let us pray.

Holy and merciful God, your Word is a faithful and steadfast guide along the pathway of salvation and life. We trust it to correct our direction when we fail to see and trust the signs you put before us. We rely on it as a faithful compass to lead us to those places where we can be a sign of your presence. Lord, I pray for each of us here today that you would lead us to holy encounters with that person each of us thought of during the sermon today. Use us to invite, admonish and lead as your unfathomable love is lived out in our lives. For the sake of Christ we pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

As we enter into this time of prayer, O God, we offer our gratitude that you are always present to us. Instill in us a desire to listen to others.

Help us listen with open hearts and open minds, that people might feel safe in our presence. Instill in us a spirit of serenity that others might feel accepted in your nonjudgmental grace.

Free us from the tendency to label people and ideas, and allow us instead to lean into mercy and kindness.

In the stillness of these moments, we acknowledge the times when we have been less than kind, merciful and open. Thank you for never banishing us from your presence, loving God.

We pray your presence, also, on those with particular concerns this day and all those we continue to hold in thought and prayer.

And Lord, let us be particularly mindful of your presence in our lives, in this place, at this time, as together we pray the prayer that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**