

June 18, 2017

Church Planting
God's Perfect Timing
Acts 19:23-28

Opening words: A.W. Tozer once wrote, *"I remind you that there are churches so completely out of the hands of God that if the Holy Spirit withdrew from them, they wouldn't find it out for many months."* That quote makes me ask you these questions: How long do you think it would take for us to discover the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Western Reserve? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be an instant discovery? Would the Holy Spirit's exit be a slow erosion? How many would never notice the Holy Spirit was gone? Do you think the Holy Spirit left Western Reserve years ago? Do you think the Holy Spirit was ever here? Do you think the Holy Spirit is with us today?

This is sermon number forty-seven in my sermon series, *Church Planting*. You remember my task. I am preaching through the Book of Acts. Why Acts? Because, Acts is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally and it will be the Holy Spirit who must revive the church again. Human effort is not enough. Our scripture reading for today is Acts 19:23-28. This week's message is called *God's Perfect Timing*.

Acts 19:23-28 ²³ About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. ²⁴ A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. ²⁵ He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. ²⁶ And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. ²⁷ There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty." ²⁸ When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

John F. Kennedy once said, *"Change is the law of life. And those who only look at the past and present are certain to miss the future."* I believe the President was right! If you think there is some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

As in the past few weeks, we find ourselves in the nineteenth chapter of Acts. The characters are new, but the location is the same. Once again, we find Paul in Ephesus. According to the text, there was a silversmith by the name of Demetrius. Many believe he was the leader of the silversmith guild or union, which manufactured silver shrines or images. At one of their union meetings, he announced to the members that there

was a problem. For years, they had made good money producing silver images of the goddess Artemis. Who was the goddess Artemis? She was the goddess of fertility, who was worshipped throughout the province of Asia. However, God had done something new. Jesus had come into the world and the times had changed. The times had changed and the silversmiths didn't like it. It is like they are standing on a bridge between the past and the future, holding their sacred items which remind them of a glorious past. Paul was introducing Christianity to their little corner of the world, causing everyone to have different priorities. The name on everyone's lips was no longer Artemis. The name on everyone's lips was Jesus. The silversmith industry that had thrived under Artemis, struggled under Jesus. Let me say this clearly. The rise of Jesus cost this group of laborers money. There had to be a conflict. Some things don't change. People have always been crazy about money and resistant to change. This story has both. Our time is no different. Did you know that 80% of Americans hate change? I believe that figure is even higher in the life of the church. This is the truth: God is always doing something new. If you believe the world has changed in your lifetime, say, "**Amen!**" The world has changed drastically in my lifetime.

The world has changed drastically since 1957. For in that year, the average cost of a new home in America was \$12,200. Today, it is nearly \$300,000. The average monthly rent was \$90. The average yearly wage was \$4,550. Today, the average yearly worker makes approximately \$53,000. The cost of a gallon of gas was 24 cents. The cost of a pound of bacon was 60 cents and the cost of a dozen eggs was 28 cents. In 1957, the new movies included *Twelve Angry Men* and *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*. In 1957, Wham-O released a new toy, the Frisbee. In 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower received the news Viet Cong guerrillas attacked South Vietnam. And, in 1957, the largest group of Baby Boomers, people born between 1946 and 1964, were born. Do I have to say it? Do I really have to say it? The world has changed a great deal since 1957. Did you know that in 1957 this piece of property was not the home of the Western Reserve United Methodist Church? It was the home of the Far Hill Nursery. The merger between the Cornersburg Methodist Church and the Epworth Methodist Church did not occur for several more years. How much has the world changed in your lifetime? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" Like the silversmiths in the Bible story, we are standing on a bridge between the past and the future.

Last Sunday night, I was strolling around Lakeside waiting for Annual Conference to begin. (I was anticipating all the excitement 😊.) I would suggest you go to Lakeside for a long weekend, but don't buy a cottage and stay for 25 years, like me. As I walked, I ran into some familiar faces. I talked to each one. Sitting on the front porch of one of the cottages were four ladies. Two were strangers, two were friends. The friends were Nancy Jarvis, your lay delegate to Annual Conference and Nancy Swogger, who must be a good friend. They flagged me down and I sat with them for a few minutes. The two strangers told us about their church. About ten years ago, their church merged with two other United Methodist congregations. Ten years later, everything sounded good. They had built a new all-purpose building. They gave all the credit to their long-term

pastor of 10 years! One woman said, we had to change to keep up with our changing times. One of the Nancy's looked at me and said, "Russ, tell her how long you have been at our church." I said, "I'm finishing my twenty-third year." The two strangers looked confused and asked, "This is a United Methodist Church? Why did you get to stay so long?" I said, "They are trying to limit the damage to one spot!" Then, the one Nancy said, "We have changed a lot in twenty-three years." As I staggered off, I began to think about how much we have changed. I began to take an inventory.

In 1994, we offered one traditional worship service on Sunday at 10:45. Later, we added an 8:30 convenience service. Still later, we added a 9:15 contemporary service, TOGGLE (Touch of God Giving Life Eternal.) The three services do break down community, but they have helped us grow.

In 1994, 4580 Canfield Road was the home of one organization, the Western Reserve United Methodist Church. Maintaining this building just for us, who only gathered for a few hours on Sunday morning, seemed like a waste to me. Today, we are the home of three organizations. In addition to the church, there is the Children's Learning Academy of Ohio (daycare) and the Mahoning Valley District Office. I didn't recruit those organizations for money. I did it for visibility. Daycare introduced us to a new generation, which didn't even know we existed. The district office forces United Methodist clergy to learn our location, which didn't happen in the past.

In 1994, we were the fifteenth largest worshipping body of United Methodists in the Youngstown District, averaging about 120. Today, we have the second largest attendance in the Mahoning Valley District, averaging about 235. We are behind only Howland UMC. We are the only church that is healthier today than we were in 1994.

In 1994, I do not believe I officiated at a single wedding. This summer and fall I am scheduled to officiate at fourteen weddings.

In 1994, we didn't have a prayer of paying 100% of our apportionments. Today, paying 100% of our apportionments isn't just a laughable goal, it is an expected reality.

In 1994, we didn't send a single youth on a mission trip. This year, we are sending twenty-three people on a mission trip to Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Over the years, we have sent many from this to church to various locations to help those in need and to experience Jesus for themselves through the Group Workcamp Foundation.

Since 1994, we hosted two Mill Creek Workcamps. You remember them. Partnering with the Group Workcamps, we brought 400 young people to our

area. Three things happened. First, people within the once proud city received some free basic home repairs. Second, our youth experienced Jesus for themselves, and third, we escaped our little piece of property and saw some of the poverty in our area firsthand.

Since 1994, we met and said good-bye to a gracious woman from Georgia named Ruth Faulkner. In the name of friendship, she gave this church \$250,000. With that money, we were not just able to put this building back to like-new condition, we were able to make this building better than it was when new.

Since 1994, we have built a first-rate pavilion. Various groups within the church and in the community use it all summer long.

Since 1994, we built a first-rate outdoor chapel, Woodland Haven. I have used it for a variety of reasons throughout the years; worship, memorial services and weddings.

On Palm Sunday, we dedicated our remodeled chancel. We eliminated the obstacles, improved the sound system and added screens to make us relevant to a new generation. We will never change the Gospel message, but we have changed the packaging.

I remind you of these things for one reason. I do not remind you of these things to say we have "arrived". There is still much work to do. We still have a ways to go. God is always doing something new, and God is not done with us yet. Never forget it.

On Palm Sunday, I asked the people to raise their hands if they started with me in 1994. Do you remember? Less than twenty people raised their hands. I thanked them for tolerating and supporting me through the years. I said, without them our progress would not have been possible. I meant it that day, but looking back, I was wrong. It wasn't those supportive, tolerant lay people who made our progress possible. I am not responsible for our progress. I am not that talented. It is God who deserves the credit. Maybe you were here on that day? Or maybe you have heard our story. It all began with the healing of a tiny baby boy, who has grown into a wonderful young man. That miracle changed our church and reminded us that the winds of Pentecost are always blowing. All we did was adjust our sail and go along for the ride. Like it or not, God is always doing something new. If you don't believe me, then ask those silversmiths in our scripture reading for today. God is always doing something new. If you believe God is always doing something new, say, "**Amen!**" If you believe God is always doing something new, then you have a problem.

If you believe God is always doing something new, then you must believe that God will do something new *again*. That means someday, you will be standing on the bridge next to the silversmiths, holding our sacred items tightly. The bridge links the known things

of the past with an uncertain future. It is impossible to go backwards, and you are afraid to go forward. Suddenly, *you* will be one of the 80% who resist change. There is no reason to believe our generation will be any different from previous generations. People have always resisted change. Someday, we will resist change. Can I ask you a question? Are you afraid of the future? Don't be. The ninetieth Psalm said it best, "From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." In other words, God is always with us!

They tell me in the British Museum in London, there is an old mariner's map of North America that was drawn approximately 1525. It shows the outline of the coast and adjacent waterways. The cartographer made some intriguing notations on areas of the map that represented regions not yet explored. Over one section he wrote: "Here be giants", over another section he wrote: "Here be scorpions." Over other sections he wrote: "Here be dragons" and "Here be monsters." During the 1800's, that map came into the possession of British explorer Sir John Franklin. He read about the giants, the scorpions, the dragons and the monsters. Scratching out the fearful inscriptions, he wrote these words across the map: "HERE IS GOD!" Never forget it. God is always doing something new, but God is always with us.

John F. Kennedy was absolutely right, *"Change is the law of life. And those who only look at the past and present are certain to miss the future."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**