

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [2nd Sunday after Pentecost & Farewell Service]

June 11, 2023

Rev. YoungMin Kim

Everything was great!

Acts 20:32-35

(1)

The day has finally come. On Sunday, July 2, 2017, I first stood before you as your new pastor. And today, June 11, 2023, is the last time I will stand before you as your pastor. The past week was full of emotions while I prepared the last Breakfast with the Pastor, visited Mae and Ray saying “Hi” and “Goodbye,” and packed my belongings in my office. To be honest, the fact that today is my last day with you just hasn’t hit me yet, but I will probably really feel it next Sunday.

Preparing my last sermon, I chose the Book of Acts chapter 20, and I want to invite you into the moment that the Apostle Paul shared his farewell with the Ephesian church leaders. Through the story, let us feel the heart of the Apostle Paul and the church leaders, find exhortations given to us, and be ready to bid farewell.

(2)

The Apostle Paul, full of passion for mission, began his third missionary journey. He left from Antioch—his mission stronghold—visited some churches that he planted in Asia Minor (today’s Turkey), and took care of and encouraged the churches and the church members. And then, he crossed over the Aegean Sea and visited Macedonia and Greece. And he did the same work there. Finalizing his missionary journey, Paul wanted to go back to Jerusalem to report on the fruitfulness of his third mission journey. But he must have felt uncertainty about his future. Thus, on his way back to Jerusalem, Paul stopped over at Miletus and sent a messenger to the leaders of the Ephesian church and requested them to come and see him.

We do not know why Paul contacted only the Ephesian church and asked the church leaders to come and see him. Was it because Miletus was close to Ephesus (about 40 miles)? Or was it because the Ephesian church was special to Paul? We do not know the exact reasons.

Paul first visited the city of Ephesus on his second missionary journey. In addition to Rome in Italy, Alexandria in Egypt, and Antioch in Syria, Ephesus in Asia Minor was one of the four major cities in the Roman Empire. In the time of the Apostle Paul, Ephesus was very prosperous in economy with the business of idol worship. When Paul first arrived at the city, he proclaimed the good news about Jesus Christ and established a faith community in Ephesus. And then, he went on to the next city, leaving his mission partners—Priscila and Aquila—and asked them to take care of the faith community in Ephesus.

And then, Paul revisited the city on his third missionary journey. This time, he spent a longer time—about three years in the city—strengthening the church and the church members, proclaiming the good news in the synagogue, and performing many great miracles and signs among the public. On the one hand, Paul set the Ephesians free from evil spirits and disbelief and brought new changes into the city. However, on the other hand, people who earned money from the business of idol worship came to be damaged financially; thus, the city’s economy was also damaged. After all, Ephesus became filled with a great uproar against Paul and his Christian fellows in the city (Acts 19:23-31). Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, the town clerk intervened in the riot, persuaded the people, and barely dismissed the assembly. Even though the dust settled, the hostility of the citizens against the Ephesian church never disappeared. For Paul, the Ephesian church must have been a millstone about his neck.

Now, the Ephesian church leaders ran out immediately to Paul in Miletus. Paul met them at the stairs of the amphitheater near the Miletus harbor. Paul could not be sure of what would happen to him in Jerusalem. Paul said, “as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me” (20:22-23). And he continued to the leaders, “And I know that none of you will ever see my face again” (v. 25).



An Amphitheater in Miletus, Turkey

Due to awaiting imprisonment and persecution, Paul bade all the leaders farewell with some spiritual exhortations. What he exhorted the leaders and all the brothers and sisters in the Ephesian church is described in today passage. “I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified...You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’” (vv. 35-38). When Paul finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. And then, they bade each other farewell.

(3)

Yesterday, I asked Joanna what she liked the most about Nokesville UMC during the past 6 years. There was silence for a moment, and she finally answered, “I liked everything, except for the snakes in the bathroom.” And she continued, “Preparing for the Parsonage Open House was somewhat stressful, but when 30-40 church members came to the parsonage, enjoyed the Korean BBQ and dishes, and shared fellowship with each other, I felt great joy.” She didn’t use the term, but I believe she found the heavenly kingdom and the heavenly banquet among you in those moments.

I asked myself the same question. And I found a lot of joys from our worship, ministries, and events and of fruitfulness from them. But placing them under the feet of Jesus, I found greatly meaningful moments that I was with you when you went through difficult, painful, mournful, and challenging moments. When you struggled with faith passing through the pandemic, I was with you. When you discerned and proceeded with the disaffiliation, I was with you. And most of all, when you lost your loved ones and were in grief, I was beside you.

The Apostle Paul seemed to have some worries saying that savage wolves would come in among the church members or some in the church would distort the truth in order to entice them away from God. But I do not worry about you because you will come to have a new pastor who is firm in faith, truth, and spirit. He will lead you to God and help you grow as Jesus’s faithful disciples. I do not worry about you because you have dedicated and humble church leaders. With leadership, dedication, and humility, they will serve you and the pastor to move forward to establish the kingdom of God here in this church and the community. Therefore, please build each other up in faith and service and help the weak among you and remember the words of the Lord Jesus and keep practicing them in your lives.

For you, I might be one of the pastors that you have received and sent. But you are my first congregation, and I will remember everything you have shown to me and my family—your welcome without prejudice, your encouragement when I was discouraged, your support for my church ministries, and your love for Joanna and Caleb. Now, I step down as your pastor as of today and will go to serve other brothers and sisters in St. Matthias UMC. From now on, please leave me and my family behind you, and be ready to welcome the new pastor and his family and show them the same welcome, encouragement, support, and love. Amen.