

Christ Presbyterian Church

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Rich Phenow

"{RE}LATIONAL: Reframing Our Focus"

Acts 18

I want you to take your bulletins home and look at the names of all these people that are listed. These are folks whom you know in our church who are involved in *caring for others*, whether it's making cookies for a funeral reception or showing up as ushers and greeters at services. Just make sure you look at the names of these people who absolutely love to show up and care for others.

I met a man named Dale for the first time about six weeks ago. Dale's life has been forever changed and reshaped and redefined. Dale's organs, his liver, his kidneys, his heart began to shut down. Dale was put into a medically-induced coma for 13 days because his body was experiencing septic shock. Dale was as close to death as one can get. Somehow a 13-day, induced coma and over five weeks in the hospital has a way of reframing somebody's life. As a result, he now has the ability like never before to receive support and love from people.

Dale has a grateful heart, a humble heart. He is gracious about letting others care for him. He said to me in the interview we had on Thursday, "Rich, there's little pride left. I can't deny others the gift that they receive when they give to me but, more importantly, I can't wait for when I get better, when I am able to move my hands and feet again, and I can give back to others."

His awesome wife Tracy stood by his side all day for over five weeks; tense, worried, full of wondering about the future, whether their sons would have a father, whether she would have a husband. A good friend of his, Jay, a Jesus-follower, a member of our church, called us and said, "My friend Dale is in the hospital in intensive care and you, the staff, need to get over there." Kyle went over right away and others of us went over to visit. We did this not so much Dale, because he was in a coma, but to visit Tracy and be alongside of her.

Through a CaringBridge site, Jay organized a prayer service in our chapel on a Sunday evening. The chapel was full of friends and family and music and Scripture. It was full of prayer, and it was full of a lot of love. The Holy Spirit showed up and in a very powerful way, the supernatural presence of God was there. People were praying who had never prayed before and people were reading Scripture who had never read Scripture before.

On Good Friday with limited mobility, Dale left the hospital in a wheelchair. In the interview I had with him, he said, "Rich, I'm different. My life has been changed and redefined." He said, "I'm a lot more emotional now. I feel things a lot more deeply in my heart."

A number of times during the interview, he had to stop talking – and this guy is a talker. He talked for over an hour but at times he had to stop talking because he was so overcome with emotions and deep feelings. Dale is a smart guy. He is a cerebral guy. He is incredibly intelligent and articulate but he is perplexed. He is perplexed by the outpouring of love that he has received from so many people, a majority of whom he doesn't even know. He is seeing life through a different set of eyes. His focus has been reframed. Watch with me as I share with you a few clips of my interview with Dale on Thursday.

(Video is shown)

I first met Dale after he had come out of the coma on the Monday morning after the service in the chapel. He was with his wife reading two huge cards that people had signed wishing him well. He asked Tracy to stop after each message because he couldn't stop crying at the power of the messages. His life was forever redefined and reshaped. His goal was to be at the Twins opener on opening day of the new stadium. His friend Jay brought him to watch the game. Then Dale went to the second game. I called him and said, "Listen, man, I'm able-bodied and everything and I haven't been to a game yet. You've been to two of them." Amazing how this man's life was changed! What's ahead? What's ahead is determination and hard work and physical therapy. More meals that people will drop by the house. A baseball team is going to come and rake his yard. A lot more prayer and even some uncertainty as to whether he will fully recover.

Think about adversity. Think about the adversity in your own life and some of the pain that you've been through. Has it reshaped you? Are you different because of it? Adversity and unmet dreams, discouragement and sickness, grief and loss, and physical and emotional pain, and suffering, and all the circumstances of our lives cause us to look, not only at the present moment but at the future in a new and different way — reframed.

We have been through the Gospel of Luke and now we are in the Book of Acts, the second writing of Luke's. Acts is really about the spreading of the Gospel. It's about the spreading of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. In the Book of Acts Luke says, "The Word of God grew and multiplied. Churches were strengthened in faith, and their numbers increased daily, and the Word of the Lord prevailed mightily." The church was on fire. Lives were being changed. They were being changed through a lot of adversity and a lot of difficulty. It wasn't easy for Paul and for Timothy and for those who were called to spread the good news.

Just for a moment freeze-frame Paul's ministry and look at some of the adversity that Paul went through and how God used *people* to encourage him in his journey. Paul walks 50 miles from the capital, Athens, to Corinth, a seaport village. Paul, I believe, is walking with his head down. He is weary. He is tired and he is discouraged. He has been driven out of Macedonia. He was barely tolerated in Athens and now he comes to Corinth where he is met with some hostility. The hostility came from the Jews who were not really excited about the message Paul was preaching. Paul looks around at this intimidating seaport town, possibly 750 people, and Paul is overwhelmed. He is overwhelmed at the paganism and the sensuality and the prostitution and the commercialism.

I think Paul is feeling a little hopeless. He is met with negative, closed-minded attitudes. He sees the sin and the suffering and the brokenness everywhere, he is weary, and he is tired. He is

tired not only of the message being rejected, but he as the messenger has been also been rejected over and over again. Possibly in that 50-mile hike with his head down, Paul got in touch with some intense feelings, some feelings of discouragement and hopelessness, some of his own fear and some of his own anxiety.

Look with me in our text for today: Acts 18:1-4. I would encourage you to leave the Bible open and underline in it and write in the margins. This is Paul now coming to Corinth.

“After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.”

Paul shows up; he is tired and he is discouraged, and how does God address Paul's need and his discouragement? He provides for him a couple, Priscilla and Aquila. I'd like to identify right now that these are the first two lay care ministers in the Bible. They are Jewish Christians, who have been thrown out of Rome. They immediately come alongside of Paul and extend to him hospitality and friendship. They provide an opportunity for Paul to share with them in their vocation of leatherworking and tentmaking which they share in common. They provide Paul with an opportunity to use his gifts and a chance to rebuild his energies. They are showing up in Paul's life in the midst of his discouragement. They listen to him and possibly reflect back some of what he was saying. They give Paul an opportunity for a sense of accomplishment through the work of his hands making sandals and sewing hides for tents.

I can relate to Paul in the sense of incompleteness that I think he feels in his ministry. There's always another Sabbath to preach in the synagogue. There is a sense that ministry never comes to completion; thus, the wisdom to having the disciples and the apostles doing something to supplement their ministry. For me, it would be, being a fishing guide. I'd love it if you would support me at being a fishing guide. Or, I'd love it if you would support me at being a pro tournament bass fisherman. The reason I'd want to be supported in being a fishing guide or pro is that I would have that sense of accomplishment and completion every time I landed a big bass or a walleye in my net. That is what was happening for Paul. He was looking at his hands and at the work of his hands. He was feeling complete though incomplete in his ministry.

Now Dale's family, Jay, and the community of friends in this church --staff and lay folks-- came alongside of Dale through his adversity. The message is simply this: **we cannot do the things of life alone**. That is why God provided us with His Body, the church. We can't walk alone but the lay people around us who have been trained to be the hands and feet of Jesus in a very real way to us, His people, will come to us in our moments of need and remind us of God's love in a very tangible way.

C. S. Lewis put it this way in his book, *The Problem of Pain*. He says this, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Pain causes us to listen to God. Pain causes us to look for the work of God through *us*, the people of God.

As this chapter of Acts continues to unfold, the Jews throw Paul out of the synagogue. The message of Jesus being the chosen one, the Messiah, is something they want nothing to do with but Paul has this deep desire that his people would know of the saving grace of Christ, that they would know that it is no longer about religious behavior. It is no longer about what the Jews could do or what they had done. It was about *what had been done for them* on a cross and in an empty tomb. Paul desperately wants them to know that in order to win God's forgiveness and love and favor, it's simply a decision of faith.

We continue on and look at the text in verse 7.

"Then Paul left the synagogue," he was *thrown out* of the synagogue, "and he goes next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized." But Paul was still discouraged, "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.' So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the Word of God."

Paul, now, maybe afraid for his life, has been thrown out of the synagogue. Though great things are happening – a leader of the synagogue and his whole household comes to faith. But Paul is tired of the conflict and he is tempted not to preach any more. So what does God do? God shows up once again, this time in a very real way, in a vision in the middle of the night, and says to Paul, "Don't be afraid."

Fear is the human emotion that occurs most often and most frequently, more so even than love. It is mentioned more than any other phrase in the Bible. The phrases "Do not be afraid," "Don't be afraid for I am with you," "I will never leave you or forsake you" occur 366 times in different ways in the Bible. John Ortberg says that is for every day of the year including leap year. We need to be reminded that we don't have to be afraid. Why? Why should we not be afraid? Because fear drives out love. Fear can put our lives into a tailspin and life can get blurry and out of focus. Fear oftentimes causes us to lose sight of God, to lose sight of how God is using his people *right around us*. Living in fear causes us to lose control and to do desperate things like lose hope.

But God shows up. He shows up through Aquila and Priscilla. He shows up in a very real and tangible way. This is God's prescription for Paul in his discouragement. God says a deeper love will replace a great fear. God says a gift of courage will replace any caution. He reminds Paul that an abiding presence will be there in the time of alarming perplexities. He reminds Paul of unlimited help against ultimate hurts. He reminds Paul that there is a freedom from loneliness in the fellowship of Christian friends. **Fear is always the absence of knowing that we are loved.** Paul needed to know that he was loved, not just for what he was doing but for who he was.

God seldom solves the adversity in our lives but God does use people to show up in the city, in the city of CPC. It is called *the ministry of presence*. We are called to show up not with the answers, the four spiritual laws, and the 12 most-read Bible passages, but we are asked and called *to show up*. You have heard me say it so many times, and I believe that it's really true, that it is not so much about bringing people to Jesus as it is about bringing Jesus to people. That's very different.

Rick, a 74-year-old man was in fragile health died recently of congestive heart failure. Rick and his wife Jean joined CPC in the fall. They absolutely loved the church. Over and over Rick would say to me, "I wish I would have joined earlier. I wish I would have had more time to get involved." When Rick died we had a great celebration of his life here.

This couple showed up at Rick's service, Aquila and Priscilla or Dave and Laura. Dave and Laura had been teaching a Bible study on Wednesday nights that Jean had been attending. I was a little bit worried about Jean because she and her husband don't have family in town. I was worried about her feeling alone but on Easter Dave and Laura invited Jean to their home. Then Jean showed up Tuesday night at our support group for those grieving a loss. Love was extended to Jean by Amy, a woman in the support group, one of our new lay care ministers, a woman who had lost her teenage daughter. She supported Jean in her loss. That's what showing up looks like. That's what the *ministry of presence* looks like. It looks like the Aquilas and the Priscillas and the Amys and the Daves and the Lauras.

Even Paul, as charismatic and as big a fireball as he was, needed to be reminded constantly that he was loved. That's why God brought people around Paul. That's why He brings people around *us*. God comes alongside of you and me. He never leaves us alone and afraid. He doesn't want us to lose hope.

So the ultimate question is *why?* Why is there suffering? Why is there discouragement? Why? Solomon says we will never know the mind of God. We can't fathom what God has been up to from the beginning until the end of time, but there is one thing we can do. We can simply do our best to revere God, to be reminded that God will show up and comfort us so that we will receive comfort and we can comfort others.

Paul says life is out of focus. It is blurry and dim and we will never know *why* but he says God knows us perfectly well. He says when we see the face of God, we will understand but there are three things that are essential: faith and hope and love. And the greatest of these is—what? What is it? It is love! Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.