

2021-05-16 Finding Your People

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May 16, 2021

Pastor Scott Austin

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Ken Tryon]

Our second reading today is from Acts chapter 18 verses five through 11:

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized. One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

I want to start with a question that you can put answers into the Zoom chat and I'll read some and then maybe some people in the room will want to shout out some responses to this. But I want you to think about a time in school where you went from one school, or maybe one school building to another school. Do you remember these moments in your education? Maybe you went from elementary school to middle school, or from middle school to high school, or maybe you moved to a new city and went to a completely different school where you didn't know anybody. I want you to tell me in the Zoom chat, what were the feelings that you had around that? I watched the Mr. Rogers documentary this week so I'm, like, really preoccupied with feelings. [laughter] What were the feelings that you had when you went to that new school building, and you can shout out your answers in the room if you want to. And I'll read some out

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from Zoom as well. Someone says, “Very anxious.” [Voice in congregation] “Excited to meet new people.” Wow. I think we might have an extrovert in our midst. [Voice] “Stressed.” Thank you. [Voice] “Uncertain.” Yeah. [Voice] “Lost.” [Voice] “From the top of the food chain to the bottom.” That's a very evocative way to say it. [Voice] “A new start.” Yeah, wow. In Zoom I'm getting these answers: Stimulated. Alone. Unsure. Afraid. Lost. Afraid of not fitting in. Free to reinvent myself.

I'm always happy when I ask you to offer responses to a question, because here's my little secret. In my mind I say, “I know exactly what they're going to respond with, and it's going to set up my sermon so well.” [Laughter] And then inevitably, I get maybe one or two of those responses and then a lot of the other types of responses that I hadn't considered. And it gives new meaning to me in the moment that I then have to try to process into the sermon So, say a little prayer for me. [Laughter] [Voice: “Do you need a second?”] No, I don't need a second. I'll just go forward with it here. But I think most of us have had, even those of us who identified the good feelings that you had going into a totally new space — I think a lot of us, probably all of us, can identify in some way, or on some level with the feelings of worry and anxiety and loneliness or alone-ness that can come with going into a new space. If it's not a school, and maybe it happened later in life for some of you again, or for the first time, you had a job change or you went through a divorce or you moved across the country or whatever it might be.

One of the things that can make it possible and even sometimes joyous to settle into that new situation is to find a new group of friends — to find your people, if you will. So maybe you went to a new school and you started playing a new sport. Or you joined a club, or you found yourself at a lunch table with all the other outcasts and they turned out to be the best people in the whole building. The lovely thing about this is that it's often the isolating experience that leads you into new or deeper, or better friendships and relationships. And I want to talk about that on the church level today, somewhat. [Sound of baby crying in background] Once again, I'm so thrilled to be slightly distracted by the sound of a baby again [laughter]. I can't wait to baptize and dedicate and hug and snuggle some babies. I've missed that part of my job, which is a great privilege that I have to be invited into families' lives at those moments.

So I want to talk about this idea of moving into a new situation and deepening and strengthening relationships, as a church. So this is week six of our exploration of the stories in the book of the Acts of the Apostles from the Bible. Stories of the earliest Christians and their struggle to overcome their religious and cultural biases and to allow Gentiles to be included fully into this new Christian movement. We've been talking about this since the week after Easter. And six weeks is quite a bit longer than I usually do if I'm preaching on, like, a topical sort

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of series. I usually don't find that I can keep going that long before I not necessarily lose interest, but before I kind of want to move on to something else — where something else is grabbing my attention. But I have to tell you this has been a powerful series for me to preach through. I hope it's meant a single thing to any one of you because it's meant a lot to me to work my way through these stories and to find God's presence, and to find meaning and inspiration in them. It's been very fulfilling and really, also quite draining, I have to say. I would definitely encourage you to go back and listen to the series if you haven't been here for each of the weeks. Especially listen to pastor Judy's sermon, which was from a couple weeks ago on. What was the date, [May] second I think.

Now, I had originally planned to end this series with today's message, but I've decided to extend it by two weeks and I'll tell you why. One is that I turned to the Christian calendar to look at what might be coming up, because we often are using the Christian calendar to shape what we do. By no planning of my own, it turns out that Pentecost Sunday is next week. And so that couldn't be more fitting with the stories of the Holy Spirit, showing the church what they are supposed to do as far as including people in their midst. And so we're going to do Pentecost next week and then on the 30th, we're going to hear a story sermon from our friend, Villa, who has a personal investment in the idea of our doors as a church being opened. That sermon is going to be given over Zoom from Finland, and that's super exciting for me so definitely don't miss out on that. But even with those extra two weeks coming up, today's is kind of a pivotal moment in the series because it's a pivotal moment in the story of the church and its leaders.

The story that you just heard Ken read from Acts chapter 18 is about the Apostle Paul in the city of Corinth, and that took place after the church was pretty far down the road to full inclusion of the Gentiles in their Christian movement. And in that story you heard that Paul came to what must have been for him A really painful realization, which is that the religious structure into which he had been born wanted nothing to do with the truth that he had learned. That the religious family that had raised him up, that had in fact prepared him from his birth to be ready to receive the message of Jesus the Messiah, that that very family not only opposed him but, as the text said, *reviled* him. What a contrast, by the way, to the church in Jerusalem in Acts 11 from the second week of our series, that heard the news of the Spirit falling on the Gentiles and listened to the story and rejoiced. By this point, it's gotten a little out of hand — all this welcoming in. And the religious structures oppose and revile Paul and the other apostles for continuing to push this question. So what he finally came to realize was that he was simply done trying. In what maybe wasn't the most mature or measured moment of his life [laughter], in protest, he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads. I am innocent.” From now on, I'll just go to the Gentiles.

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In many ways, if I'm being honest, this is how I feel, somewhat, as a pastor. I know how many of in the community here at Artisan Church feel about what I've been calling "the business side" of this biblical series, which is that, as I'm sure most of you know at this point, our leadership is proposing a statement of withdrawal from our denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church, which is to be voted on by the members of our church on June 13 at our annual meeting.

By the way, speaking of the business side of things, we do have those town hall meetings coming up this week on Wednesday and Sunday. If you have any questions or concerns about this vote and want to know any of the details about it, I really encourage you to be at one of those events. You can be in person here on Wednesday night or Sunday night next week, or you can do it over Zoom. We are asking you to register either way, so if you haven't registered yet, go to our website, find the image that says "Town Hall Meetings," click on it and follow through those links to sign up for whichever one you want. The reason I'm pressing you on that a little bit is because we are not going to breeze past that on June 30, but we actually do have other church business that needs to happen at our annual meeting, some of it sort of significant business, so the better time to ask deep questions would be on Wednesday or Sunday night. So please make it if you can and if you can't make either one, but want to hear more, feel free to reach out to me or to anybody on our leadership team. We would be happy to talk with you about it and help you in whatever way.

So, as we approach, as a church, that important moment where we are going to be considering our own version of shaking the dust off our clothes, I thought that this story of Paul's experience in Corinth might be useful for us to consider. First of all, notice that it's in the city of Corinth and there's two whole books of the Bible called Corinthians, so you know something happens in this city. Something continues to happen in this city. The good news is that Paul was in great pain at that moment, and even lashed out a little bit. But in that pain he had a vision. And that vision is what allowed him to find his new people. So I'm going to put the text of that vision on the screen. I'm going to ask Avila to do that so that you can all see it in the room and you can all see it on Zoom as well. I'm going to read it and I'm going to ask us to read it together.

This is what the Lord said to Paul in the vision: "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." Can we say this vision together? I really want this to impress itself into our hearts and minds. [Reading, together] "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." I hope that you read that along with us on Zoom, unless you're like, in a coffee shop or something. That might have come across a little weird, [laughter] but I hope that that

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message is already beginning to find its way into the depths of your heart, and then into the depths of your soul. So let's talk about this vision. As I see it, this vision breaks down into four parts. There are two commandments and there are two promises. It would be nice if visions just had promises, but this one has some commandments. Let's talk about the commandments and the vision first. The first one is, "Do not be afraid." This is a commandment about how we ought to feel, which at first is kind of like, "Well, don't tell me how to feel. I feel the way I feel." Right? Mr. Rogers would say, "You can't tell me not to be afraid." But it's actually not trying to police somebody's emotions. It's trying to reassure Paul and I think it's probably, I hope it's fair to say, by extension, that it's to reassure us.

"Do not be afraid," by the way, is a very, very, very, very common refrain in the New Testament, and actually throughout the whole Bible: Do not be afraid. Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Do not fear. Again and again and again in the Scriptures, and how many of us had an experience of religion that was so centered on how afraid you should be? If I just said the phrase, "If you died tonight —" right? A lot of you are just going, "No, no! It took me 10 years to get that out of my head. Don't put it back in there!" Do not be afraid. Why have we made our religion so centered on fear when the commandment is so consistently, "Do not be afraid"?

And so if you feel afraid or unsettled or worried about what comes next for us as a church, do not be afraid. It's okay to feel, but you don't have to be afraid. That's the first commandment.

The second commandment is: Speak up for the truth. Do not be silent. This is less about how you feel than more about what you do and what you say. This is designed to give you confidence, because when you are attacked for speaking the truth you might find yourself feeling scared, and that's normal, but you also might be tempted to shut up, to stop speaking the truth.

And at its best, that might look like trying to be a peacemaker, but as a person who is somewhat conflict-averse, I can tell you that, um, I – I will use an "I" statement here – I sometimes use the language of being a peacemaker to protect myself from the difficult work of continuing to speak the truth to those who need to hear it. This commandment says: *Nope. Keep going. Don't be afraid, but don't be silent, either.*

Those two commandments were the first half of what I'm seeing in Paul's vision, which I hope extends to us in some way. The second half of what I wanted to talk about is the promises that are contained in that vision. And it's a good thing there are promises, because if we're going to go forward boldly and courageously – if we're going to continue to speak the truth, even to

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people who don't want to hear it – we're going to need some promises, and here's the first one: It's that *you are safe*. No one will lay a hand on you to harm you; that's what Paul received in that vision. So, on a personal level, Paul was safe in a dangerous environment.

What I want all of you to know, here in the room and out there on Zoom and Facebook, is that I'm committed to making Artisan safe for you on a personal level. That's part of what we're doing this for. And I also want you to know, the whole community, as your pastor, that Artisan is going to be safe; we're going to be okay. It's not gonna be easy, but no harm will come to us. I'm trying my best to claim that promise, and I'd invite you to join me in it.

Promise number two is even better, which is this: *You are not alone*. In a year plus, where we have felt so alone so much of the time, I have felt that it's one of the very few clear pastoral duties that I have been given. One is to tell you to love one another, the other is to tell you that you're not alone. And here we are at the end of this series, with things looking better for the possibility of us being together, and it's right there in the middle of this vision. You are not alone. And this is true in two ways in the vision, isn't it? Did you notice this? "For I am with you," God says, "and there are many in this city who are my people." So, number one is, you are not alone because God is with you; we are not alone because God is with us.

And that's wonderful, and it would be nice, in an ideal world, if that were enough to get us through, but sometimes we need, um – there's a song that says, "I need someone with a little skin on them." [chuckles] We need some actual human beings to be with us so that we can know we are not alone, and the second part of that promise is that there are *other people*. It's specifically worded in this beautiful way, "there are many in this city who are my people." There's nowhere we could go as a church. Geographically, theologically, culturally, there's nowhere we could go where God will not be, and we're God's people will not be, because when the broader church and anybody else start saying "no," God is still there with us. And it's God's "yes" that we need to listen for, not the "yes" of other people.

So, I was putting this all together, and it suddenly dawned on me that there's a really beautiful idea that I actually first learned from some of our LGBTQ siblings, but which is also popularized and embraced in other communities – it's the idea of "chosen family." This refers to a group of people in an individual's life that fill the role that's typically, and ideally would have been, felt and filled in the family of origin, but for whatever reason hasn't been. So, for people who've been marginalized, or abused, or cast out by their biological families, it can be very powerful to find a new family among those who you choose to be your family. Now, I don't want to appropriate that really beautiful sentiment; it's not a one to one analogy, but I do find really

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inspiring meaning in the idea of chosen family. Because the truth is – I can't not be honest about this – the truth is that, in many ways, the broader church family that was my and our church family doesn't feel completely like family to me in the way that it once did. And I know that others of you feel that way, as well, many of you on a much deeper and more painful level than I even feel it. And so, the idea that that's not the end of the story when it comes to being part of a church family is really reassuring to me; the idea that there might be a chosen family for us as a church, the same way there's a chosen family for people who've been harmed and wounded by their families of origin, that's really encouraging to me, as a church. And so, if you're feeling unsettled, maybe you can find some hope and meaning in that possibility, as well.

Now, there's one little bonus part of this story from the book of Acts, which I can't resist telling you about. [chuckles] There's an unexpected and probably unpredictable result of Paul's decision to shake the dust off his clothes, to say, “Your blood be on your own heads. I'm only going to the Gentiles now.” Did you notice that he moved in right next door to the synagogue? [laughs] Right? He lives with a Gentile. And it says he stays there a year and six months. That's a long time. I'm coming up on a very exact sense of how long a year and six months might be.

And do you know what happened? Crispus – which is a great name, but – Crispus, the official of the synagogue, converts. After Paul shakes off the dust and says I'm only going to the Gentiles, the idea of staying so near to the family that he shook the dust off his clothes about is powerful to me, because the reality is I don't feel like we've moved as a church. I feel like the vision that we had when we started this church is the vision that we have today, and all we've done is allow it to unfold, and all that's happened is that we've seen the Spirit calling us to something that's even deeper and more true about what we originally knew was deep and true.

So, to use the kind of geo-located metaphor, I don't really want to abandon the synagogue and, you know, sail around the world to another completely different place; I actually feel pretty at home right now and I feel like it's the family that's started to shift, in many ways. And so, even as it's time, you know, in the discernment of our staff and leadership team, to move on, we're not going very far. You might think of us as moving in right next to the synagogue. And you might even hold out hope that Crispus will be converted eventually. Can God still work in the church family that we're leaving after we're gone? Yes. Lord, hear our prayer.

I love that part of the story, because it's one of those things that sort of uncovered as I was continuing to study the text. I had this whole thing figured out, what I wanted to say about it, and then I saw that and it was like *whoa!* I love the scriptures when they just give us more than we expect.

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So, here's what I want to ask you: What pain are you feeling right now? This is not one of the ones that you have to answer out loud or type into the Zoom chat, but what pain are you feeling right now? What worry do you have right now? What are you feeling afraid about? Maybe it has to do with your personhood or your own identity; maybe it has to do with the idea of community affiliation, which is important to you; maybe it's something else altogether. Can you offer that worry, that fear, that anxiety, to God and allow God to take that burden from you? Can you imagine yourself asleep in your bed like Paul was, having a dream where God says to you, "Don't be afraid"? And then, as you continue into that dream, what vision do you have? What promises do you begin to perceive? What hopes for a brighter future are taking root in your heart right now?

We have this beautiful cherry tree out here, and the blossoms have mostly dropped, so that means we're going to have fruit on it very soon. Last year, I took a bunch of the cherries and Tracey made a pie or something out of it; they're delicious cherries. And I took a bunch of the seeds, the pits, from those cherries and put them into pots and stuck them out in front of my house, and just left them there through the winter. Had about ten or twelve of them, and three or four of them have these little cherry trees popping up. I don't know if they're gonna make it or not, but I do know there'll be like 500 more cherries on that tree this spring, if you want to take some and put them in pots. Wouldn't that be special if we all had an Artisan cherry tree somewhere on our property? I want the idea of a brighter future and a more hopeful place to take root in you, and in us, like those cherry seeds. There's no guarantee of what will be, but there's infinite possibilities, because every single one of those seeds could be a forest of cherry trees years from now.

So, hear once more of the promise of God, and may it be true for us as it was true for Paul: "I am with you. No one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people." Lord, help us find your people. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).