

Expanding the Mission

**Ps 123 and Romans 1:1-16 – Sermon Text = Rom 1:11-12
563, 548, 530, 556**

*For I am longing to see you
so that I may share with you
some spiritual gift to strengthen you –
or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged
by each other's faith, both yours and mine.
(Romans 1:11 - 12)*

Paul just plans to pass through the city.
He's going to stop for a few days,
attend a few gatherings of Christians in the capital,
and move on to his next mission field, Spain.

In my fertile imagination,
this image of Paul painted by El Greco in 1612
captures him as he arrives in Rome
and meets the first group of Christians.
This is not a church he has founded.
He is keen to see how they are being and doing church.
It's his first time in the 'big' city
at the centre of the empire.
There's a bit of anxiety on his face.
But I find also a deeper curiosity.
And deeper still is the clarity and strength of his core faith,
as he leans on the sword that symbolizes, you will remember, the Word of God.



That's the thing about Paul.
He's always thinking about what to do next
to build the kingdom or commonwealth of God.
He is convinced that God saved the world in Jesus Christ.
The work that God did and the word that God was in Jesus Christ
fulfilled all the promises that God had made to creation since its beginning.
God's message of redemptive health for the whole of the world
was entrusted first to the people of Israel,
but in Jesus, God delivered on all those promises.
Now reconciled to God in Jesus Christ,
all peoples of the earth can rejoice and participate
in flourishing lives of justice, peace, and beauty.

Jesus had called Paul to expand his mission in the world.
As Paul's vision of that mission extends to Spain,
one of the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire in his day,
he knows he will have to pass through Rome to get there.
He had nothing to do with the founding of the churches there.
But he does know of them and the importance of their witness
in the urban centre of the empire.

So, he wants to visit and, as our text this morning indicates,
engage in mutual encouragement.
He hopes to be able to share with them
some spiritual gift that will emerge through the work of the Spirit
as they explore the work and word of the God of the Gospel
in their conversations.
He looks forward to being welcomed into their space
and seeing what things he can offer and gain
as the Spirit works within and among them
to deepen the conviction and courage of their flourishing faith.
Those conversations, and the companionship that they nourish,
are the foundation of the church's strength
as it expands its mission of building the commonwealth of God.

As we begin to consider Paul's Letter to the Romans together,
I think it's important to remember this context for Paul's writing.
He's on his way to a new mission field.
He's keen to meet the Christians of Rome,
to learn from them and to offer his insights to them
on some of the key issues facing the expanding church in the Roman Empire.
The letter is not a carefully thought through exposition of the Christian faith.
None of Paul's letters are.
Romans is a series of reflections on key issues facing the mission of the church
that Paul thinks will encourage those engaged in that mission.
He hopes the letter will open up conversations in which he will learn more as well.

This morning I want to use Paul's reflections on expanding his mission as a jumping off point for thinking about the expansion of our mission in opening up the Sanctuary in Brentwood for broader community use as an arts centre.

Let's first remind ourselves of why we are doing this.
It is yet another way of nourishing souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

We are doing it because of our conviction that Jesus Christ wants to nourish people to flourish in this space in his grace. It is the God of the Gospel through the work of the Holy Spirit who is inviting, encouraging, inspiring, and instructing the people who come into this space.

It will not always be in explicitly Christian ways.

We are offering this space as a community service.

We will respect the meanings and messages that the users bring in with them.

What is important initially is what brought and kept most of you here and that is hospitality.

Remembering the work that Cindy Johal did among us five years ago now, we all valued most the warmth and acceptance with which we were welcomed into this space of grace.

That's the Brentwood tradition we are continuing and expanding as we make this space available as a community arts centre.

So we don't control everything that will happen in this space.

And that's a pretty profound Christian stance on most things because it's not us who is the most powerful influence in this space.

It is the Holy Spirit of the God of the Gospel.

She created this space in the first place.

She is never absent from this space, no matter what is happening in it.

She will always use that activity to prod and provoke people to live to their full potential, a potential we believe that can only happen when people are attracted into a more conscious relationship with the God of the Gospel.

That, I am convinced, will happen here because I trust the Spirit to generate encounters with the grace of Jesus Christ, even though they might happen in ways we can't see and don't understand.

So, we let go of our need to control and let the Spirit work her wonders of amazing grace, just as she did in orchestrating Paul's encounter with the grace of Jesus Christ on the Damascus road so long ago. The same Spirit, working for the same purpose, is still active in our midst. I, for one, am willing to trust her to use this space in redemptive ways.

This new venture in our mission will generate some revenue
to help us maintain and improve this space.
Thanks to the support of Kennedy Stewart,
our local Member of Parliament,
we have been able to hire Janik for the summer
to be Operations Manager of the Sanctuary in Brentwood.
You will each get one of his cards this morning.
This is how we are branding the space – ‘A space of grace for the arts.’
If you know people who might be interested in using the space,
pass the card along.
There are lots more where that one came from.

Janik has been developing a business plan and a marketing plan
for this community space.
Artists, mostly musicians at this point, are using it already
for concerts, rehearsals, recording, and workshops.
To a person, their response to the space
has been very warm and grateful.
They have sensed the compassion that went into
the building and maintenance of this space of grace.
They sense the nourishing that is going on here,
even if they don't use our words for it,
or have no words to put to it at all.

But then, that's a provocative way to see all of the arts, isn't it?
They are a means by which we humans try to find
appropriate ways to respond in gratitude
to God's call to flourish in his company.
Those ways will sometimes comfort,
sometimes challenge,
sometimes even offend,
but always so the Spirit can “provoke us to love and do good deeds,”
as the preacher of the Letter to the Hebrews recognizes.

These are exciting times for Brentwood Presbyterian
as we expand our mission,
following in the steps and spirit of St. Paul.
We carry with us the sword of God's work and word
modelled for us in Jesus Christ and present among us in the Spirit.
New calls on our imaginations and resources will emerge
and new responses will be composed,
but all in the service of our core purpose –
to nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.

May God bless us richly on this delightful journey
into his flourishing future.