

2.11 July 29, 2011

NEXT DOOR TO THE CHURCH

Acts 18:1-11

Introduction---Where do you live in relationship to the world and where do you live in relationship to the church?

I want us to start with verse 1 and the place is on the other side of the world called Corinth. Some of the most outstanding monumental ruins of the ancient world are those in that city. You can visit there, see the temples of yesterday, the market place, the altars and the stone houses.

Though we know that Athens as a most prominent in history, Athens was a city of philosophers. It was a city of culture.

Corinth at the time of Jesus was the center of the empire as far as commerce, business and trade were concerned for all that part of the eastern world, not far from Rome.

This was due to its location. If you could just visualize a map, Greece jutting out into the Mediterranean Sea, then a very narrow isthmus, it was like a bulb, not more than 3 or 4 miles wide. There were 2 deep water harbors on either side; one facing east to Ephesus, Asia Minor and all the Middle East, and one facing west to Italy.

Here Corinth was located at the lower part of the isthmus.

Sailors brought their boats into this harbor, pulled them onto dry land and rolled them across the isthmus and into the water on the other side thus they avoided a long and treacherous route by the Mediterranean so Corinth, very early, became a center of commerce, trade, seaport city with two harbors.

Corinth was about 50 miles west of Athens and the Greeks had built a skidway across the narrow isthmus where they actually dragged small ships on greased skids. Now this city was filled with beautiful temples of all kinds. It was breathtaking, it was the center of the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of sex. There was a great temple, the hill in back of the city every evening a thousand priestesses of the temple would come down into the city streets to ply their trade as cult prostitutes indulging in the worship of sex. The city gained the reputation throughout all the Roman world as the center of sensuality.

Wherever a citizen of Corinth was portrayed in a drama, he would be a morally loose character and usually a drunk. This was the city to which the apostle came, walking all alone in the dust of the road.

The city was infested with strongholds of evil. The apostle describes these in his first letter to the Corinthians---sexual license, perversion, racial discord, family feuds, political problems.

We might say it was like a city like our very own city. We live in Corinthian conditions today and if there is any church in the New

Testament with which we could particularly identify, this is one.

Sailors brought their boats into the harbor, pulled them onto dry land, rolled them across to the other side and this was a seaport city. When Paul came here, it was not only a wonderful commercial center, but it was a center of sports. They had boxing, foot races, discus throwing, many other games, indulged by hundreds of people and watched by thousands of people. Of course, there was a great deal of gambling and Venus, the goddess of love, was worshiped and in her name they engaged in the vilest religious rites---Sodom, at its worst was no worse than Corinth. Sailors coming in from the west brought the vile customs from other nations and so when a man saw a man living in lewd, sinful ways they described him as saying---he behaves like a Corinthian.

It was completely (destroyed) in 145 B. C. by the Roman Army, but a hundred years later, Julius Caesar rebuilt it in all of its glory of Rome itself and made it a provincial center with the seat of government and a governor and people retiring from the Roman Army and the Roman officials came to live in this city that had so much glamour to it. It was a city something like Las Vegas, notorious for its entertainment. It was the fun city on the Mediterranean and by the same token, it was a sin city.

So by the time of this event that I read to you from the Scripture, 50 A. D., Corinth had been there almost a century. The great apostle Paul was on his second missionary journey and he came

first to Philippi, then to Thessalonica, then to Berea and to Athens where he preached on Mars Hill and he had no ~~reception~~ ^{reception} of the Gospel. In September of this year, he came on down about 30 or 40 miles to Corinth.

We read this account in this passage today. After these things had happened at Athens, Paul departed and came to Corinth. There he found certain Jews named Aquilla and his wife, Priscilla, who had just come from Rome and who were Jewish Christians, we learn.

1.2
This verse 2---the question is---how do these who had lived in Rome and recently come from there ever become Christians? Christianity started in the Middle East in Jerusalem and Judea, but we know the Gospel came very early to Rome. Perhaps there were Romans at Pentecost who were saved; and the Gospel flourished in Rome to such an extent that the Roman Emperor, Claudius, commanded all Jews to depart from Rome. We do not know why he commanded Jews to depart, both Jewish believers and Jewish Christians, until we read the secular history.

Paul was alone at Corinth; his companions had not yet come; he was waiting. He had no money or means of support and he found these fine Christian people and they were also faithful members of the church, the local church.

A Roman historian by the name Seutonius wrote about Claudius expelling all Jews from Rome six years before this because of a

controversy or a conflict that was stirred up among the Jews over Christ. In the Jewish community, Claudius did not know any difference between Christian Jews and Orthodox Jews and so he expelled all Jews--- he said they are troublemakers; they are arguing over this issue and creating confusion and disorder in the city. About 20,000 Jews were sent out of Rome by Claudius.

So Paul found two believers in Corinth and he took up abode with them because they were of the same craft; they were tentmakers. Paul was a tentmaker.

What is significant about this or that? Again we dig back into the background and there were in those mountains a certain breed of black-haired goats. The black hair of these goats made a very fine durable cloth and those people had a particular craft and this particular product---the making of tents that were more durable than any other tent in the Middle East. It was a craft that Paul, as a rabbi, learned. Every rabbi had a vocation whereby he could make his living and not depend upon the synagogue for his support. So Paul was a tentmaker and famous for the goat-hair tents that he made as were these two people. So Paul settled down and began to make tents with them.

In the meantime, day by day Paul preached, not just in the marketplace, but as his custom he preached in the synagogue. He preached that Jesus was the promised Messiah; he brought them the good news that the one for whom they had waited and were expecting

had now come in Jesus.

6,4
Verse 4---Now this says to us that as he reasoned he tried to persuade the Jews and witness to them. He did two things in verse 4 in his work---he reasoned; that is, he approached their minds and second, he persuaded. He tried to woo and touch the heart and the will with the Gospel message.

You may ask--does this mean there were Greeks in the synagogue?
Oh, yes--there were Greek proselytes as they were called. Many of that day were not Jews and in coming to the Jewish faith because of the monotheism of Judaism. They were sick by the plurality of gods and all the superstition that was associated with the Roman religion and the Greek religion and people were attracted wholesale to a reasonable true religion of the Jews which said there's one God and he is a living God.

Another reason they were so attracted to this religion was because of its morality. They were sick of the gross immorality of the Romans and of the Greeks. They had turned to a religion that provided a foundation of social structure that would strengthen the family life---a religion of the ten commandments that said there are some things wrong in society and we must build against these things and throughout the Scripture and throughout history.

Here in Corinth, there were many Greek proselytes---God-fearing people who were worshipping in the synagogues. Now Paul was preaching to the Greeks and to the Jews in the synagogue that Jesus was now the

Messiah, the completion of the revelation and that started in the Jewish religion with Abraham and now is complete in Christ.

v.5
Verse 5--Timothy and Silas soon came to Corinth. This made Paul feel much better. He loved companionship and he loved to feel that he had his brethren by his side helping him. Nothing in the world helps a pastor so much as to know that the good men of his church are standing with him. Nothing hurts him so much as to know that there are some of those who are supposed to help him are out criticizing him and destroying what he is doing. A Gospel preacher called of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, having the help of good men, can do a tremendous work for God. You can be a vital part and when these men came to Corinth, they brought Paul an offering from Philippi and they heard of what had been done and they begin to work with him.

v.6
In verse 6---But Paul did not get a good reception in the synagogue; they hardened their hearts, they opposed him and they said he was blaspheming. Paul finally threw up his hands as we would say, in a symbolic way. He took off his coat and shook the dust from it as I shake myself of you; in other words, Paul says I now free myself from all responsibility of you because I have done all that I can do and you will not listen to me. From henceforth I will go to preach to the Gentiles and they were putting him out of the synagogue. He said that is alright; I will shake the dust of you from my cloak; your blood is on your heads; you must take the personal responsibility for your decision.

As each of us must ultimately take personal responsibility for our decisions, we each one must stand before God and give an account of ourselves to God and we can go so and so so long saying---I will not---I will not---I will not until even the Holy Spirit of God says I must depart from you---you stand on your own---I've done all that I can do for you. So this is what Paul is saying to these people.

Verse 7---Here is the key to the wonderful story that we want you to understand this morning. When he departed thence going out of the synagogue, shaking the dust off, telling them they were responsible for their actions and he entered into a certain man's house named Justus---one who worshiped God---he was a Greek. And he was a proselyte in the congregation that was inside the synagogue, whose house was hard against the synagogue, whose house was next door to the church and there is our lesson for today.

It must have been that as he left the synagogue, there must have just been a wall between the synagogue and this house. We do not know who Justus was; this is the only reference we have of him. There are two Justuses mentioned in the Scripture, but they are other persons; not this one. We know that he was a Greek; we know that he was a God-fearer; we know that he heard the Gospel preached to him and when the time came that Paul was thrown out of the synagogue and everybody was against him, Justus opened the hospitality of his heart and his home--- come on and take up my house here, not to live here, that is not what he is talking about. Paul already has a place to live with Aquilla and Priscilla. Take my house and turn it into a meeting place. Start a prayer meeting here, start a preaching service here, preach in my house---

I turn it over to you and he lived, the Scripture says, next door to the church.

Living next door to the church---I think there are many wonderful lessons we can draw from that very fruitful verse. I think it is significant that Paul would relate this to Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts. Paul seems to say yes, I remember; put this down. Not only did this man open his house, but his house was right next door to the church. So it is very vital, I think, that Paul wanted us to get the message--- not just the hospitality of this man, but the location where it happened and this occurred in the Book of Acts.

Now we remember here that there in Corinth, when things were going so tough and so hard and all the people were opposing me, Paul said there was a man, Justus. He lived right next door to the synagogue and he is the one who opened his house and his heart and he lived next door to the church.

The question I want to ask today---How close to the church do you live? Do you live as close as Justus lived to the church? Now, I'm not talking about physically. We start this service Sunday after Sunday and I meet people---some have driven several miles to come to this church. Some drive several miles---a deacon, a Sunday School teacher. It is not that they live next door physically to the church, but they live close to the church spiritually. That's what I'm talking about---living next door to the church with your life, with your interests, with your pattern,

with your contentment---hard against the church; that's where I live.

How close did Justus live to the church? Now physically the church was right next door, but spiritually, how close did he live?

First, I think Justus lived close enough to the church to be in touch with the source of power that was there. Are you that close? The word God-fearer says a host of things to us about this man---he feared God. Not that he had an unwholesome fear of God, but that he respected God, he had reverence in his heart for God.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said something like this---"In my heart there is a fragile little flower called reverence and I find that I must nurture it every Sunday or it soon dies."

Is there in your heart and life an awesome reverence for God? In this day when we are being moved farther and farther away from the church in what we call secularization---the secular life focuses on things, on mechanical explanations for our very existence so that we say---Really; there is no God.

As far as I live, I'm a practical atheist, whether in theory or in not. I live as though there is no God; he has no claim on a part of my life. Now that is secular living and we are being moved farther and farther from everything religious and spiritual by all these forces about us. Why we even take secular music and try to jumble it up with religious overtones.

Are you close enough to the church to be in touch with the power up there? The awesome reverence and respect for God for morality. Do you recognize that God does have a claim on your life, that you do belong to him whether you do anything about it or not?

There are lots to be said for a God-fearer who says---Oh yes I believe in God and I know I'm not what I ought to be. I live like a pagan, I talk like a pagan, I sin like a pagan and when you really get down to it, I know in my heart that God is real, he is alive and he is not pleased with what I'm doing and the way I'm living.

You see, that is the beginning of all righteousness---the beginning of a right relationship eternally with God is when there is this spark of reverence in me and I fear Him and respect Him and acknowledge Him.

Justus although he had been brought up in a pagan society in Greece with many gods, he was still close enough to the church to be in touch with the main source of power---the power of God.

Second, Justus was close enough to the church to be a part of the fellowship of that church. He was in it. He was not just a name on the roll, but he was in that fellowship over there in the synagogue. And when it moved over here in the house, he was a part of that fellowship. Think about that remarkable fellowship that developed in what was called a Christian church, the body of Christ. Oh, what a fellowship.

Start at Philippi. Who was in that fellowship--Lydia, one of the most prominent businesswomen of that day. In that church was also a demented girl who was being exploited by some wicked men. She had followed after Paul and became a believer and understood and that is the cause of the riot, but she was in that fellowship.

Then over there in Athens we believe that one of the judges or philosophers did not become a believer and in Corinth, the two tent-makers, Aquila and Priscilla they were part of that fellowship.

And here was this Greek, God-fearing Justus, who said I am a part of the wonderful New Testament fellowship---the body of Christ--- I am in it.

Are you close enough to be a part of this modern miracle called the church?

Sitting in the balcony years ago was Dr. Don Harbuck, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Eldorado, Arkansas, who was attending a continuing theological education conference. Dr. Wayne Ward was supplying the church that morning in Louisville and said he saw him weeping during the first part of the service, even before he started preaching. When Dr. Harbuck came by after the service, he asked him what was the matter. Don said I was just so moved with joy at what I saw. You were already preaching before I ever said a word. That congregation was preaching a sermon. I looked around and I saw everybody; I saw black, white, oriental, but I saw rich people, I saw

poor people, I saw young people, I saw old people---I just had to sit and weep with joy. This is what a New Testament church really is, where everybody is somebody and the ground at the foot of the cross is level. We are all alike as we come before God.

Justus was a part of the fellowship of the church; he was close enough to be a part of it---are you really close enough to be a part of that wonderful, loving fellowship called a church? Don't miss it, friend, don't miss it. You're a Baptist, you're a Christian, but are you close enough to be really a part of the fellowship of the church?

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Third, Justus was close enough to be a part of the answer and the solution to the problem of his day. If you take a look at Corinth the excavations today have revealed something of the wickedness of the city---the marketplace, you see not only the pagan altar in the middle, but around the edge of the marketplace there are 33 nightclubs, we would call them----drinking places, places of immorality and prostitution. 33 different locations right around the city square. This was such a wicked place and people lived such a wild, immoral life that throughout the Roman Empire they coined the word Corinthian---anybody that lived wild and loose and free was labeled Corinthian. You are living the Corinthian way of life when you go wild and free like that. And into this very environment Paul came preaching the Gospel of morality and of Christ Jesus.

And here's Justus; he was close enough to the church where the line was drawn and it was drawn. There was a clear distinction between

Christian and pagan, totally different in their position on issues and their stand in life and the way they lived.

Justus said I am going to stand on the side of right. I'm going to let my influence be known. I'm a Christian and I want the world to know it.

Every evil in this century of ours, every problem of immorality and of corruption in high places and in low would be straightened out quickly if everyone of us who claimed to be Christian would stand out openly, take our stand on the side of the solution of the problem. This is not right and I'm going to take a Christian stand on it. I want everybody to know that I am a Christian. Justus lived close enough to the church that he was a part of the solution to the problem of his day.

Today I'm asking you how close are you to the church? Are you close enough to be in touch with the very source of life itself--- Jesus Christ. Are you close enough to let him have the claims to your life? Are you close enough today to say, I'm not just a name on the roll, I'm not an absentee member with a church membership way out yonder somewhere where I do not live. I am part of the body, I am part of the fellowship.

The modern miracle down here on the corner at 1101 Chesapeake Avenue in the Borough of South Norfolk I am a part of it. I am involved in it; I am under the load; I am close enough to share my responsibility.

I am not sitting on the outside casting my time and energies to every other kind of para-church effort and every other kind of program going on out yonder.

I believe the church is in the ongoing witness of Christ. There are many claims that come to us from all around saying---go this way, go that way, give to this, give to that.

But I recognize that the church is the ongoing body of Christ in the world and I'm under the load. It has my commitment, my resources, my time, my energy and I'm there.

Are you that close?

If you're not, let me encourage you to pack up today and move next door to the church and be close, become a part of it. Why not change your location and your address spiritually today.

This is the power of the church today. It's very much like Captain Robert Scott in the year 1910 and 11 and 12 who went on that expedition to the South Pole. Food and fuel had already been buried at various spots. At first they traveled by motor sled. They broke down, they relied on ponies and then on dogs. The ponies died, the dogs were sent back to the main base and Scott, and the four set out on foot in January, 1912. Temperatures were exceedingly cold. At no time did it rise above zero and on January 18 they reached the Pole and discovered the Norwegians had arrived a month earlier. Traveling conditions on the return trip to their base camp were poor,

supply of food inadequate. February 17 the first man died. The four survivors walked painfully across the ice against the wind. March 17, two months after they had begun the return trip, a second member died--- frostbitten. At first, they were optimistic but the blizzard lasted several days. March 29, Scott wrote the final sentence in his diary: "We will stick it out to the end, but we're getting weaker of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity but I do not think I can write anymore." News of his tragic death did not reach England until February, 1913, almost a year later and a memorial service was held for these people. But in the field of science and his mission in which he held out he says--I don't think I can write anymore.

But when we think about our mission for Christ in this world, are we as faithful in honoring Jesus Christ?