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The Open Sea

Acts 20: 32 - 38

The event went by many designations – the Swofford Soiree, the Patterson Party, and the Wade Wing Ding, to name a few – but the event had the same purpose every year, a dinner in May hosted by the Membership Committee to honor our visitors. Now we hold the same event at the church, so we can give the visitors a full tour of our facility after the meal, but in those years, as the names indicate, the party was held at a church member’s home. One particular year it was held at the Baucoms’, and since we had taken a van load of tables and chairs to their house, I volunteered to collect the church’s equipment and return it.

It took me the better part of an hour just to cram everything in the van, as I took pains to create a structure to stack and stash everything securely. But I hadn’t gone far in traveling back to the church when the car in front of me abruptly stopped, causing me to slam on brakes. Instinctively, I ducked – an action that saved my life – for in the next nanosecond, a folding chair came whistling over my head, shattering the van’s windshield.

I drove *very slowly* the rest of the way to church, my mind entertaining the headlines: “St. John’s pastor beheaded by church chair in church van.”

It would have an inglorious way to die.

After that, Steve Taylor volunteered to retrieve the tables and chairs in the future.

So, I stand before you this morning as a survivor who has emerged from the many close calls, physical and figurative, that have arisen in seventeen and a half years of ministry among you. I remember quite vividly my first holy “Ah-Ha moment,” among you.

I had been the pastor of St. John’s for about a month when I experienced my first “Hanging of the Green” service,

a service I had never seen before, much less participated in. So imagine my surprise when I beheld the chancel choir bursting down the aisles singing, raucously, “Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly,” and bearing poinsettias with which they would create a Christmas tree in the choir loft. I was enchanted. I remember the phrase that came to mind: “These people are my kind of crazy.”

Then we closed the service singing the Lord’s Prayer, and I was enraptured.

I said to myself, “You have found a home.” Those two traditions, hearing the chancel choir sing, “Deck the Halls,”

and participating in the communal singing of the Lord’s Prayer, combined with the exuberant singing of “Go Tell It On the Mountain,” and “The First Noel,” at the beginning and end of the Christmas Eve service became the highlights of my Advent celebration for years to come.

As I stand before you one last time, what comes to mind, oddly enough, are the hilarious happenings that have occurred amidst the solemnity of worship. I will go to my grave remembering the sound that ensued when inept custodian Henry prematurely pulled the plug on the baptistery during the service, and suddenly worship was interrupted by the loud, continuous, slurping gurgle of water descending a drain. The staff can attest that upon occasion I can have very expressive eyes, and I gave Kay Price and Nancy Morris an urgent look that said, “Do whatever you can.” They did.

Somewhere amidst my sermon it was as if someone had turned the volume button on the slurping gurgle very low, though you could still hear it. In truth, only female ministers could have done the job.

For these women had entered the water to sacrifice their panty hose and stuff them in the drain!

I remember the Sunday morning that someone came to me sure that someone was smoking an illegal substance in the building during Sunday School one morning. Having come of age in college dorms during the 1970's, I quickly knew that the smoke I smelled was not marijuana, but I had no idea what it was – or where it was coming from -- until Steve Taylor and I went out on the roof. There we beheld thick smoke billowing out from the chimney.

Steve said, "Uh, I know what it is:

the cover has come off that chimney, and I'll bet a bunch of pigeons have got in there and built nests.

When I heated the water for the baptism this morning, the hot exhaust must have set all those nests on fire."

What we were smelling was not marijuana: it was poached squab!

I have never forgotten Jonnie McLeod's observation that a vibrant church is a church without walls, which explains why so many of my memories of life among you come from outside the sanctuary.

Two vivid memories involving the Benton family and automobiles come immediately to mind.

The first involved Bob Benton, one of the finest men I've ever known, who volunteered to drive a second van when we had an overflow crowd for a mystery trip. The only problem was, shortly after leaving St. John's we ran into the densest fog in which I have ever driven. Visibility was near zero. I said to Peggy who was riding beside me, "I didn't dare tell Bob where we were going. But if he loses our van in this fog, they are truly going to be on a mystery trip."

Bob, however, true to his background as a decorated World War II pilot who flew countless missions in the fog over Britain, kept the nose of his van on our bumper like white on rice (with Elsie complaining about it all the way).

That night we ate in a Washington D.C. restaurant that dated from the 18th century, and then our night ended with a private tour of the West Wing of the White House. It was a transcendent evening.

But it was all due to Bob's ability to drive in any kind of weather.

My second vivid memory involved Ken Benton, as great and true a friend as I have known, who was driving kids home

from the United Baptist Association Bible School, traveling through tough neighborhoods, desperately trying to find the right road, when he heard one of the kids yell, "Hey, Mister! Hey, Mister! Jimmy's showing his butt!" Now Ken is old and senile. He thought they meant Jimmy was acting badly. Then he looked in his "rear view mirror,"

an accurately named apparatus in this instance, because Jimmy was indeed "showing his butt."

When Ken called in the report of his trip into my secretary Peggy, she laughed for five solid minutes

before she could tell me what had transpired. From that day forward, Ken Benton has been "Hey, Mister," to Peggy.

I think of all the places my association and ministry with you has taken me:

to hear Andy Williams sing in Branson, Missouri; to dine heartily in the Amish Country of Pennsylvania;

to see a murder mystery in St. Augustine. I think of sitting down front, center stage,

for the unforgettable performance at Oberammergau. I think of walking through Venice with Lloyd Baucom and Ed Outen, and if either of them missed a gelatino kiosk in all of Italy, I am unaware of it.

I think of running with Bill Claytor around the Sea of Galilee on a sparkling Sunday morning, one of the most memorable runs I've ever taken. I think of trying to keep Ethel Harris from dying on me as we trekked up the sheer donkey trail at Masada. I think of riding with Larry Batts and Hal Brown through New Orleans, our lives at the mercy of a drunk taxi driver, whose bottle of whisky rolled out from under the seat as we crossed a

bridge, the only taxi ride I've ever taken that ended not with a fare, but with our driver rear-ending someone in the French Quarter. (Then we got out and left!)

I remember eating in an open air café over Hadrian's markets in Rome, celebrating "Big E," Ernest Powell's, birthday.

I can still see the forlorn hopelessness on Martha Moore's and her sister Marie's face as a donkey pulled their flimsy cart down toward the bowels of the incomparable wonder of Petra.

From the tower atop Peachtree Plaza in Atlanta, to the prayer towers of Amman, from Shakespeare in Montgomery to Dead Sea mud, from Graceland to Golgotha, Gettysburg to Galilee, from the mighty Mississippi to the Jordan, from the Rhine to the Nantahala, we have seen it all together – and I have counted it my high privilege to do so.

Of course, not all of my trips on St. John's behalf have been fun ones. Some have been sad, like driving to meet Mark Parker and his family at Arlington National Cemetery for a family funeral.

I think of driving up to Lexington, Kentucky, just in time to have prayer with Joe Patterson before he went into bypass surgery. I kid you not, Joe was actually alone on the prep table when he saw me come in and he said,

"Richard, we need to talk about that unfinished business in the Finance Committee."

I said, "Joe, you've got other things to worry about. Finance Committee business is the least of your worries. Besides, I've already taken care of it." Deaths and sicknesses, special requests, and visitors' strange addresses have taken me many places, and I have traveled many miles.

But I've been glad to do so, because Jonnie is right: a vibrant church is a church without walls – and a vibrant ministry is a ministry without walls, too.

Some of the memories from St. John's that will stay with me longest happened on golf courses across America. I can remember standing on a golf course in Mobile, Alabama, with Lloyd Baucom, Tex Sluder, and Ed Outen, looking up at a sky so black that it seemed we were playing in a total eclipse.

I think of those precious, if too few, afternoons, when I'd sneak away to visit the "Green Family," with Bobby Furr, Al Bridges, Tommy Almond, Roy Kendrick, Dick Waldron, Ed Turner, or my so-called twin, Dan McCintock, whose own mother in a medication-induced haze thought I was him and began telling me stuff that I didn't need to know.

For many years, my golfing partner Byron Bullard and I would square off against the formidable twosome of Tom Peacock and Don Millsaps, and it was amidst one of those matches that I had the distinct pleasure of watching Don make a hole in one – and lose the hole! Don hit his 6-iron right in the hole, but on the shot previous to his hole-in-one, Don has hit his six-iron in the water, so all his hole-in-one got him was a spectacular par. Then my sandbagging buddy Byron rolled in a twenty-footer for birdie, so Don's hole in one availed him nothing – but a hearty attaboy.

I think of our Christmas plays, probably the most comprehensive intergenerational events in which I participated at St. John's.

I carry vivid pictures in my head of all of you who were involved in *The Christmas Maker*, *The Colonel's Christmas*, *The Herdman's Christmas*, and of course, *Blue Christmas*.

I confess that I have a couple more Christmas plays in my mind, if I can find time to write them.

But who knows if I'll ever find a cast of people crazy enough to help me do them?

In my mind's eye I see Randy Brantley, who looked and sounded like the perfect 19th-century preacher;

I see L.A. Hutson and Tex Sluder playing the role of the Colonel perfectly, each in his own distinct way.

I see all the "hobos" who played in *The Christmas Maker*;

I see the atomic mushroom cloud created by Elizabeth Peacock and the rest of the youth as the Herdman clan;

I see Terry Carpenter giving Tex a good scolding of righteous indignation. I see David Watson as the first Elvis.

I will always feel a special kinship with the group who banded together to do *Blue Christmas* its final time here. Week after week, Janet Wade, Clarence Eden, Ken Benton, Bill Claytor, Anne Sutton, Eli Allred, and I saw each other more than we saw our own families – and we became family in the process.

I've been in theatre in one way or another all my life, on stage, back stage, and in countless audiences, but I've never heard laughter as loud and sustained as what I encountered the night we did *Blue Christmas*.

That night was probably the highlight of my career at St. John's.

Yet beneath the laughter was a message of truth.

I remember one ordinary rehearsal night as Janet Wade was delivering a soliloquy with her usual uncommon poise and poignancy, when a mystical hush fell over the entire group, everyone listening with rapt attention, some moved to tears.

Clarence whispered, "You may go on to write passages that equal this one in power, but you will never surpass it."

Most of all, I will carry with me memories of time spent investing my life in nurturing young people.

I have always believed that the pastor who plants God's Good News in young lives is doing a great work.

That's why I have taught Vacation Bible School, when most pastors don't consider it worth their time.

Most pastors have no idea of the evangelical impact upon kids of seeing their pastor throw socks at their heads and his allowing them to throw socks at his head. Most pastors don't spend time playing wiffle ball with sixth graders

or inviting them to a sleepover in his home. Some of the young people in this room will remember for the rest of their lives that it was their pastor who taught them how to pitch a tent or set a pick or raft a river or ski a mountain. Some of the fondest memories of my time at St. John's are of those long treks

I would take with youngsters through the forests, serenading them with my version of "Marching to Zion," as we ate blackberries and forded rivers and stepped around snakes. I give thanks for people

like Linda Finger, Ken Smith, and Paul Huffman for volunteering their time to make such trips happen.

And I give thanks for Melissa, without whom much of what I call my ministry could not have happened.

I have no time or space to pay sufficient tribute to my beloved helpmeet, but I will simply say this:

it will only be in her absence that you will come to realize the depth of her value to this church family.

Together, Melissa and I have embraced your children as our own, for we believe that Proverbs told the truth when it says, "Train up children in the way they should go, and when they are old, they will not depart from it." I will always remember the Saturday afternoon I received a call

saying that little Tucker Hicks had his ear torn off by a dog, and he wanted me to come pray with him before he would let them put him to sleep. I dropped what I was doing and sped to his bedside.

I don't know what comfort he took from my prayer and my presence, but I know that by his courage and grace he imparted more encouragement to me than I could have possibly given unto him.

Indeed, however much I have given to the young people of this church, they have given far more to me.

I will miss you all of you, but taking leave of the young people of this church breaks my heart most of all.

As you might imagine, this was a hard sermon to start; it is even harder to bring to an end.

There are so many people I want and need to thank, so many people whose ministry, life and faith

have been a positive example and encouragement for me. A journey that began eighteen years ago with a lunch at an Augusta, Georgia Olive Garden, with Jack Allen, Tom Peacock and Janet Wade comes to its end.

It has been quite a ride – and a mostly stable one, but that's because I've had so many great friends to work with.

I can honestly say in these past seventeen years that I've never been bored.

It is true that in the last few years I've often been frustrated,

but I've stayed fascinated throughout my tenure by the challenge of being your pastor. A person might could rise at 4:30 or 5 Am and work hard at a job until 10:30 or 11 in the evening for a few weeks, maybe for a year, if they are just trying to impress somebody with their work ethic. But no one can follow that schedule day in and day out for over seventeen years unless their passion for their people and their God is real. My passion for serving God and you has been real. I say again, I have loved the challenge.

The days have been long, but the years have been short, and if you have not given me an easy life, you have provided me with an amazingly interesting one. I remember standing on a tee at the Dunes Golf Course in Myrtle Beach with some of the older guys from the church, sneaking in a round of golf on a fine October day while their wives shopped. I was with Hal Harrill and Lloyd Baucom, and I don't remember who else, but I made this statement: "There is no place on this earth I would rather be right now than right here enjoying you fellows company." That was the truth. I thank you, one last time, for the privilege of allowing me to serve you.

But now the time has come for me to pull up stakes, and sail into the unknown. I sail toward a new congregation, hoping to find a people who will embrace my comprehensive vision of service, worship, ministry, and outreach. I sail toward a new congregation, hoping to find a people who share my passion for crafting a faith that engages the modern world. But who knows? I'm mindful of the fact that Paul left his beloved church in Ephesus eventually ending up in Rome, where, according to church tradition, he was ultimately crucified upside down. The same fate could befall me. But I am willing to risk it. Uncertainty is inherent in the nature of any true pilgrimage of faith. I can only ask you to do what the people of Ephesus did for the apostle Paul, allow me to take leave of you and board a ship toward the open sea.

But as I take my leave of you, I offer you the same great prayer of blessing that Paul offered unto that beloved church at Ephesians. In truth, it speaks the unction of my heart:

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, before whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with the fullness of God." Goodbye. God bless you all.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
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