

*After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.<sup>2</sup> 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 the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them,<sup>3</sup> and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.<sup>4</sup> Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

*<sup>5</sup> When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.<sup>6</sup> But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”*

*<sup>7</sup> Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God.<sup>8</sup> Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.*

*<sup>9</sup> One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.<sup>10</sup> For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”<sup>11</sup> So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. (Acts 18:1-11)*

### Keep On Speaking!

What’s our part in God’s plan? We often say that God has a plan for us. Usually we’re thinking about our own lives. We mean that he knows what he’s doing when it comes to running our lives. That’s absolutely true. But God also has a plan in a much wider sense: God has a plan to spread the gospel throughout the world. God has a plan for every church and every mission until Jesus returns. What’s our part in that plan? Where does the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod fit in? Where does Peace fit in? Where do you and I fit into that plan? This morning, we want to take a look at what happened when St. Paul first came to the city of Corinth in order to draw lessons for ourselves about God’s plan and where we fit into it. And in the end, what we’re going to see is that our part in the plan is simply to proclaim the gospel. What does “proclaim” mean? It means to talk about Jesus. What God said to St. Paul, he could say it to us: **Keep on speaking!** That’s our part in God’s plan.

#### I.

You see God’s plan in action in this chapter of Acts. St. Paul was on his second great missionary journey. He came for the first time to the city of Corinth almost by accident. His mission team been working in the northern part of Greece, but they were driven out by persecution. Paul was a special target of hatred, so the team sent him on alone, while they wrapped things up and organized the new congregations in the north. So Paul came alone to this big, southern Greek city. He found there another Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who were also on the move. The Roman emperor had expelled all the Jews from Rome so they had come to Corinth to start a new life. Of course, this was no chance meeting. God wanted Paul to meet Aquila and Priscilla and apparently, Paul shared the good news about Jesus with this Jewish couple and they believed. Because they and Paul were professional tentmakers, Paul lived and worked with them while he waited for his mission team to arrive.

But Paul didn’t forget why he was there. Every Sabbath, he went to the synagogue to talk about Jesus. That was his mission strategy. Wherever he went, he went first to the Jewish community and told them that all God’s promises were now fulfilled in Christ. Only when he was finished with them, did he turn his attention to the gentiles. Now, we know of no command for him to do it that way. In fact, God specifically called him to work among the gentiles. But God gave Paul freedom to devise the strategy that he thought would work best. So Paul went first to people who already knew the one true God, who already had the Old Testament scriptures, who already understood that God had promised to send a Savior. People like Aquila and Priscilla were able to mature quickly in their understanding of the gospel and provide assistance when he turned to the gentiles, for whom all of this was very new.

But Paul’s experience in Corinth shows that mission strategy has to be flexible. You make a plan and then you do the work and see how God blesses it. You have to be prepared to shift your focus when God does something unexpected. You have to be honest about what’s working and what isn’t, because the truth is, God

opens doors for mission work. In Corinth, like in most places Paul worked, some Jews believed his message. But most didn't. The time came when he was no longer welcome among them. Then Paul turned to the gentiles. There he found God's open door. Many believed. At God's command, Paul remained in Corinth for a year and a half – one of his longest stays anywhere.

God opens doors. You and I are not engaged in the kind of church-planting mission work that Paul was doing. But we are engaged in the same ministry. Like him, our job is to proclaim the gospel, to talk about Jesus, to confront sinners with their sin and to offer them the good news of forgiveness in Christ. So, as human beings charged with preaching the gospel, we try to come up with the best strategy to do that in our situation. This is a strategy: every Sunday we have a worship service. We have Bible Class and Sunday school. We operate a Lutheran elementary school and a preschool and a Lutheran high school. All of those are strategies to preach the gospel, and even strategies to reach out to people who don't know Jesus. Every year, we have kids in our school and especially in our preschool, who don't have a church home. Our Board of Stewardship and Outreach is working to come up with new strategies to reach people who don't know Christ.

That's all to the good. But in the end, we have to recognize that only one thing gives faith: the gospel. People need to know they're sinners who have no chance of reaching eternal life without Christ. They need to know that he lived and died and rose again to give them that life. Any strategy that does not give us the chance to talk about Jesus is a waste of time. God works through the gospel. He calls us to trust that message and keep on speaking it.

Do we trust that God will work if we just talk about Jesus? Do we trust that it really all does come down to what Christ has done for us? I'd be surprised if anyone in this church disagreed with those statements. But it's easy for us to act as if we didn't trust them. There's a part of us that doesn't want to accept that the only way to change hearts is through the law and the gospel. That part of us thinks we need to be reasonable and understand what people want. There is some truth to that statement. But if that becomes our strategy, it doesn't take long for us to deemphasize uncomfortable truths. It doesn't take long for us to say that reaching out is the most important thing we have to do, so anything that drives people away needs to be thrown out. It doesn't take long for us to be so worried about what people think of us that we forget that Jesus said, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you." The gospel offends unbelievers. Some people are always going to speak ill of people who are faithful to Christ's message.

The part of us that thinks it knows better than God is the sinner inside us. It's unbelief to look for another answer to the work God has given us to do. It's sin. But Jesus died even for that sin. He paid for that sinner inside us. He paid for all the times that we thought something else would work better than what God has given us. He paid for all the times we forgot that our job is to just keep talking about Christ. He rose to tell us that sin is gone forever. God has wiped it away and he sees us as perfect. My friends, that's the message we have to talk about Sunday after Sunday, day after day, here and at home and wherever you meet someone who doesn't know Jesus yet. Trust that the God who sent his Son to die for all people everywhere has a plan. Understand that our part of that plan is very simple: **keep on speaking! God has a plan to spread the Gospel.**

## II.

We honestly don't know what the future holds for Peace Lutheran Church. But God knows. He has a plan for us and he calls us to simply be faithful in speaking the message about Christ. Once we understand that, we can make plans and we can change those plans when God opens different doors. But there's another way we can be unfaithful to what God is doing: we can freeze up and fail to speak. We can get lost in how hard it is and be intimidated by the world around us. Paul's experience in Corinth speaks to that, too.

After the Jewish phase ended, Paul settled down to preaching to the gentiles. And God says that many people believed and were baptized. Right after that statement, the Bible tells us that God came to Paul in a vision and said, "**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.**" The first words God spoke were "Do not be afraid." Now, he was talking to a veteran missionary. Why did he say that?

Because Paul was still a sinful human being, just like you and me. I think we can assume from what God says here that he wrestled with the same fear of speaking about Jesus that we do, because he had a sinful nature that rebelled every time he thought about going out and speaking to unbelievers. In fact, in one of his letters to this congregation, he admitted that he was unimpressive in person and that his speaking "amounted to nothing." It's hard for us to picture St. Paul that way, but like every Christian on this side of heaven, he had to

overcome fear and doubt. Not many weeks before this, he had been thrown into prison for preaching the gospel and was “severely flogged.” In the ancient world, being flogged stripped the skin off your back and often left you barely able to walk for days. It was extremely painful. Paul was sent to Corinth because some people wanted to do worse than that to him. Who wouldn’t wrestle with a little fear in that situation?

How did God deal with Paul’s fear? He said, “I am with you.” When little kids have nightmares and they’re afraid, what do their parents do? They go to them and they hold them. Sometimes, they even bring them into their own bed to sleep. Why? The child knows that as long as mom or dad is with them, nothing bad is going to happen. That parent will protect them. That parent will provide all they need. That was God’s point. He told Paul that he was with him and that no one was going to attack him because he had many people in that city. God promised him that he would keep all the persecution away so Paul could bring the gospel to those people who needed to hear it. This was no human parent making that promise. It was God himself.

God is with us too. Now, we don’t have a promise that no persecution will come to us. Quite the opposite, Jesus told us that if they persecuted him, they will persecute us. And quite frankly, we often find talking about Jesus to be scary. Isn’t that true? I find it to be scary to talk about Jesus, especially when I’m in a situation where I have to witness one on one to somebody. What are we afraid of? Isn’t it the way that person will react? The devil uses fear to keep us from telling people the good news. He makes us afraid of confrontation, afraid of losing the good opinion of someone else, afraid of looking foolish, especially if that person challenges what we say, afraid of not knowing how to do it well. How can we overcome that fear?

God is with us, every hour of every day. He will only allow those things to enter our lives which serve our spiritual good. So even if we do have to face ridicule or anger or confrontation, even if we do struggle to get our words out, he will use all that for our spiritual good. That means he will use it all to strengthen our faith and keep us on the road to heaven. And God is with us in the word. The real power is not in how clever we are. It’s not in how well we present it or answer all the arguments. The real power is in the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we announce the good news, when we talk about what he has done, the Holy Spirit works, always. He reaches into hearts and changes them. So you don’t have to burden yourself with the responsibility for convincing anybody. Your job is just to talk about Jesus, to tell what he has done. God does the heavy lifting.

Finally, you have God’s promise that all your failings are forgiven. Every time you sputtered and couldn’t get the words out, every time your fear outweighed your trust and you kept silent, every time you did a poor job of witnessing is washed away in the blood of Christ. You are forgiven. You are loved. You are God’s chosen instrument to share the good news in this world. He will never forget that he sent you to do all that.

**Keep on speaking! God will be with us when we do his work.**

That’s true for us as individuals. It’s true for our congregation and our synod and the Christian Church in all the world. God chose us from all eternity. He sent his Son to live and die and rise for us. He sent the gospel out into the world – through us. He built his power into the word and sacraments and he never stops working through them. Trust in his power and his promises and keep on speaking about Jesus. Amen.