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The Importance of Paying Attention

Acts 20:7-12

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The novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte is a classic, which means it is a book everyone should read and very few of us actually have. This summer Nathan and Jill both read it. Jill says that *Jane Eyre* is her favorite fictional character. Jill also said she never read a book where she had to look up the meaning of so many words. Because Charlotte Bronte's father was a pastor and Charlotte was a voracious reader, there are also lots of biblical references and allusions in the story. When we were in Michigan last month where I was doing some preaching and teaching, Nathan and Jill were both reading the same copy of *Jane Eyre*. Early in the novel, Jane is living at a boarding school for impoverished girls and she recalls (page 61), *"The Sunday evening was spent in repeating by heart, the Church Catechism, and the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of St. Matthew; and in listening to a long sermon read by Miss Miller, whose irrepressible yawns attested to her weariness. A frequent interlude of these performances was the enactment of the part of Eutychus by some half-dozen of little girls; who, overpowered with sleep, would fall down, if not out of the third loft, yet off the fourth form, and be taken up half dead. The remedy was, to thrust them forward into the centre of the schoolroom, and oblige them to stand there till the sermon was finished."* Jill asked out loud at that point, *"Who is Eutychus?"* I thought for a moment and replied, *"He's the young man in Acts who falls asleep and then out of the window because Paul talked so long."* This is not a very familiar story – I mean how many people have heard a sermon about Eutychus? So I got my Bible out and read it to Jill and the boys. Greg asked me if I ever had preached a sermon about Eutychus and I said, I didn't think so, but I could so I am.

Before I read Acts 20:7-12 I want to provide a little context: about half of Luke's gospel (from Luke 9:51-19:37) is an account **of a journey**, Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. As we emphasize at BBC, Jesus invites us to follow him on a spiritual journey which is the adventure of a lifetime (Luke 9:59). As Pastor Kevin mentioned last Sunday, in Acts the Christian life is repeatedly called *"the Way"* (9:2; 19:23; 24:14). By the time we get to Acts 20, Paul is on his final journey, which will end in Rome.

When Luke wrote his Gospel and the Book of Acts, Christian hopes for the imminent return of Christ were fading. Christians needed to cultivate the virtues of perseverance and patience - paying attention to learning and growing together on the journey of life. Luke presents Jesus (9:51) *"setting his face to go to Jerusalem,"* and in a similar way Paul is determined to take Christianity to the capital of the Empire. Both

Jesus and Paul send helpers out ahead of them (Luke 9:52, Acts 19:22). Both seek to encourage others on the way.

Life is on the one hand a grand journey, much like the one Paul undertakes all the way to Rome, and on the other hand, life is made up of very ordinary moments. If you think about it, perhaps around a third of our life is spent doing just two things: sleeping and eating. This story mentions both, as well as the sustaining power and value of regular worship and fellowship, of sharing the Word and breaking bread and encouraging one another.

“On the **first day of the week we came together to break bread**. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, **kept on talking until midnight**. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named **Eutychus**, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.

Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. ***“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!”***

Then he went upstairs again and **broke bread and ate**. After **talking until daylight**, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.”

This is one of the New Testament’s earliest definite references to weekly Sunday worship. Sunday is the Lord’s Day when Christians gather to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. In gathering around the Word and the breaking of bread, the church is renewed and restored for the journey ahead. Gathering for worship and fellowship sustains, encourages, and comforts us all through all the joys and heartaches of life.

Think about the early church for a moment – there was always lots to talk about, questions being asked and answered, biblical passages to discuss, given what we know of Paul it is no surprise that he would talk late into the night!

Given the late hour, that Eutychus may have been working all day (it was a Sunday, but that was an ordinary working day, and the church would meet either very early in the morning, or very late at night, or both), and that there were oil lamps burning in the room, it is hardly surprising that he would want to be by a window where it might be cooler and that he nodded off to sleep. As far as I can tell Eutychus is the first recorded example of someone falling asleep during a long sermon, but he was far from the last! If Jesus is the first born from the dead, Eutychus is the first to snooze during a sermon. When folks fall

asleep in our sanctuary, they don't have to worry, but Eutychus was perilously perched in a window and fell three stories.

The humor suddenly turns to tragedy when Eutychus was taken up dead. Tragedy comes upon us like that. Life is going along and we assume that it will always do so then something terrible and unexpected happens. When we went up to Maine, Mary contacted me about the death of Grace Hinrich's and then Barbara Wyman. Then she called me to tell me about Sean Martin's terrible car accident, just four weeks after he and Donna Potter were married and starting a new life together in New Hampshire. Life can change in a moment. In the passage in Acts a vibrant, young disciple is suddenly dead and everyone in the room must have been in shock. Perhaps there was a cry from the street, people stunned, immobilized, no one knowing quite what to do.

But Paul went down and bent over him and embraced him and told the church – *“don't be alarmed.”* The answer to death was a tender embrace. Paul like Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kings 17:21-24 and 2 Kings 4:34, went down, hugged him, held him, and Eutychus came back to consciousness. Then they went back upstairs and celebrated (I suspect with great joy and renewed appreciation) the meal which speaks of the dying and rising of Jesus himself (Acts 20:11). The talking continued until daylight when it was time for Paul to go. Why let a little thing like death stop a good preacher? Death is always breaking into our lives. Paul's response, the Christian response is *“Do not be alarmed.”*

I would be negligent in my responsibility as a pastor, an American, and a citizen of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Cape Cod, if I didn't share a few words this morning about the passing of Massachusetts Senior Senator Ted Kennedy. This is not about politics, although he spent his life in politics. Like everyone has noted, he was not a saint, he was a flawed human being; just as we all are. But to paraphrase a line from a favorite movie of mine, most of us are just passing through history. What we witnessed this week with the death of Senator Ted Kennedy was history. This week we have read, heard and seen many tributes to his life of service. Sen. Kennedy served the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the United States for almost 47 years, longer than I have been alive. I was born in Boston and raised in Brookline, a mile from where John and Bobby Kennedy were born and lived as children. By the time I was four years old both John and Bobby had been murdered. In the living room of our home my father had two pictures on a corner wall – one of John and Bobby talking at the White House, another just of John. Those pictures remained on that wall for years. Sen. Kennedy was

a member of a Gold Star family - his oldest brother Joe died serving our country in World War II. Then he lost John and Bobby. He knew what it was for death to shockingly break into one's life. Because of his heartbreaking personal losses, he was able throughout the rest of his life to bring comfort and compassion to others who had suffered similar tragic sudden loss – whether in serving our country or in the 9/11 attack. He was father not only to his own children but to the children of his murdered brothers as well. He carried an incredible burden of expectations and family responsibility.

Regardless of one's political persuasion or leanings, there is no denying the incredible sacrifice and service given by Sen. Kennedy and his family to our nation. Watching the service in his honor on Friday night and listening to Republican Senators John McCain and Orrin Hatch, one of the thoughts I had was that we are losing Americans who actually could be friends with people even while holding different positions on issues or advocating for different ways to achieve goals. This is a legacy of Sen. Kennedy that needs to be perpetuated by others. Our politics are becoming less friendly, less civil, and our governing and our national discourse is suffering as a result.

Another hallmark of Senator Kennedy's life as noted by his priest from Centerville during his homily yesterday, was his concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, that was inspired by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos and his Catholic faith in general. When Jill was working at St. Francis House in Boston in 1988, Sen. Kennedy came in early one morning. There were no cameras or reporters. Jill thought he would just pass through quickly, she was in a small room, but he stopped, shook her hand, asked her name, how long she had been there, what college she had gone to, he looked her in the eye and cared enough to listen about her work with homeless women and men. Jill says she got a little flustered, she wasn't anticipating him taking such an interest, because most people who take tours of homeless shelters don't slow down to ask questions. Sen. Kennedy believed in helping those who were not born with or given the privileges and opportunities that he received. He was an example of redemption and perseverance, in that sense, he was a little like the Apostle Paul. I think he got better the older he got and that is a good thing for any of us to do because it shows we are still learning and growing. Most of us do not live out our life on the world stage and in the public eye like Senator Kennedy, nor will we be remembered and written about by historians. Most of us live lives of historical anonymity. However, for better or worse, we all do leave a legacy and an impact on our families and the communities in which we have lived or worked.

In Acts 20 Paul is on the final leg of his life's journey. He is trying to stop along the way to encourage as many churches and people as he can and to say farewell because he is moving on and will likely not see them again. The miracle of raising Eutychus from the dead is perhaps the least well known miracle story in the Bible because Paul and Luke treat it in such a matter of fact kind of way. The church was engaged late one night in intensive instruction and table fellowship which are central to the Christian life. Together they prepare us for those difficult moments when death comes, whether suddenly and unexpectedly or after a long life and illness. When Eutychus can't pay attention any longer and falls asleep and out the window, Paul restores him to life, a living illustration of the resurrection of Jesus and God's ability to grant new life.

Luke doesn't dwell on the miracle though because the mark of Christian community is not so much the miraculous as it is the message of the risen Jesus. The world loves the spectacular, but for the church what is truly foundational, what shapes our life together is gathering around the Word, paying attention to it, listening intently, learning constantly, and seeking always to live what we say we believe. We do this in a community that eats together, talks together, that takes an interest in each other's lives, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. In that Upper Room where Paul and the church in Troas were gathered, they wept and rejoiced in a matter of a minute over Eutychus' fall and his rising again. One thing I learned while studying for this sermon is that Eutychus was a common slave name and it means '**Lucky**' and on this occasion he truly was. Sure, Paul preached a long sermon that night, but what more could a church ask of its worship than to get up and face the world another week alive and "*not a little comforted,*" because they had seen God's power and sensed God's presence while they were together remembering and celebrating the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

The words "*Don't be alarmed. He is alive!*" are true of Jesus, they are true of Eutychus, and one day will be true for all who trust and believe in Christ. In the mean time, we can do worse than to encourage others on our journey, trusting in God's Word, recognizing like Paul, that the moments we have with one another are precious and fleeting so we are to make the most of them, and that just as Paul embraced Eutychus, sometimes the best thing we can offer those who are hurting is a tender embrace, a word of encouragement, and our presence around a meal that reminds us of Christ's promise and his power.

