

Acts 20 (Selections)

Paul called the disciples together and encouraged them to keep up the good work in Ephesus. Then, saying his good-byes, he left for Macedonia. Traveling through the country, passing from one gathering to another, he gave constant encouragement, lifting their spirits and charging them with fresh hope.

"You know that from day one of my arrival in Asia I was with you totally—laying my life on the line, serving the Master no matter what, putting up with no end of scheming by those who wanted to do me in. I taught you out in public and I taught you in your homes, urging Jews and Greeks alike to a radical life-change before God and an equally radical trust in our Master Jesus.

²²⁻²⁴"But there is another urgency before me now. I feel compelled to go to Jerusalem. I'm completely in the dark about what will happen when I get there. I do know that it won't be any picnic, for the Holy Spirit has let me know repeatedly and clearly that there are hard times and imprisonment ahead. But that matters little. What matters most to me is to finish what God started: the job the Master Jesus gave me of letting everyone I meet know all about this incredibly extravagant generosity of God.

Now it's up to you. Be on your toes—both for yourselves and your congregation of sheep. The Holy Spirit has put you in charge of these people—God's people they are—to guard and protect them. God himself thought they were worth dying for.

Now I'm turning you over to God, our marvelous God whose gracious Word can make you into what he wants you to be and give you everything you could possibly need in this community of holy friends.

³³⁻³⁵"I've never, as you so well know, had any taste for wealth or fashion. With these bare hands I took care of my own basic needs and those who worked with me. In everything I've done, I have demonstrated to you how necessary it is to work on behalf of the weak and not exploit them. You'll not likely go wrong here if you keep remembering that our Master said, 'You're far happier giving than getting.'"

What Kind of Place Is This?

It's hard to believe that the summer is over – particularly – this year - when it seems to have just arrived – and here we are when Fall is nearly upon us. It's also hard to believe because some many of those things that were supposed to get done this summer are still on the list. But here we are once again – ready or not.

As we have been making preparations for next week's anniversary celebration, we've had a chance to look back at what this congregation has done in the past. That's not the topic for this morning – we'll have a chance to do that next Saturday and Sunday. In looking at the past, we've also had the opportunity to discover some of the basics about what it means to be a church – a congregation – a community of faith.

In the earliest years churches were once compared – as you may have noted in the children's sermon to a ship – perhaps in this new day and age – there are some images and metaphors – some terminology that we can borrow from the airlines to describe how a church can and should operate. And I don't mean by declaring chapter 11 bankruptcy...canceling flights...losing luggage or cutting back on

service. Instead I will ask you to look beyond the foibles of your last flight and look at some of the ways a faithful church can adopt the ways of a **competent** airline as we look at what kind of place this is.

First, think of this place as a MAINTENANCE BASE. That's what it can be for you. As I understand it, an airline's maintenance base is the place where all the right machines, tools and mechanics are available to repair – restore – and renew the fleet of planes – to keep them flying safely.

I'm also told – and I hope that it's true – that regularly – after so many hours of flying, a plane is brought in for a complete overhaul. The plane may not be experiencing any mechanical difficulties whatsoever – but when it reaches a certain number of hours of operation – it goes to the maintenance base for a complete checkup. I suppose the folks in charge have discovered that it is very difficult to repair a wing while in flight – so they don't wait until something is obviously wrong – until the plane develops engine trouble – or a wheel falls off. A competent airline maintains its planes in top flying condition by seeing to their continual, regular care.

A faithful church ought to be a maintenance base.

Of course, there are folks who are very regular in their church attendance and support – as I've heard people say going out the door – we come every Easter Sunday whether we need to or not.

Seriously, the church, particularly this church should be a place where you can not only be maintained – but overhauled – on a regular basis. It should be a place where you can hopefully be renewed – restored – and when the need arises – repaired. But don't feel like you have to wait until you have transmission troubles before you get towed in – Use this place as a maintenance base so that you can continue to arrive and depart to the places you need to be.

It's also appropriate to think of this place as an OPERATIONS BASE. For the airlines, the operations base is the nerve center for its flights and its business. In the operations base you can see that the purpose of an airline as it seeks to serve the transportation needs of all kinds of people – from seasoned business travelers to first time nervous passengers – from those who may need extra time in boarding – to those with oversized carry on baggage.

There is a lot of work and preparation that goes into even a routine airline flight. Schedules are created, planes and crews are routed, cleaning crews assigned, safety concerns are addressed, and – in a good airline – the needs of passengers are folded into the mix. It takes a lot of people to make that happen – not just the pilot or the flight crew.

An authentic church should be an **operations base** – a place that works to serve the needs of others. There are times when you look at our church calendar you can see this is a place that reaches out – Take Tuesdays – Heart and Soul is on one side of the building and morning aerobics group in the social hall with Habitat for Humanity working each and every day. Then a group of student teachers meets in the afternoon, a dance group comes into the social hall, the free clinic is running in the evening, while serenaded by the Bifocal Brass practicing in the choir room. We have a busy calendar schedule – but there are also gaps that need to be filled. There are other needs that deserve to be met. Now it's not up to the pilot or the flight crew to take on the whole load. Neither should we expect the baggage handlers to have to work until they drop. There is a place in this place for everyone to take on some operational responsibility. (Remember the children's sermon and the idea of the ship – the pews – the rowers.) You are the people who can serve the needs of all kinds of people in our community and around the world – and in doing so find a reason and a purpose for living. It doesn't all have to be service tied or directly connected with this church – that tends to create some "in-breeding" problems of its own - but the influence of what you get from this place should motivate you to be operational kind of people. Yes, we gather to worship and even work together – but we leave this place to serve.

What kind of place is this? We also need to see that this is an EMERGENCY BASE. For the airlines, an emergency base is where they take care of the dangerous things that can happen due to the failure of a plane at a critical time. It's not hard to visualize what happens during an emergency situation. The control tower personnel are intently focused on bringing a plane in for a safe landing – flashing lights and roaring sirens on big equipment rolls down a runway – pilots and flight crews work hard to prepare the passengers for what needs to be done. You've seen the movies and the news as to what happens when a "mayday" is called.

The church ought to be ready to be an EMERGENCY BASE.

It would be wrong to let the church only an emergency base – there as the last resort – but please, please, please never forget that it is always capable and desires to be so when the need arises in your life. There is no problem – no late hour – no seemingly impossible life situation that can not at least be partially handled by this community of faith.

Do we wish that people might have taken some time to read the flight safety instructions in the seat pockets? Do we wish that folks might have been more attentive when instructions were given about what to do in an emergency before it hits? Well – yes. But rest assured this place is one of God's ways of reaching out and helping when you need it the most without judging or questioning how you came to get in such a mess. This place can be the difference between crashing or coming in safely for a landing.

I think we've got the equipment – maybe not all the flashing lights and sirens - and we've got the people who care enough to be an emergency base.

Finally, I think that it is appropriate to think of this place as a HOME BASE.

In the airline world, the home base refers to the place that is home to the crew. It is, by the end of their travels, their destination – the place that is comfortable and familiar – the place where family and friends await their safe arrival and where they can be relaxed and refreshed before going out on the next flight.

The church should be your HOME BASE. A place where you can feel comfortable and where you can relax after a hard week or refreshed after going through a difficult experience. There is no place like home.

For almost anyone who has anything to do with the church – this is the place where the sacred ceremonies of life are preformed. For some, it's the only time they darken the doorway: we affectionately call them the Hatched – Matched and Dispatched crowd – we only see them for the ceremonies. And yes there are the Christmas and Easter people who come and hear the same themes and music each year. But our responsibility is not to question their motivation, complain about their priorities, or snag them for some task.

Our responsibility is to welcome them into this house – the home where we celebrate the fellowship of other people and want the stranger to feel comfortable and at ease. The home where no one is left standing alone or sitting off in the corner by themselves. You are the only ones who can create that kind of atmosphere and make this place, the kind of place that an authentic, faithful church should be.

What kind of place is this?

- A home base, where everyone is welcome
- an emergency base, that stands ready to bandage the hurt and wounded
- a maintenance base where you are not only "maintained" but where you can receive the "radical-life change" and overhaul that occurs when you say: Jesus is Lord

- an operations base where you discover once again you're far happier giving than expecting to get and where you reach out to be the good news to people who need you.

So fasten your seat belts, bring your tray tables and seat backs to their full upright position and be ready to take off as we soar off to the next thing which God asks us to do as individuals and as a community of faith.

Let us pray: Gracious God and Holy Friend, we offer ourselves and our service to you and your purposes once again. May we be the authentic and faithful people you have in mind as we follow Christ, our Lord. Amen.