

Sunday, December 30th, 2018
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Intro to the scripture: Acts 17: 10-15

In the middle of southern Kentucky sits Berea College. Berea is a liberal arts college that was founded in 1855 as the first interracial and coeducational college in the South. Berea charges [no tuition](#) and admits only academically promising students, primarily from Appalachia, who have limited economic resources. One hundred and sixty years ago, Inter-racial and co-educational colleges were well out of the ordinary. In fact, in the early 1900s Berea College was forced to stop admitting black students for a period of time as it was illegal in the US for blacks and whites to be educated together.

The name Berea appears several times in the scripture. It was so inspirational that other colleges and many churches have used the name themselves. We even have a Berean Baptist Church here in Brunswick. This is because of the story of Berea in the Bible.

The following scripture that my husband Peter will read has many big words and can be hard to follow at times. In fact, given that we don't have church school today and we wanted to make sure it was understandable to all, Peter decided to read from the Good News Bible, which our church gives to all 3rd graders each year.

The take away message from this reading is that Paul and Silas had been travelling around, preaching the word of Jesus. They had just been driven out of Thessalonica by an angry mob. They then went to Berea, and when they spoke about Jesus, the people of Berea not only thought he was a good speaker, but it says they studied the Scriptures, and compared what they read with the facts related to them. They believed they could understand and find out truth from the

Bible. When Paul preached, the Berean people had not only open hearts; but also clear heads. Many people have clear heads but closed hearts, and never receive the word in full. They don't see its relevance in their lives. It was *both* of these things that made the Bereans more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica—open hearts AND clear heads. This open-mindedness led the founders of Berea College to pick that scripture as a basis for their name, to celebrate how the people of Berea were open to hearing the word of God and were so inspired that they continued to study and learn more.

Sermon

When I was one years old, my parents started an intentional community called the Carpenter's Boat Shop which is up the coast in Pemaquid. Each year, about 10 apprentices of all ages would live with our family in a dormitory attached to our house. My father, who is also an ordained minister, would teach the apprentices the art of wooden boat building, and both my parents helped the apprentices find new direction in their lives.

Because we lived 100% of the time with these apprentices, plus having visitors stop by most days for tea, coffee, or a muffin, my parents would always take the month of August off every year and we would take a vacation trip. Sometimes we'd go to an island in Maine or one year we did a house-exchange in Washington, DC. However when I was ten, my parents decided to spend the month on Prince Edward Island. My father's college roommate had a close friend who was a film director in Toronto. This man owned a second home on Prince Edward Island, and he offered it to my family to use for free, in exchange for doing some light repairs around the house, since he heard my father was a carpenter. The man warned my father that he had not been there in several years so the house might be the dusty or need some minor repairs. We weren't concerned.

So my family packed up our bags, loaded up our car and set out for the month of August. We spent the first night camping at Fundy National Park in New Brunswick and the next day we drove to the ferry crossing and rode the ferry over to Prince Edward Island. When we arrived it took us a little while to find the driveway to this house. We had driven by it a few times because tall grass had started to grow up-- even some small trees. As we navigated our car slowly down the long driveway, over the grass and around the saplings, we began to be a bit more nervous. As we drove around a final curve, we stopped short in front of the house. Our vacation home, where we were supposed to spend the entire month, had fallen down. Half of the house had collapsed into the basement. What now?

My mother began to cry. We three children began to cry. We checked into a hotel that night and my parents had to make a plan. I remember them sitting in the dim light of the hotel room discussing how they could not afford a hotel or rental for the entire month, but they did not want to go home. They really needed time to rest that month and spend time together as a family. My dad pointed out that we did have our camping equipment and suggested that maybe we camp for a while.

That idea seemed a bit daunting as our family had never camped for more than one or two nights at a time before this, but we figured we'd give it a try. The next day my dad went back to the fallen down house, jumped into the basement, and managed to pull out a few supplies like pots and pans, some dishware and silverware, and we made a reservation at a national park on the north shore of the island. What started with tears and apprehension turned into an incredible holiday. It turned out that the campground was phenomenal, situated on the bluffs overlooking a beautiful red sandy beach. There was a rainy day shelter for cooking and eating in bad weather, but overall the weather was beautiful and our family ended up staying the entire month at the campground, taking day trips to Anne of Green Gables house and Charlottetown.

Flexibility is a skill that doesn't come easily to most people. In my professional life, I am a school psychologist in Brunswick and talk with educators a lot about how

to develop flexibility in children. The front part of our brain- the frontal lobe- controls our attention, our impulses, and helps us to plan ahead. We call these skills executive functions. This part of our brain also controls our ability to be flexible and to approach problems in different ways. For example flexibility helps kids understand how words can be used in more than one way (such as “Don’t *slip* on the banana peel” vs. “Sign the permission *slip*”). Flexible thinking is also what helps children understand the perspectives of different characters in a story or that their friends may have different perspectives than they do. Sometimes children struggle with flexibility when their routine changes, such as on days when their class has a guest speaker or their teacher changes math to the end of the day because of the fire drill. Though flexibility can be particularly hard for the students I work with on the Autism spectrum, it is not something that comes automatically to most students, and teachers need to coach children through the stress that can be caused when they struggle with flexibility. Parents can all relate to times where children get upset when something changes, such as when the babysitter doesn’t do the bedtime routine the same way as the parents.

As adults, it is easy to fall into patterns and routines are comfortable. Sometimes when we look at our lives, we noticed that we are not so flexible. Like our muscles that get stiffer with age, our brains tend to seek out the familiar and we don’t always want to try new things. We get into traditions and daily habits that are *easy* for us.

I enjoy listening to NPR’s podcast Hidden Brain. The host Shankar Vedantam shared a story about how a few years ago, there was transportation strike in London that shut down most of the London underground stations for 48 hours- so not a long strike, but most commuters in London use public transportation. During the strike people could still travel on the bus and there were some over-ground trains where they could use some of the tube lines that were not shut down. They had various options. The economists who studied this got hold of the data as to the trips that people were making. They identified people who took the same route to work every single day. There's a technical term for this- it's called commuters.

You would think that these commuters who have absolutely perfected their route to work would know every step. They would know the best place to stand on the platform, how to find the fastest connections. And yet the economists found, looking at the people who took the same route to work every day, that about 1 in 20 of them discovered that when they were forced to find a new way, they found a better way.

And I think that that's quite a common situation. We get into particular habits, but occasionally we get knocked off course. And very often, of course, our original habit was the right way to do things and we go back. But often, we find that the new way of doing things is actually better all along. If our favorite restaurant suddenly closes, or our old car gets rear-ended, we are then forced to find a new restaurant, or buy a new car. These changes may actually turn out to be better!

In two days it will be a new year, and if any of you are like me, the beginning of January involves a lot of planning for the year ahead. I will sign up my children for some summer camps, investigate a summer rental on a lake, plan birthday gatherings for family members. I map out our plans with precision. Yet, life happens. Our plans do not always unfold as we anticipate. Hopefully your vacation rental won't have collapsed into its basement, but you may find that your child breaks their arm right before your beach vacation. Or that your spouse gets sick and you need to reschedule an important dinner or trip. Sometimes you may not have the energy to do more than just get through the day. That happens. Life is not always the fun times, but the sad and difficult times too. People often use the expression that only God knows what will happen. Though I do not view God as a force that alters our life directly, by making people ill or deciding that it's our time to die, I do feel that God's spirit helps us to work through those times of grief or frustration.

Pastor Mary teaches us to look at circumstances and ask ourselves, "Where is God in this situation?"

Where is God in this Situation? It helps us to try and reframe how we view different situations. Sometimes despite disappointments we still can see God. Like the Bereans, can we look deeper at our lives and reflect on God's presence

within it? What can we learn from this new challenge? Can we embrace it with both an open heart and a clear head?

Last year, it snowed heavily on Christmas Day, and our family decided to postpone our dinner from Christmas Day to the next day, which we call Boxing Day in our family. It turned out that everyone enjoyed it so much, having the Christmas Day to just relax with our own children and spending more time in pajamas, and then having more formal meal that next day, we have decided to make that a new tradition. Just like those subway riders in London, disruptions to our routine can sometimes lead to improved outcomes. It is a little like God inserting herself into our life and saying “I’m going to challenge you, but it is not always a bad or scary thing.” We don’t really have the control that we seek. We may think we have life all figured out, that we know how our prayers should be answered, but that isn’t how it works. Like the people of Berea, I hope that as the New Year unfolds, I can keep an open-mind, maintain some flexibility, and ask myself through the bumps and bruises, “Where is God in this new plan?”