

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Happy Birthday, Church!

Archippus and Friends

(Colossians 4:17)

Introduction:

Certain moments arrive that indicate milestones in our lives. These milestones are often marked by a birthday.

Parents are relieved when their child leaves the years of the Terrible T's (2's and 3's) - only to discover the Fearsome 4's and 5's.

Sweet sixteen may bring a driver's license. At eighteen, you can serve in the military. At twenty-one, you may, if you choose, legally buy alcohol.

Before I turned forty, I set a goal of running a marathon - which I did.

When columnist and humorist Dave Barry turned 40, he wrote one of the funniest books I've ever read - uncreatively titled, Dave Barry Turns 40. (Dave Barry Turns 50 wasn't quite so hilarious...)

Turning thirty is also significant, even though Barry didn't write a book about it.

The old Jewish tradition was that you could read the Old Testament's Song of Solomon when you turned thirty - and not a day earlier.

Billionaire Bill Gates marked the milestone by earning \$234 million in the year that he turned thirty. The average player in the NFL observes turning thirty as the year of his retirement from the game.

This morning, our church turns 30. So, what does a church do to celebrate turning thirty?

Well, besides enjoying a breakfast taco brunch, we're going to glance at the rearview mirror for a couple of minutes and look back at some of what God has done over the past three decades here.

But, as you should always do when you want to go somewhere, we're going to spend the bulk of our time looking through the windshield, looking ahead, at where we are going, as a congregation, God willing.

Our Past Chapters

We mark the formal beginning of the Northwest Community Church story on the first Sunday of June, 1982, when the congregation (roughly a baker's dozen) came together to worship in the Arts and Crafts room of the (former) YMCA on Wurzbach Road.

The Lord forged a church over that first summer as we welcomed a few hardy souls who cast their lots with us - Jack and Sue Biros, Johnathan and Ginny Godsey, Joe and Laura Johnson among them.

We grew and matured for the next ten years, meeting at the Seventh-Day Adventist Church on Bandera Road.

And then, in 1991, we moved into what was, at the time, the empty shell of a building at 8900 Guilbeau Road, and finished it out, bit by bit over the next several years.¹

¹ Good story. Our 16,500 square foot "shopping center church" was constructed for 1.2 million dollars in the mid- to late 1980's. The tough economy of that era meant that the building was never occupied by tenants and was bought by the Resolution Trust Corporation, an arm of the government that sold assets to get some financial return. We purchased the property for \$180,000 and finished out the lower section and part of the upstairs section for another \$180,000. Three more constructions projects were required to finish out the building to the state you see today.

Over the years, too, we added staff and worship services. At one point we bought two acres. Years later we sold those two and bought twelve more.

We have supported missionaries and reached out to our community with basketball camps and Vacation Bible Schools and groceries and more.

There have been weddings and funerals and dedications and healings, souls saved, broken people restored, and lives changed. And there have been divorces and sometimes serious squabbles tossed in along with the victories and the triumphs.

It's been thirty years of L-I-F-E. It's been a wonderful, abundant-across-the-spectrum thirty years blessing from God!

And this is not a morning for nostalgia. I have no intention of spending the morning tearfully walking down Memory Lane with you. No need for Kleenex. Joy is the mood of the hour. I'm full of thankfulness.

In fact, if there's one truth from Scripture that comes to mind as we meet this morning and look back at previous chapters in our church's life, it is this, from Lamentations 3:

***[22] The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.
[23] They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.***

God's faithfulness and God's grace have sustained us and fed us for the years of our congregational life.

The past couple of years have been filled with normal ministry, new initiatives, missions trips, worship, growth in community - and a lot of reflection about what God would have us be all about in the next chapter.

Our Current Chapter

We have thought and read and prayed and then discussed with each other the issues of our unique mission and purpose and vision from God.

We re-arrived at a Mission Statement that has been in place for a long time and, with a little tweaking, still articulates the heartbeat of our church.

“Having tasted God's amazing grace through faith in Jesus Christ, we passionately pursue life-changing relationships with God, with each other, and with our world.”

That statement addresses the three most famous and “named” commands of Jesus.

With respect to the passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with God, we hear His Great Commandment.

[Mark 12:30] AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.

With respect to the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with each other, here in the church, we hear His New Commandment.

***[John 13:34] A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.
[35] “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.***

And, with respect to the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with people in our world, we hear His Great Commission.

[Matthew 28:18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...”

We've also given a lot of time to identifying values to which our church clings.

Over the past six weeks I have had an absolute blast bringing messages that have addressed the themes of loving and living the Bible, bringing our friends to Jesus, generous living and giving, building faith at home, masks-off relating, and dependence on God.

These values (whether partially realized or mostly aspirational) speak to the passions and the “to die for” of our church - and they are the truths that get me up in the morning.²

So, yes, I’m incredibly thankful to God for His amazing grace and steadfast faithfulness in the past. AND, I’ve really been enjoying the current season that has had us re-thinking our congregational mission and our values.

But I’m even more excited about what God may have in store for us in the future, years thirty one and following, chapter “next.”

To orient to some of what I believe God may have in store, I’m going to introduce you to one of my New Testament heroes. We meet him near the end of Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

In the last paragraph of this letter, Paul sent special messages from those with him - Luke and Demas - to the church at Colossae. He also had messages for some individual members of the church.

After a couple of these greetings³, Paul sent a highly individualized message to one man.

² Years ago, a good friend pointed out that the core values of Enron, the disgraced company brought down by fraud and deceit, were “communication, respect, integrity, excellence.” My friend pointed this out as a warning against putting faith in bannerizable “core values” in our church. Sobered by the reality that a list of core values *can* be ignored, I’m still hopeful that reminding ourselves of what we hold to *could* keep us focused on these values.

³ Paul wanted the believers in Colossae to warmly greet the Christians in the nearby city of Laodicea for him. A sister in the Lord named Nympha, who evidently opened her home to the church for regular worship, was honored with a special greeting.

Our Next Chapter

Intro: Archippus: An Often Un-sung Hero

[17] Say to Archippus, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.”

Who is Archippus? (see Philemon 2)

We find Archippus’ name in one other place in the New Testament. When Paul jotted off a short note to his friend, Philemon, he mentioned *[Philemon 2] Archippus our fellow soldier.*

From this we gather that Archippus was a faithful follower of Christ and that he lived in Colossae. Beyond that, we know nothing about Archippus.

One commentator (Abbott) is of a mind that Archippus may have been the son of Philemon, but there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that.

Here in Colossians 4:17, though, Paul mentions Archippus’ “ministry.” What ministry was that?

What was Archippus’ ministry?

One of my commentaries suggested that he gave pastoral oversight to the church (Herbert Carson), but there is nothing in the verse to suggest that.

Another couple of scholars believe that he could have been an evangelist, although, again, there is nothing in the verse to lead us to that conclusion.

Archippus’ ministry is left undefined.

The word used to describe his ministry (a word we, today, may associate with a formal church structure) is a word that is often translated simply, “service” (diakonia). It is not a stained-glass word at all. There is nothing liturgical about it.

His ministry/service could have involved preaching, leading music, waiting on tables, or sweeping floors.

One of my more honest books has this, *“It is difficult to be precise as to the particular form of ministry which had been committed to him.”* I’ll go you one better. It is IMPOSSIBLE to know what ministry Archippus had received in the Lord!

Archippus no doubt knew exactly what Paul was referring to. But readers from the first century on haven’t had a clue.

He might have had a ministry among the poor or the slave classes. He might have had a ministry to children, to lepers or to the aristocracy. He might have been a teacher in the church, or a discipler of young converts.

It could have been anything.

And Paul tells Archippus, this faithful soldier of Jesus, to take heed to fulfill the ministry which he has received in the Lord.

We hear those words and we wonder...

Paul’s words to Archippus - and YOU!

Was Paul warning Archippus to get busy and fulfill his ministry? Was he scolding Archippus for not fulfilling his ministry? Was Paul simply honoring Archippus by affirming that he had been given a ministry?

We don’t know. But the verse provokes serious thought.

The idea that rises from Colossians 4:17 is the basis for the rest of my remarks this morning.

It is also the idea on which I hang my hopes that the next chapter of our church’s life will be more effective, more God-honoring, more fulfilling, more Kingdom-centered, and more impactful than the previous chapters.

Here it is:

If Archippus, a man mentioned only briefly in the New Testament, received a ministry from God and was urged by Paul to fulfill it, then it follows that every believer in Jesus has received a ministry from God and needs to be careful to fulfill it.

That would include me and you and every other follower of Jesus you can think of. You have been given a ministry from God and you are to fulfill it.

Now, in the time we have remaining this morning, I want to develop three “big ideas”.

Two of them derive directly from the Bible’s teaching about you and your ministry. The third “big idea” is more the outline of a concept as to how we here at Northwest, could apply the first two “big ideas.”

First, a thought about destinations.

You, Unleashed for Service (Ephesians 4)

We’d probably agree that getting someone to come to church is a good thing. Personally, I’m glad you’re here, and if you brought a friend, I’m glad you and your friend are both here.

But getting a person to church is not the “Great Commission accomplished.”

After a season of being at our church, we hope that you will get plugged into community and will grow as a worshipping disciple. But it is not a “win” if you are ONLY plugged into community and taking part in worship. Attendance at church, without ministry output, it’s not a Kingdom win.

The church is not a final destination. Once anyone comes to our church and starts moving toward spiritual maturity, the church is to serve as a launch pad into ministry.

And everyone - no exceptions; no sideline sitters - in the church is to be “on mission” for the Great Commission.

As Ephesians 4:11-12 tell us, the ministry belongs to every believer, including YOU.

[11] And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, [12] for the equipping of the saints for the work of service (or, literally “ministry”)

Some of you may mostly fill that mission within the confines of the church (teaching, leading, serving, etc...). And if you have gifting and passions to serve within the church, GREAT! You will bless lots and lots of people by your service here!

But here’s the thing.

If all we are aiming at is to have every ministry position at our church filled, we won’t make much progress in reaching a lost world for Jesus. And...

If all we are aiming at is to have every ministry position at our church filled, we could do that and there would still be many, many people NOT deployed into ministry, not engaged in ministry.

So, some of you will fulfill your ministry inside the church, and many of you will fulfill your ministry outside of the structure of the church.

Those who are serving Jesus in the church are serving those who are here. Those who are serving Jesus outside the church are serving those who are not here and may NEVER come here.

That’s OK.

Our assignment from Jesus is not to grow the church. He said that He would do that (see Matthew 16). Our job is to be salt and light for God and to penetrate our culture for Him like leaven in a lump of dough.

Our church - and any church - is not the thing. Our church - and every other church - is a tool God is pleased to use to advance the Kingdom. But the advance of the Kingdom is always more important than the growth of our church.⁴

⁴ In terms of outreach, we will continue to have a very active and engaged cross-cultural Missions program. Missions will continue to be funded by the church

So, that’s a thought about destinations. Now, a thought about identity, direct from the Apostle Peter.

You, a Priest to God (1 Peter 2:9)

[1 Peter 2:9] But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.⁵

The doctrinal truth

Out of this verse (and a few others) comes the teaching that every believer in Jesus is a priest to God. This teaching was one of the pillars of the Protestant Reformation. When we speak of the “priesthood of all believers” we mean that:

- every believer is gifted (by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit) to understand Scripture without the aid of a church authority.
- every believer has the privilege of praying directly to God without needing to go through an intermediate human priest.
- every believer has a special call to ministry

The idea of the priesthood of the believer comes right out of Scripture. So, yes, it is true that I have a call to ministry. I am fulfilling my call to a pastoral ministry. But it is also true that YOU have a call to ministry.

There is nothing more thrilling than serving God in the arena of your calling, an area where you are passionate and gifted. There is nothing like knowing that you are involved, up close and personal, in God’s plan for advancing His kingdom.

through the annual budget. We will have a standing Missions Committee, will actively support (financially and personally) missionaries, will raise funds for special Missions projects, and will cheerlead for people in the church to take part in short-term Missions trips.

⁵ See also Hebrews 13:15-16; Romans 15:15-16 for references to believers in Jesus being priests to God and fulfilling priestly function.

And it is God's will for you to be fully deployed in significant, Kingdom-of-God sized, eternally significant MISSION. In Christ, there are no mission Nobodies. In Christ, everyone is a Mission Somebody.

So, as we move forward into the next chapter of our church's life, I want to say to each one of you, just as Paul said to Archippus, "*Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.*"

What does that mean? Try this...

The practical application

Everybody listens to the Holy Spirit; everybody stays sensitive to the stirrings in their heart

Because, having trusted Christ for salvation, you are a priest to God and therefore have been given a ministry to fulfill (see Archippus), you need to be sensitive to your own service passions and be sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit as He nudges you to serve.

And when you sense His nudging and sense your passions to serve stirring - you must serve!

Serving in the church

Again, this service could be centered around the formal structure of the church. Your priestly service might involve working in the church nursery, teaching Sunday School, leading a Care Group, being on the Praise Team, or serving in any of a dozen other church-related ways.

We want to let you who are a part of our church know what the opportunities are for service in the various ministries going on here at Northwest.

There are great open doors to serve children, youth, and adults here, and you could very well find your ministry "sweet spot" by plugging into service here.

So we're going to tell you in what ways and in what arenas you can serve here.

Serving where you are

But it is possible that your service might take you outside of the church structure. And the form that ministry might take could be in the form of personal service to family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers.

New Testament ministry need not be grandiose. It need not be flashy to be significant. Under the radar and behind the scenes service IS Kingdom-of-God sized stuff.

Taking a meal to a new neighbor in Jesus' Name is MINISTRY. Visiting a co-worker in the hospital is MINISTRY. Taking time to listen to a discouraged friend is MINISTRY. Pointing a friend to Jesus is MINISTRY.

I know that many of you are involved in those kinds of ministries all day long. You may not have ever thought of them as "ministries", but they are.

Or, you might discover existing, more formal, ministries in our community where you would really enjoy plugging in.

Serving with existing ministries

Over the years, a bunch of people from Northwest have served with LeRoy Jacobson's ministry to teens through Youth for Christ and THAT has been their ministry.

Others have gotten involved at local crisis pregnancy centers, and have served women, their unborn babies, and the fathers of these babies.

Some have very actively served the Lord at military bases, plugging into ministries there, assisting chaplains, attending and helping with base chapel services, discipling servicemen and women.

Moving forward, one of the things we will do here is maintain a list of ministries we are aware of outside the church with which you could get involved.

So, you might choose to jump on board with something that is already up and running.

Or, the Lord might put it on your heart to initiate some entirely new way to serve and to advance the Kingdom.

It's happened before...

Creating new ministries

I have long been amazed (no longer surprised, just amazed) at the capacity for creativity that resides in God's people when it comes to finding ways to be salt and light to the world.

For example...

KINGDOM ASSIGNMENTS

Back in 2006, on Sunday, January 15, we conducted an experiment we called, "Kingdom Assignments." In the worship services on that Sunday, we asked for thirty six people to come forward to volunteer for a Kingdom Assignment.

I told everyone on that Sunday that if they volunteered they would have ninety days to fulfill their Kingdom Assignment. At the end of those ninety days, they would have a chance to report back to the church how their Kingdom Assignment went, what they learned, and how people were touched by what you did.

I assured the church on that day that if they agreed to participate in the Kingdom Assignment they would meet needs in Jesus' Name, they would grow in their relationship with Jesus, and they would bring honor to God.

The people who came forward that day had no idea what they were going to be asked to do. But, sure enough, out of the worship services on that day, thirty six (somewhat nervous looking) people walked to the front, stood on the platform, and waited to hear what their assignment was going to be.

First, we handed each person on stage a crisp \$100 bill. (Yes, the people who got the money were shocked!)

Then, we made it clear that the money was not theirs. It wasn't the church's either. It had been given expressly to fund the Kingdom Assignments.

Then, we told them that the Elders were not in any way telling them what to do for their Kingdom Assignment.

No, they were to determine before God what they could do with that \$100 to expand His Kingdom outside the walls of the church.

The assignment was to invest the money in meeting human needs in Jesus' Name, sharing the Gospel, or doing whatever God placed on their hearts. And it was awesome to see what the people who got that money did with it.

- One guy used the money to buy lunch food, and then he made sandwiches and fed folks under a bridge downtown every Saturday for months (actually for years after the Kingdom Assignment experiment concluded).
- One woman lovingly made and then served cookies and lemonade to take to a small, rowdy gang of teenagers who were making life miserable for the neighbors every morning before school.
- Another man used the money to buy soft drinks and snacking food to take to a local park to share with people who were playing basketball - and then shared the Gospel of Jesus with them.
- Several used the money to fund Missions projects.

The \$100 was "seed money" to be used to make Kingdom impact.

People who took part in the Kingdom Assignment project used that seed money wisely and creatively - and the rest of us stood amazed at the advances for the Kingdom that took place.

Or take the ministry that has come to be called Bread and Water.

BREAD & WATER

This ministry was the brainchild of Nathan Fry, who, when he started it, was in High School. It was taken up by Ken Eberhardt, then James Stopher (when Ken was not able to be involved). Now Ken heads it up.

Bread and Water has never asked for anything from the church except recognition and prayer. It is a ministry that expresses the passion of those who are involved. No one has ever been made to feel guilty for not being involved, but the church has applauded and prayed for and encouraged those who are involved with it.

It wasn't thought up by staff. It wasn't promoted by elders. You, members of the Body here, thought it up, organized it, led it, and are leading it still. And over the years of Bread and Water's life, our church and homeless men and women have been thoroughly blessed.

Conclusion:

I could tell more stories of Kingdom impact from service rendered here at the church or in the community.

But one thing I want you all to be assured of - the ministry which you have received in the Lord is every bit as significant as anyone else's.

As we turn thirty, I believe that we are entering a chapter of our church's life that will see more ministry mobilization than ever before.

You are Archippus. You are to be at maximum for the Great Commission, serving where you are gifted and passionate.

As you serve here at church you will be resourced and equipped and trained and encouraged and prayed for.

As you serve in the community, you will be recognized, dignified, promoted, prayed for, and cheered on.