

Together on the Journey

The impact of other people on our journey of faith.

We have nearly reached the end of this series from the book of Acts called Journeys into the Unknown, Led by the Spirit. Today our title is Together on the Journey. You might think of Acts as the story of great individuals, particularly the apostles Peter and Paul. But for his sermon on the Day of Pentecost we read that Peter stood up with the eleven others and preached. And Paul on his amazing missionary journeys always traveled with companions. Together on the Journey. When you and I walk our journey of faith into our unknown future we are led by the Spirit of God for sure, but also we should never walk alone.

Pastor Rupert has asked me to coordinate an interaction with Richard on this question of how other people impact on us in our lives for God. So we don't have a sermon as such but rather some examples from the book of Acts – think of Stephen & Philip, Ananias & Saul, Peter & John, Paul & Barnabas and so on. And in dialogue with Richard the aim is for all of us to reflect on people who have been influential in our lives, in the past or here and now in Chiang Mai. But also to think about how we ourselves are exemplifying the life of faith to others right now in this Chiang Mai context.

Let's take and read from the word of God in the book of Acts in chapter 2 verse 42 and count the times we read the word 'together'. **Read Acts 2:42-47.....**

The same atmosphere of purposeful togetherness is in the next summarizing section at the end of chapter 4. You can read there. And in chapter 6 the leaders of the early Christian movement called everybody together about a problem. Find that chapter 6 in your Bible. **Read Acts 6:1-2**

Pastor Rupert referred to this story a while back. But let's talk about it again for a moment. At this early stage the Christians are functioning as a community more than as a church, as we think of church. But there were leaders of the community and there was structure to their common life, as we have read. And there were problems. Any group of people has problems, we all know that. One of the organisational aspects of their common life was a regular distribution of food to poor widows. There were bad vibes developing about this because one group in the community felt disadvantaged. So the leaders called the people together and together they chose seven men to deal with the issue. We hear no more in Acts about those men except Stephen and Philip. Were they friends? We don't know. They certainly worked together in the role they were given. They were both evangelists, Stephen and Philip, each in their own personality style. And as Pastor Rupert reminded us a few weeks ago the Holy Spirit led their lives to a very different destiny. So I wonder how Philip and Stephen influenced each other in those early days. Many years later Philip was living out on the coast with his four daughters who were all prophets. Paul and his missionary companions dropped in to visit for a few days and I imagine them reminiscing about the old times.

I imagine Philip the elderly evangelist saying, *“Paul, you didn't really know Stephen. You were not one of us at that time.”* And Paul interrupts saying, *“Philip, I weep inside whenever anybody mentions his name.”* *“Paul, let me tell you, Stephen was a great guy. I know the way that he died made a huge impact on you...”* *“That's right, from that day on when I helped to murder Stephen, the Spirit of Jesus just burned away in my conscience.”* *“Yeah but Paul, it wasn't just that. It was the way he lived. He was fearless. He was a straight talker. He was a great student of the word. But also he was kind. He was gentle. . The seven of us, we used to sit in our*

meetings deciding whether to give some money that had just come in to sister Abigail who had 4 children or to sister Priscilla who had an elderly mother and aunt, but only one child. You know, I often think I learned more about the Spirit of Jesus sitting around that table with Stephen than I did from his martyrdom.” *“Well I never heard you say that before Philip. As I say, I never had the chance to learn from Stephen, except from his manner of dying. He was a great one among us.”*

OK now let’s imagine another scene from late in the life of the apostle Peter, perhaps in Rome. An old friend is dining with Peter and his wife. This is just me imagining, remember. The friend says, *“Hey Peter, you know young David, the fellow we just added to the deacons group? Do you know who his mother is? I just discovered this the other day.”* *“No, who?”* *“Dopey Rhoda. She is David’s mother.”* *“Who’s dopey Rhoda? That’s not very nice anyway.”* *“Oh she can take it. She likes to laugh and she’s quite proud of it in a funny way.”* *“How come? Who is this dopey Rhoda?”* *“You know, Rhoda, the little girl... When the angel got you out of Herod’s prison... And she knew it was you but she forgot to let you in.”* *“Oh, that was her name? I never knew it. Rhoda.”* *“Whenever I think of Rhoda I think of the lesson we all learned that day. If we’re going to pray for something we should expect God to answer.”* *“Yeah, I’m banging on the door still and you’re all telling her she’s nuts. And you keep on praying. Huh!”* *“From that day to this whenever I ask God for something in prayer I expect that he will answer. With God nothing is impossible. That’s what I remember from dopey Rhoda.”*

Or one more moment of imagination if you can bear with me. I think they’re realistic imaginings and remember this is not a sermon.... Paul is in prison in his old age when his lifelong friend Barnabas comes to visit him. *“Barnabas, my friend, I want to tell you how much I have appreciated you over these so many years... No listen, Barnabas. I can’t think of anybody I know who has meant more to me in the course of my life. I can’t bear to think how hard a man I would have been without your softening influence on my life.”* *“Oh go on, Paul, it’s all the work of the Holy Spirit of Jesus in you, brother.”* *“Yes and no, Barnabas, yes and no. The Holy Spirit uses people like you powerfully to bless people like me. If you hadn’t put in the good word for me with the hierarchy in Jerusalem in those early days...”* *“You shouldn’t call them the hierarchy Paul. The brothers.”* *“Yes the dear Jerusalem brothers. You’re right, as always Barnabas. Like I say, I would have been a hard man without you to teach me a gentler way.”* *“Maybe, who knows.”*

“Barnabas, I’ve never said this to you before but I want you to know how bad I feel about that major bust-up we had about John Mark.” *“Forget it, Paul, you had a point and I got pretty mad that day too.”* *“Hah! You get mad? Barnabas? Never.”* *“Anyway all’s well that ends well for John Mark, Paul. He turned out pretty well didn’t he.”* *“Thanks to you Barney. No thanks to me. You believed in him. You helped him through it. You stuck with him. I just cast him off like a worn-out sandal, and you. Then I took up with Silas.”* *“Well, he was a good man.”* *“Yes he was, God rest his soul. But Barney, my friend, I want you to know that I thank God for you and for every good thing you’ve taught me and modeled for me.”* *“Well, we’re like chalk and cheese, you and me, Paul, but I guess the Lord has taught us both a lot from each other. All for his glory.”* *“Amen. All for his glory. But thank you, my friend.”*

Now then, Richard. A few words about you. Richard and his wife Carolyn, with their daughters Denia and Jennai, have been here in Chiang Mai for four or five years. For much longer than that they’ve been in mission in various parts of the world. In the last year or two Richard has

served on the leadership team here at Community Church. Now they're about to leave for a new ministry in a church in Canada and we have a final opportunity to dialogue with Richard about the impact various people have made in their journey of faith. **So Richard, I've shared some imaginative stories from Acts, what thoughts do you want to pass on about the way people have come into your life, walking the journey of faith alongside you for maybe a short time, maybe long? Then they're gone again.**

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Do you have any stories or examples of people who have taught you, blessed you, challenged you, changed you, in their time with you on the journey?

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Thanks a lot, Richard. Back to you in a moment. So far we've talked about individuals but the journey into the unknown led by the Spirit is a journey in community. Wherever the gospel of Jesus went churches were formed. People walked and worked together on the life of faith. I think sometimes about the church in Ephesus. It was founded by the Apostle Paul on his 3rd mission journey when he preached daily in a public lecture hall for more than two years. His preaching was so powerfully effective that it began to threaten the income of the people who made idol shrines. A huge riot erupted. The civic authorities regained control with some wise and well chosen words but Paul decided to move on anyway. About three months later he returned for a flying visit on his way back to Jerusalem. He called the elders of the church he had planted to meet him on the beach, as I imagine it. Let's read a couple of snippets from the moving story there in Acts 20.

Read Acts 20: 22-25, 36-38.

When I was young I used to think that Paul must have been hard to like. He seemed to me like a dogmatic, argumentative kind of guy. I think now it was perhaps some of the interpreters of Paul who made me think that way. Because the Ephesian elders wept and embraced him because they might never see him again. In his three years in Ephesus Paul had taught and modelled and challenged and disciplined them. He worked hard and prayed hard for them. And they loved him.

So then Richard, from the various church contexts in which you have worked in mission do you have any more stories or illustrations or people... Or conversely have there been any churches which have specially encouraged you in their community life, redirected your thinking, grown your faith, or whatever, in significant ways that you can share with us?

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One last question, perhaps the most important. Do you have any words of encouragement or challenge for us at Community Church about helping each other along in the journey of faith? Many of us are here only a few years, or even only a few months. Do you have any suggestions for us on how we can impact more and more on each others lives for God in the time we walk the path together.