

September 15, 2019

“Finding Trouble: Making A List”

Matthew 14:22-31, 2 Corinthians 11:16-30

Raise your hand if you remember getting in trouble in your younger years. Keep your hand up if there were consequences (lost privileges, being grounded, a fine) . . . if the police were involved. We get in trouble for all sorts of things and a variety of reasons. Sometimes our silliness, stubbornness, and stupidity get us in trouble. Those are the events we'd rather forget. But sometimes it's a person's courage, bravery and commitment that get him or her in trouble. Just over 18 years ago on 9/11, first responders got in their emergency vehicles and raced toward trouble. Those are moments we will never forget.

This fall at FPC we're going to be Finding Trouble.

I got the idea for this sermon series last winter when I was reading Jim Martin's book called *The Just Church*. Jim was our speaker last year for Freedom Sunday. At the beginning of his book he talks about his years as a pastor and all of the strategies used to help people grow as disciples, and how unfruitful they often are when it comes to changed lives. He started noticing something in his church as they developed a partnership with a church and ministry in South America. As the partnership unfolded, they found themselves addressing serious and systemic issues involving poverty, power, and injustice. They were in way over their heads . . . and, Jim noticed, their faith was growing like crazy; his too.

Reading from Psalm 50 one day, Jim came across verse 15. In it, God says, "Call on Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." (Psalm 50:15) Jim realized that, so often, he wasn't in trouble at all. Which meant he didn't really need to call on God. Which meant he never really felt delivered. Which meant he really wasn't glorifying God that much; if at all. So he started "looking for trouble" as he put it. Martin said, "I'm most aware of God – and most responsive to Him – when I'm in trouble. It's so simple, I find it almost humorous. But clearly what God wants of us is to call on Him in the day of trouble." Okay, are we supposed to just go out and get in trouble? What if I can't go to South America, or Uganda, or some other difficult place? A bit later he explains, "Looking for trouble is about making the concrete decision to emerge from our isolation. It's about deciding to peel back some of the layers of our insulation . . ." (*The Just Church* by Jim Martin)

What so many find out as they find trouble is that being in over our head is good for our faith muscle. Not being able to rely on ourselves, our giftedness, our resources, our experiences, and our street smarts makes us feel very vulnerable; which makes it highly likely that we will call out to God for help. It makes sense that we should be Finding Trouble.

I want to clarify that, for our sermon series, we will not be advocating general thrill-seeking, though some of you quite naturally push the limits of your bodies more than others. We're also not talking about a sort of spiritual masochism people wear like a badge of honor, as if living dangerous lives for Christ makes God love us more, and deserve more accolades from others.

What we're getting at is seeking after the ways of Jesus and His Kingdom – going where He wants us to go and doing what He wants us to do. That's what Paul did; and he found trouble almost everywhere he went. He was always in over his head. His commitment to spreading good news, reaching Gentiles, and leading the Church got him in the crosshairs of Jewish opponents who questioned his authority. We see him responding to them in our 2 Corinthians passage, with a little tongue-in-cheek bravado. He was also in trouble on occasion with Roman authorities. And then there was the physical danger he faced as he travelled to bring the Good News from town to town. This still happens today when people feel called to "Go" and share/live out the Good News in more difficult places. We should be praying right now for Luke and Naomi Parker* who are travelling from one North African country to another, discerning where it is God wants them to develop community partnerships for the sake of the Gospel.

After hearing stories about church partnerships in South America and travel in North Africa, it might be helpful to stop and acknowledge that we ALL have a degree of risk-aversion, the need for self-preservation, and a strong desire for comfort. But that doesn't mean we can't commit to taking a step or two into some potential trouble.

Peter gets into a bit of trouble taking a step or two (or three) out onto the Sea of Galilee, doesn't he? And then what happens? He cries out immediately to Jesus. "Lord, save me!" 'I'm in trouble!' Jesus doesn't even think twice. Matthew tells us that Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught Peter. And then He said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" How do you hear that? For you, what's Jesus' tone? What does His face look like? Do you see Him as stern? Disappointed like your mom was after she asked you to clean your room? Does Jesus think Peter is pathetic? Or is He actually commending Peter for finding himself in a little trouble?

We get a little clue one chapter earlier in Matthew 13 when Jesus tells two parables. In His parables about mustard seeds and yeast Jesus reminds us that being a part of His Kingdom only requires a "little faith." So maybe we need to hear these words to Peter as an encouraging affirmation from Jesus.

Just a little faith is a really big deal. Exercising a little faith means following Jesus just beyond or well beyond what you can see and predict and take care of all by your gifted, well-resourced

* Names changed to protect identity of individuals.

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self. It means taking God up on His invitation to live abundant life in His Kingdom, and finding a little trouble.

Gary Haugen is the leader of International Justice Mission, the largest anti-slavery organization in the world. He tells the story of how IJM came to be in his first book, *Just Courage*. Early in the book he says, "In different times and in different ways, our heavenly Father offers us a simple proposition: Follow Me beyond what you can control, beyond where your own strength and competencies can take you, and beyond what is affirmed or risked by the crowd – and you will experience Me and My power and My wisdom and My love." (*Just Courage* by Gary Haugen)

And just what has Gary and so many others been experiencing since he decided to follow God into some serious trouble?

There are a number of IJM videos that you can find online. You may view the one we watched at: <https://vimeo.com/180588459>

Did you hear what they said? "We will not go away." And because "[They] will not go away," they will find themselves IN TROUBLE again and again and again. Paul couldn't stop talking about Jesus and the Good News of grace; and because of that, he had a long list of troubles.

What's on your list and what's on my list?

It might be a short list. I'm not here to make any of us feel bad for the current length of our list; but I am here to say with just a "little faith" our lists can get longer than they are now. I'm also here to remind all of us that we don't have to be stuck living a life without convictions or a sense of purpose. We don't have to have a stagnating faith that's never really tested. We can follow Jesus to the places and into the situations He's inviting us; places and situations in which we are in over our heads and bound to find some trouble.

For the next 10 weeks, we will look at what some of those places and situations might be for you and me. We will be talking about praying dangerously . . . sharing your faith . . . crossing barriers . . . hanging with kids . . . being exceedingly generous . . . getting honest about addictions . . . facing death courageously . . . embracing holiness and purity. Next week we will be invited to pray dangerously, be exceedingly generous, and help end slavery. We have the special treat of welcoming Brian Nasala who served with IJM in Uganda and married a former staff member at Amani Baby Cottage. We'll have a chance to hear about God's heart for justice and do our best to prayerfully and financially support IJM.

Even taking a look at the bulletin might give you a couple ideas about how you might get yourself in over your head a bit. Emotionally Healthy Spirituality will take you below the surface of your life to experience and explore realities you may have never seen or dealt with before. There are a number of ways to serve children and youth. Maybe you need to ask for a Stephen Minister, or find a way to serve in a ministry to disadvantaged people. Maybe you would be willing to lead a small group of CMU college students through one of the many campus ministries we connect with and support. And maybe you can get up early and meet with a group of men you can be honest and real with.

Before this sermon sets you on a course to just "do more" so that God will love you more, I want to encourage those of you who have never opened yourself up to the incredible love of God (or not done so in a long time) to take a step of faith in the direction of that love. It is actually difficult to fathom that God sent His only Son who faced tremendous troubles on our behalf. It's easier to believe God loves us when we're lovable, and is ticked off when we mess up. Maybe the first thing on all of our lists ought to be to receiving God's amazing grace and love, once again or for the very first time.

Let me ask again: What's on your list and what's on my list?

Over the last few years, we have had a growing involvement with International Justice Mission. This has also led to connecting with several students from CMU. A young woman named Carolyn graduated last year with her bachelor's degree and a heart for biblical justice. She just began a year-long internship in Bangkok working with IJM and local officials who are cracking down on unjust practices affecting immigrants who don't speak Thai, don't know the law, and are desperate for work; enslaved by the fishing industry. She emailed out her first update this week, even though she's barely settled in, and tried to convey her emotional journey so far. She wrote, "As I have described it to others – my emotions about being here fluctuate from being excited to being terrified. This is expected, but still no fun to deal with!" There's no doubt that Carolyn will be Finding more Trouble along the way.

How about you and me? How about making that list?