

## Bridges, Harbors, and People I Love

August 28, 2016

Luke 10:1-12, Romans 16 (selected verses)

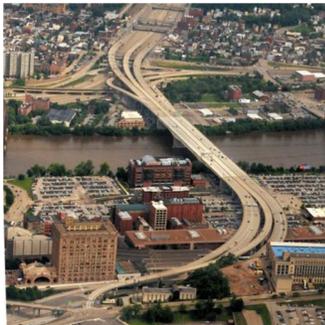
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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If you have spent any time with me on the river this year, you've probably been forced to hear me wax poetically about two bridges that exist almost side by side on the Allegheny River just upstream from the Point.



The Sixteenth Street Bridge (also called the David McCullough bridge) is my favorite span in the city. It is a thing of beauty and strength as it connects the North Side and the Strip District. I love the sculptures – winged seahorses in spheres – that symbolize the four corners of the earth; I love the engravings of fish and of Poseidon that adorn the columns; and I love the fact that you can walk across it. It's a bridge that points to awe and wonder and reminds us that it's good for communities to be connected to each other and we ought not to take that for granted.



Just downstream from that structure is the Veterans' Bridge, an imposing platform that whisks traffic from Interstate 279 to Interstate 376 as quickly and efficiently as possible. It is a giant, ugly conveyance that seems to regard the communities over which it towers as little more than distractions or inconveniences. The only way to cross that bridge is in a vehicle, preferably as fast as you can – because that bridge is not designed to create wonder or awe or thanksgiving – it's designed to get people from someplace way over there to someplace way over there as smoothly and rapidly as possible. "Here" does not matter to those on the Veterans' Bridge.

And if we were in a boat under those bridges, I'd tell you that I think the Church of Jesus Christ ought to be more like the Sixteenth Street Bridge than the Veterans' Bridge. The Church ought to create wonder and awe as we celebrate connections that can be made and progress that can be measured.



And as I pondered this, I drove my boat under the Carrie Furnace Hot Metal Bridge, which goes from Homestead to, well, something that isn't there anymore. And it occurred to me that a lot of our churches are more like this bridge than either the Sixteenth Street or the Veterans' Bridges. That is to say, someone has gone to a lot of trouble to create an elaborate structure, characterized by strong support systems and rock-solid foundations – and yet, that structure doesn't really go anywhere, make any connections, or lead to any accessibility. In terms of functionality, the Carrie Furnace Hot Metal Bridge is a useless relic.

That said, if you offered me a chance to visit one of these bridges this afternoon... I'd choose the Carrie Furnace, hands down. I think it's fascinating.

Why does any of this matter?

Because I realized a long time ago that I would have made a horrible apostle – at least initially.

I think I would have been a *great* disciple. It would have been so cool following Jesus around, engaging in long, drawn out conversations about stuff that really matters, and having deep and intimate relationships with other followers. I *like* that kind of stuff. And so when I heard Jesus say, "Pray that God will send out some people to do God's business in the world," man, I'd be all over that prayer. "Come on, Matthew, Andrew – let's pray that God sends some people!" And then, after the prayer, before I can say, "Hey, Simon, what are you doing for lunch? I know this *great*

shawarma place over in Capernaum...”, Jesus says “Go! I am sending you!”

Um, really? Me?

Look, I understand if you don't believe me now, but the truth is that “Go!” is not my first nature. I've learned something, and there will be more about that in a moment. But if I had been in charge of the early church, it would have looked much, much different.

We'd have been hanging out together, and we surely would have missed Jesus after his ascension and all that. And I'd make sure that we got together each night for a little singing, and then I'd probably ask some awkward and intrusive questions that made you want to avoid eye contact for a while. We'd keep building the relationships amongst the disciples, and we'd dive deeper and deeper into that small group...

Yet fortunately for everyone who's ever lived, I was *not* in charge, then or now. The first disciples (translated from the Greek word for “follower”) were shaped to become the first apostles (translated from the Greek for “one who is sent out”). And as that happened, they left the relative safety of their own homes and culture and families, leaving the delight of constant relationships with each other in order to follow God's call into the rest of the world.

If it had been me, we'd have hung around in Jerusalem, Bethsaida, or wherever, mooning and spooning about the good old days and wondering if God would ever use us again. But thanks be to God, the real Apostles did what Jesus told them to do.

Don't get me wrong – I'm sure that the intimate relationships continued. You know that when Peter and John were in the same town, they got together and prayed and talked and maybe even

sang a few of the old songs. I am certain that personal relationships are the fabric from which the church was created.

The text that taught me that was today's Epistle reading, Romans chapter 16. This chapter, incidentally, is the number one reason you have never signed up to be a reader in church – because you're afraid that I'm going to stick you with something like this.

Here's the background: Paul, the Apostle who traveled the most, is also the Apostle who left the best record of his deep and intense personal connections with people. Here, he closes his letter to the church in Rome, which happens to be one of the heaviest theological treatises in the New Testament, with a list of names. In so doing, Paul turns the discourse on correct theology and Christology into a love letter as he names names, sparks memories, and points to the web of relationships that sustains the church.

I'm going to read it now, and in the split second that you hear a name, try to imagine each name as a real person; someone with a story, a home, a friendship, and a joy. Listen for the intimacy that is here...

Be sure to welcome our friend Phoebe in the way of the Master, with all the generous hospitality we Christians are famous for. I heartily endorse both her and her work. She's a key representative of the church at Cenchrea. Help her out in whatever she asks. She deserves anything you can do for her. She's helped many a person, including me.

Say hello to Priscilla and Aquila, who have worked hand in hand with me in serving Jesus. They once put their lives on the line for me. And I'm not the only one grateful to

them. All the non-Jewish gatherings of believers also owe them plenty, to say nothing of the church that meets in their house.

Hello to my dear friend Epenetus. He was the very first follower of Jesus in the province of Asia.

Hello to Mary. What a worker she has turned out to be!

Hello to my cousins Andronicus and Junias. We once shared a jail cell. They were believers in Christ before I was. Both of them are outstanding leaders.

Hello to Ampliatus, my good friend in the family of God.

Hello to Urbanus, our companion in Christ's work, and my good friend Stachys.

Hello to Apelles, a tried-and-true veteran in following Christ.

Hello to the family of Aristobulus.

Hello to my cousin Herodion.

Hello to those who belong to the Lord from the family of Narcissus.

Hello to Tryphena and Tryphosa—such diligent women in serving the Master.

Hello to Persis, a dear friend and hard worker in Christ.

Hello to Rufus—a good choice by the Master!—and his

mother. She has also been a dear mother to me.

Hello to Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and also to all of their families.

Hello to Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas—and all the followers of Jesus who live with them.

Holy embraces all around! All the churches of Christ send their warmest greetings!...

<sup>1</sup>And here are some more greetings from our end. Timothy, my partner in this work, Lucius, and my cousins Jason and Sosipater all said to tell you hello.

I, Tertius, who wrote this letter at Paul's dictation, send you my personal greetings.

Gaius, who is host here to both me and the whole church, wants to be remembered to you.

Erastus, the city treasurer, and our good friend Quartus send their greetings.

All of our praise rises to the One who is strong enough to make *you* strong, exactly as preached in Jesus Christ, precisely as revealed in the mystery kept secret for so long but now an open book through the prophetic Scriptures. All the nations of the world can now know the truth and

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<sup>1</sup> The Forerunners of Christ with Saints and Martyrs (Fra Angelico, about 1423-24).

be brought into obedient belief, carrying out the orders of God, who got all this started, down to the very last letter.

All our praise is focused through Jesus on this incomparably wise God! Yes!

Paul, the Apostle who was sent by God to amazing places – was Paul in each and every one of those places. He had long conversations, and he asked irritating questions. He interceded in arguments and started a few, and there were some old songs along the way. But everything he did was in service of the mission on which he'd been sent. Paul was who he was, where he was, for the sake of the One who had called him and sent him.

I started this message with thoughts of bridges, and I talked about how the church of Jesus Christ ought to be about bridging divides, revealing wonder and awe, and so on. And as I think of our own little expression of that church – the community of people here in Crafton Heights, I am drawn to a slightly different metaphor: that of a harbor.



<sup>2</sup>According to our friends at dictionary.com, a harbor is “a part of a body of water along the shore deep enough for anchoring a ship and so situated with respect to coastal features, whether natural or artificial, as to provide protection from winds, waves, and currents... any place of shelter or refuge.”

This place – this building, this set of relationships, this collection of ministries... this needs to be a place of safety. We are called to be a refuge to which you can come as you are with no fear of judgment and no pressure to be perfect; the church is a community in which you can let down your guard. When you've

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<sup>2</sup> Ships in Harbor, by George E Lee (1925-1998)

been out to sea for a while and you feel beaten up and drenched and overwhelmed by storms, this congregation is the place to which you come for healing and restoration and refreshment.

And this is a place for equipping – you ought to be growing while you are here. Learn about yourself, discover resources that will help you on the next leg of your voyage. Become enlarged in your capacity to serve, give, or lead.

And remember that like all harbors, this is a place from which you will be sent. No one is here forever, soaking it all in, hiding from the peril and adventure of the open sea.

A harbor, after all, is valuable only inasmuch as it is a place where vessels come and go. Ships, of course, are made for sailing. Ships are specifically built to transfer people and cargo, knowledge and ideas, from one place to another. Harbors exist to make sure that when it's time for a ship to sail, it's ready for the journey.

A harbor that is full of vessels that never go anywhere is a waste! There is no benefit to the community that surrounds the harbor, and in discouraging ships from sailing, a harbor is seeking to prevent them from accomplishing their created purpose.

A vibrant harbor is an active, confusing place: it is complete with vessels that are coming and going, transferring resources from one crew to another, sharing advice or notes as to where to travel, how to deal with storms, or amazing sights that the open sea will bring. A harbor that is working as it has been designed is a place of vibrancy and life.

This morning, in our little harbor, we say “God be with you” to Rachel and Michael Weller as they prepare to return to their home in Ethiopia. It has been good having you in port these past eight months, and we hope that you are somehow a little better equipped for the next part of your journey.

In our little harbor, a lot of collegians have already left, and more will head out tomorrow. We'll welcome a new musician next week, and an additional staff person at the Open Door the week after that. The programs at the Preschool and Open Door are getting ready to kick into gear, and some of you are going to get a call from the Nominating Committee in the next few months.

Beloved, let's remember with gratitude and affection those with whom we've been privileged to spend time, but who now find themselves at sea – on the journey elsewhere. And let us pray that they find the next harbor when it's needed.

Beloved, let's include those who have made it here safely, and who need some respite, equipping, and a place to share their gifts.

Beloved, let's encourage each other to live into the purpose of being the church in this place, at this time, with these people. And let us not be afraid of the journey that is to come – this afternoon, this week, this month – knowing that the One who calls and sends us is the One who guides and protects us. Thanks be to God! Amen.