

Acts 20:7-12

It's okay to not be okay. I'm grateful that the singer/songwriter, Jellyroll, reminds of this in his song that Tim just sang for us. However, I find that sometimes when we aren't okay we don't tell others or we may have tried to tell but others don't listen or give us advice we don't care for or that makes us feel worse. Or maybe we just find it easier to say we're "fine" and go on not being okay, but we need each other, especially when we aren't okay. I think as followers of Jesus we can and should say when we aren't okay. Because sometimes life is just hard. Today's face of faith is our last in our summer series. This teenager, named Eutychus, is a little unique in that his is a passive character in this easily passed over biblical story. Some may even say he's a footnote in that many have never heard of him. After all, Paul is the one who is more known and recognizable in today's bizarre story. Again, let's set the scene. Paul and his entourage of disciples have been traveling for a while, as they have just concluded the last bit of their second missionary tour. They arrive in Troas where they stay for one week. On his last night in Troas, Paul, the guest preacher, is gathering with the community one final time to preach and break bread together. They're meeting at night, since Troas has disciples who are slaves and cannot meet during the day. And Paul is more than likely feeling the pressure of cramming everything he knows about Jesus into ONE sermon before he leaves them. So Paul's sermon is WAY longer than any of mine. This is where we enter today's story.

PRAY. READ.

This is "the first recorded incident in the history of the Christian Church in which a teenager is literally bored to death by preaching. That alone makes this story a favorite among youth groups; it is always nice to know you have

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biblical company” (workingpreacher.org, Anna Carter Florence). Some in the church have used this story to gauge the length of their pastor’s preaching. While others in the church have taken this opportunity to shame those who may take a little snooze every now and then, especially during the sermon, and I’m not just talking about the youth. Like the cartoon that shows the preacher in the hand-shaking line saying, “See you next Sunday, Eutychus!” as the profusely sweating older looking man leaves the sanctuary. And the caption underneath reads, “A good sign the pastor caught you napping during her sermon.” But maybe this story isn’t really about how long your pastor preaches or shaming people into not sleeping in church, even though it’s often used that way?

This is also one of the first recordings of the early church gathering for Sunday worship- on the Lord’s Day- on the day of resurrection. In other words, a distinct day of worship set apart. This is a huge shift in the blurred lines between Judaism and early Christianity. The customary meeting day of the early church was on the first day of the week. There were no church buildings, as people often met in homes and there seems to have been a preference for upstairs rooms, perhaps in memory of the Lord’s first supper (Acts, William Barclay). And in this story, there was more than likely a love feast at sundown and the observance of the Lord’s Supper at dawn. Paul preached on and on and on until midnight. I don’t know about you all, but I turn into a pumpkin around midnight, especially if I’m exhausted or if I’m hot or if my eyelids get too heavy? Luke, the author of Acts, also tells us that in the upstairs room there were many lamps so we can probably surmise that it was hot, stuffy and more than likely, a small room. This all sounds to me like a room full of potentially sleepy, uncomfortable people.

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This is when the young man-Eutychus- whose name means “Lucky,” enters the story sitting in a window as Paul preaches. The windows back then weren’t made of glass. They were mere openings in a home or building. What was Eutychus doing sitting in a window? Some of us could answer, maybe there was a breeze offered or just some movement of air in the midst of a very stuffy room? There could be many reasons why he was sitting in the window. Maybe Eutychus- even though Paul had been around for a week- still didn’t understand or speak this new Christian language Paul was teaching and so he sat from a distance. Maybe he thought it was boring or didn’t apply to his life? Didn’t anyone notice him sitting in the window? It’s not as if it was a big place and there wasn’t plenty of light? It’s like when you’re at a kid’s birthday party and you begin to notice that little Joey is off in a corner by himself or the kid by the bathroom is about to stick his fingers in an electric outlet. Even before I was a parent, I tried my best, with the help of others, to look for those on the margins...those sitting in places that may have compromised their safety and well-being. And please don’t tell me it’s my job as a pastor to look for those on the margins because I’m going to tell you that it’s anyone’s job who follows Christ. But no one interrupted Paul here to check on Eutychus. No one went over and asked Eutychus to please come and sit with them. No one went and sat with Eutychus. No one, at least by what we’re told. Paul didn’t notice him, either. And until somebody notices, sometimes “the only way off the windowsill may be to fall out the window” (Carter Florence, Part II).

Eutychus’ story may not be as well known; however, his story is not unknown in the marginalized faces of those who have fallen out of

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metaphorical windows or just plain fallen away from the church. It was during my time as a campus minister. For anonymity's sake, I'll call him Brian. Brian, a Baptist preacher's kid, had faithfully attended youth group and worship throughout high school and into college until he fell away from campus ministry his junior year...he fell away, he would later tell me, from his faith. I couldn't pinpoint what was going on with him, but I knew it was something. Brian had become withdrawn and was no longer showing up to weekly worship- not even once in a while. A student asked me one day where Brian had been, and I followed up with him. He wouldn't return my emails or my texts. One day I ran into him at the Starbucks next to campus, and it was a short and awkward exchange. I asked him how he'd been and told him how much I missed seeing him. This is always difficult as a pastor because sometimes unintentionally, we often, by our mere presence alone, invoke feelings of guilt and shame. Weeks passed by and I received a late night phone call. Brian had been drinking and was crying. He asked me if I believed his life was worth living and then he asked me if I believed he was going to hell for being gay. "Yes" and "no" were my replies. For anonymity's sake, I'll call her Melissa. I first met Melissa, who described herself as a seeker in her faith, at a weekly Bible Study. Melissa attended Bible study regularly but she never came to worship. One night, we met afterwards and curious, I asked her why I never saw her in worship. She proceeded to tell me that a few years ago she had been briefly married but soon realized that the marriage wasn't going to work. He suffered from an untreated mental illness and was self-medicating, and she struggled with an eating disorder and a low self-esteem. She said, "We got married too young, and we weren't good for one another. We tried counseling, but it didn't help, and I saw no other way out." At this point Melissa was sobbing and she covered her head

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with her heavily tattooed, sleeved arms. She then looked up at me and said, “We got divorced, but I keep hearing the words of my longtime best friend’s parents, who are Christian, that I’m going to hell for divorcing my husband.” Melissa felt safe enough to ask some of her questions in the margins at a Bible study but not in worship- where she had yet to experience the grace-filled waters of baptism or breaking bread together at Christ’s table. I’ll call him Bobby. I hadn’t seen him for weeks in worship, and one day I see him downtown. I say, “Bobby, Bobby! It’s good to see you!” Bobby puts his head down and won’t look me in the eye. “I can’t come to church no more, Pastor. I fell off the wagon.” I quickly set him straight that his relapse had nothing to do with him not coming to worship, and I let him know that he was loved and missed. Brian, Melissa and Bobby, like Eutychus, were in but on the margins of their communities of faith. What if it’s possible to be in church and be disconnected? One can come to worship and still be moments away from a big fall in their life. Brian and Melissa and Bobby’s falls weren’t fatal- thanks be to God- but they sure knocked some life out of them. As humans and as people of faith, it’s not a matter of if we fall but when.

I’m not necessarily talking about sin when I talk about falling, though it can be. We aren’t told of any particular sin that caused Eutychus to fall. He fell asleep while sitting in a window. How many folks have we seen on the margins in this community of faith? Or how many have fallen out of or away from the church? Could Eutychus’ fall have been prevented? Regardless, it wasn’t, and he fell. What will our response be to those among us who fall out metaphorical windows or who fall flat away from the church of Jesus Christ? I suggest if you do notice someone about to fall

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metaphorically or literally ask them or ask one of the staff how you can help. I'm not talking about the kind of help that hurts others or the kind of help that requires practicing unhealthy boundaries. I'm talking about checking in with someone, especially when you haven't seen them in a while or they seem distant yet physically present, and asking them if they're okay. It'll take courage for you to ask and even more courage for them to tell you if they aren't okay. Just noticing though can remind another that they matter to you and to God...that you see them and care about them.

I hope and pray it will be like Paul's response in this story- a story that could've ended very differently. When Eutychus fell, we're told that Paul stopped preaching even on limited time. When a teenager falls out the church window to his death, "everything has to stop. We have to take a good, hard look at what is going on" (Carter Florence, Part III). If we don't see the fall, like these folks did, we ask as Brian's friend did, where they have been. Paul went down and fell on Eutychus wrapping his arms around him- with no concern for dignity. The Greek word used here means "he threw himself on him." As my preaching professor notes, "This particular Greek word is rare in the NT, and the only other place it appears in this exact grammatical form and nuance of meaning is in the parable of the prodigal son, at the moment of the reunion between the father and his younger son" (Carter Florence, Part III). "He was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15: 32). I don't believe Luke's word choice here is a mistake, as it calls to memory the story of the Prodigal in Luke 15. I wonder if Luke thinks that a teenager falling asleep unnoticed during worship is a sign that something isn't right. "We could do what some of us like to do which is to look for who is to blame

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(long-winded preachers and bored, sleepy teenagers) but then we would miss the point. Being found is the point” (Carter Florence, Part III). Being raised to new life- being restored by the grace of God is the point. The people who are on the 3rd story window ledge margins of Christianity matter to God, and I hope they matter to us as well. Paul embraced Eutychus with his entire being and then he said to those afraid and grieving around him, “Don’t be alarmed. He’s alive” (v. 10b)! Jellyroll sings, “I’m not okay, but it’s gonna be alright.” It may not be okay right now, but it’s gonna be alright because God is the God of resurrection. And God also uses us, broken vessels, to bring forth new life and salvation. After the community surrounded Eutychus, and he was brought back to life- Paul then returns upstairs to the Lord’s Supper and then he preached some more until it was time to leave town. As we gather today around Christ’s table, where the Body of Christ is made visible, let us celebrate God’s radical gift of love in Christ for we were all lost and are now found! Many of us may not be okay right now and that’s okay, and we also believe that- in Jesus Christ- it’s going to be alright. Thanks be to God! Amen