

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Hold the Rope
Acts 15**

I have discovered that one of the things that turns a crowd into a community is when we have the same language. So one of the tasks of a leader is to help give common language by repeating the same thing over and over and over until people are saying *I get it, I get it, I get it*. Either they say, "That's not us. We need to find another place." Or they say, "That's us; that's what I want." So, for instance, over and over in the years leading up to this, I have said that I think most of you are afraid. I don't want to say you're chicken, but I think you are not getting the life that God wants for you because, like Henri Nouwen says, "Most people live in the house of fear, and God calls us into the house of love." How would your life be different if it was driven by the love of God, than the fear of what's coming next? I want to have this be that kind of community. In the same way, we talk about leadership all the time, and that means that we think there are people out there who are just a little bit smarter and who can tell us what to do, and I think that's absolutely wrong. I think rather, leadership is the non-anxious presence that we need to move. The leader is the person who doesn't come in and say, *Aghhhh* with everybody else, but says, "Let's take a deep breath. God has not left the building." That non-anxious presence is what we want to convey to each other. That's a characteristic we hold. The third one actually I stole, or learned, from a pastor friend twenty years ago. He said, "If you want to change the world, don't get a great job in business. If you want to change the world, don't become President. If you want to change the world, don't amass a personal fortune. If you want to change the world, join a little church. Because I have come to believe that the local church is the hope of the world." I've come to believe that to the core of who I am—that it is when we gather here together, and hear about the love and the grace and the joy of our God that we have hope to offer the world. I believe that for 60 years, CPC has tried to be the hope of the world.

We've talked this autumn about how we are building a foundation on which we can be faithful. You can be faithful as an individual; we can, as a community be the hope of the world. And we have used building images, we've talked about a pile of rocks called an Ebenezer—building stones that say, "God was here, and God is still here." And another week we talked about Jesus as the cornerstone of the whole building that everything rests on. Last week Jake talked about how people who follow Jesus are turned into living stones, who have the same temperament, the same posture, as Jesus does.

Today, I want to talk about a different kind of stone. Let me ask you this: how many of you have ever yourselves or your family, ever been involved in a remodeling project? Just raise your hands. Was it not the most satisfying, wonderful, stress-free thing you've ever been through? It was ugly!! I believe that we need to talk as a church about

remodeling stones, because when we need to remodel we tussle, we fight about what kind of kitchen we should have, what kind of bathroom we should build, what kind of church we should refashion. So I want to talk about remodeling stones today and how that helps us to be faithful. And I want to use one more leader saying that I hope you will memorize. One more. We gave away 103 Bibles this weekend to first graders, because we said to them that *when we open our Bibles, God opens His mouth*. When we open our Bibles, God opens His mouth. If you never hear from God, you're not opening your Bible. When we want to hear what God says, we should open our Bibles, because then God opens His mouth. That is especially true when you are remodeling, because if you are remodeling, the chances are that you're in some kind of a fight. You don't call it a fight, you call it a discussion that evolves, but I'm in the middle of a fight. A family fight—not with my wife—but I was gone this past weekend on a brother's get-a-way with my brothers and nephews. We went in to just have a great time, and we came away fighting. I'm in the middle of a fight. The worst fights are family fights. Does anybody know how to drive you nuts more than your brother? Is anybody more stupid than your sister? Can anybody not listen to you like your parents?

Family fights are hard, so I thought what we would do together is open the Bible and let God open His mouth on a family fight that's about rebuilding or remodeling the church. It's in Acts 15 if you want to follow along in your Bibles. The biggest family fight in the New Testament is in Acts Chapter 15. The brand new church is about 20 years old. It starts in Jerusalem, it's almost all Jewish people, and they live there for about 10-15 years and then slowly they go out into the Roman Empire, and then God calls Peter, and then Barnabus, and then Paul, to start to bring in non-Jews—they are called Gentiles back then. And then the church really starts to take off. It starts, this family fight, this church fight, it starts in a little town called Antioch. Let me give you a word on where Antioch is. Look up on the map: eastern edge of the Mediterranean, that arrow is pointing right at Israel. Just to the north of Israel you see Syria, and just to the north of Syria you see Turkey. Antioch is on the border of Syria and Turkey. It used to be in Syria in Jesus' time. Now it's in Turkey. Antioch...you wouldn't know it, it's a nothing little town. But about 30 miles east of Antioch is a town that you know. It's a town called Aleppo. Thirty miles away from Antioch is Aleppo. It was then in the middle of the battle; it is now in the middle of the battle. And that is the place where some of these Gentiles have heard about Jesus, and there's a family fight. Listen to this:

¹Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ²This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. [Acts 15:1-2]

They had a family fight.

So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers

very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. [Acts 15:2-4]

Then it says:

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? [Acts 15:6-10]

The image there is the Law of Moses, the law of the Jews is a weight, a yoke on the Jews, and they can't carry it. And Peter says, *now you want to say that God wants to do that to them too? No way!!*

¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are. [Acts 15:11]

By the way, that's the last time you ever hear Peter in the book of Acts; it's his swan song.

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. [Acts 15:12-13]

Now James is probably the head of the Christian church at that time. We think of Peter, but really, James the Just, James the Elder, is the head of the church in Jerusalem. Everybody listens to him. James the Just gets up and he speaks, saying:

“Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has...

That by the way shows that he is the real leader. He's known Simeon, Simon, since before he was Peter. Remember Jesus changed Simon's name? Simon became Peter. He knew him as a kid. He says,

¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this. [Acts 15:13-15]

And then James quotes the prophet Amos,

¹⁶ After this, I will return

Now when you see “after this” in the prophets, “after this” almost always means after the Messiah has come. So the Messiah has come.

¹⁶ After this (the prophet said) I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name. [Acts 15:16-17]

And James finishes this way,

¹⁹ It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. [Acts 15:19]

They shouldn’t have to be circumcised. And he turns and he says *let’s write a letter*. And in the letter they say, “We love it that you guys have come to Christ. Don’t go back to the pagan temples, don’t have sex in the pagan temples, don’t eat the temple food. God bless you.” And they commissioned Paul and Barnabus and sent them back to Antioch.

The fight is over. The first remodeling fight of the church is over. When Paul and Barnabus go back the church literally explodes with growth, and instead of being 80% Jewish, it’s one-tenth of 1% Jewish in less than 100 years, because the Gentiles needed the grace of Jesus just as much as the Jews did.

You know what I learn from that fight? I learn that churches have two destinies and two destinies only. Every church will either learn the Acts 15 lesson or they won’t. That’s your only choice. Churches will either become a gas station of grace, a hospital for sinners, or a museum of irrelevance. Every church will either become this—this by the way is a church in Iraq—or every church will become that. That is a museum inside a church that is dead. Churches will either become this or that. There is no other destination. When you remodel, make sure what you are building. Jesus talks about this as the narrow way. He says every person, every church, is on a narrow way to the Kingdom of Heaven, and there are dangers on both sides. Well, that’s true here because there are dangers for churches on every side. Some churches have such a great thing going. Some churches, very few but some, have 103 first-graders getting Bibles. And they think *this is great! We have to get 110 next year. More of our kids need this. More of our kids need to be in Student Ministry. More of our kids need to do this.* It becomes about us and ours. Or, the other side of the road, some churches say *you know, the people on the outside of the wall are really more important than the people in here. We ought to just spend all our time out there.* And they make people who are already in the church feel like they’re the second-class citizens. Jesus talks about faith as a narrow way because of the danger of both sides of the road. On the one side of the road are the people who say, “We are Christians; we refuse to change.” They are perfectly prepared to be the church of 1927. If 1927 ever comes again, that church will

be full again. Other churches say, “Are you kidding? We’ll change everything. Bring in the smoke machines; throw out the Bibles. Let anything happen.” And they chase the latest fad. I think that those are two ditches on either side of the road. I want to hold on to the essential, and let everything else go by.

Jesus talks about faith as a narrow road, a narrow way, because there are dangers on every side. What’s happened in Acts 15 is what happens to every human being. Every human wants to make their faith have to sound like my faith. *If you’re a real Christian, it better sound like me. If you don’t talk about Jesus the way I do, you’re one of those darned liberals—or you’re one of those darned fundamentalists—or you’re one of those crazy Pentecostals—or you’re one of those sterile Episcopalians—or you’re...*and that’s what had happened in the early church. They didn’t want to remodel the church to let God act in different ways.

So how does CPC remodel—we just picked our contractor this last week—how do we remodel in a way that learns the Acts 15 lessons? How do we rejoice when other people, new people, people who do not dress or talk or act like us, come to grace? How can we be determined to do everything we can to help that happen? Not to build for ourselves, but to do everything possible to make it easier for them to know about grace. I want to leave you with an image that has been helpful to me in this regard. Under each pew there should be a basket. Would you just pull out the basket if you are at one end of the pew or the other? Inside of that basket there should be tons and tons of ropes. Some very nice person cut 2200 pieces of rope, so there will be one for every man, woman and child. Everybody should have one, not every family, every person. I’d like you to take this home. I’d like this to go into your bathroom, behind the sink in your bathroom so that you will see it every day. And I’d like to tell you a little story.

At the beginning of the 19th century, there was a young man in a lower class city in England. His name was William Carey, and somebody invited him to come to church—he didn’t usually go to church, but he had started to come to church, and then he started to believe in Jesus, and then he got saved by Jesus, and then he started to tell everyone else he knew about Jesus. He was excited to be a Christian. And he gathered a group of people together, and they decided that they would like to have new people come to Jesus, all over the world. And so they met together, and they read papers together, and they wrote papers for each other, and they met together, and they read papers and they wrote papers, and nothing happened. Finally Carey said, “I think what happens is that one of us needs to go out there. I think one of us needs to go out into the world and tell people about Jesus.” And everybody agreed. And they said, *where do you think we should go? France? No, I think God is calling us to go to India.* Back then India is seven months away. One of the other guys in the group says, “India? If you drilled a hole right through the center of the earth and came out on the other side, you’d still have a long visit to get to India! Who would ever go all the way to the bottom of the earth to get to India?” William Carey says, “I’ll go. But I’ll only go if you’ll hold the rope. I’ll go down, but you have to hold the rope.”

I believe when we remodel this church, we need to include lots of rope. I don't think many of you are called to be missionaries to Myanmar, or preachers that have to speak to hundreds, but I believe that every single one of you who has felt the grace of Jesus Christ is called to hold the rope.

The story of William Carey is that he did go to India, and his friend said *I'll hold the rope*, and for the next 40 years they did not see each other because the one was in India learning to speak dialects, and the other was in England raising money and sending other missionaries and writing letters of support and having his back. He held the rope. And people in India came to Christ because there were people in England holding the rope.

What does this story mean for our church? What does it mean for you? I think that holding the rope has to be personal. Some people say *I believe in the Gospel going everywhere; I want everyone to be a Christian. I pray for that. Dear God, I pray for the people in India, pass the mayonnaise, Amen.* I believe it has to be personal, because I think it is only personally that you can encourage someone. When you encourage somebody, literally you are giving them courage, and so I'd ask you, as you hold that rope, who do you know personally that is telling others about Christ, and you want to help with that?

Laura and I, on your behalf, went to Uganda. For those of you who haven't been here a long time, our church sponsored over 2000 World Vision kids in Uganda for over ten years, and when the project came to an end, we did a celebration in Rakai, Uganda. We went there and they had hundreds and hundreds of people come and do dances and have long, long ceremonies, and thank us over and over, and then we greeted them, and towards the end of the afternoon, somebody is looking for the senior pastor. That's never a good thing! So I said *please come* and Laura and I got to meet a 10 year-old boy named Michael. He had khaki pants and his best shirt on, and a killer grin, and he had walked miles to get there. He said, "I have come today to beseech you that World Vision will not leave. I want to become a doctor, and if World Vision leaves, I won't be able to go to a good enough school to be a doctor. Please don't leave." Well now, World Vision needed to leave. There were other desperate places where they needed to work, but Laura and I could not get Michael out of our minds or our hearts, so with another couple we said, "Michael, we want to send you to school." He was freaked out with our generosity. It costs us incredible things—I think it was like \$25 a month. And he went to school, far from his home. He went to a boarding school. And this other couple and we paid for that, year after year after year. And then he took his exams, and he said, "I've gotten into Medical School. Praise the Lord!" And we felt so good, and he could not pay for it. We gulped, and said with the other couple, *well Michael, why don't we pay with you for Medical School?* And this is Michael now [picture shown]. Michael's just finishing Medical school, and I think he's going to be one of the best doctors in Uganda. You know why? Because it's personal. This kid sends letters to us, three or four times a year, and his letters always start out, "Dear Auntie Laura and Dear Doctor, Reverend, Pastor Crosby." More of you could call me that! "This is your son Michael." It's personal. You want to hold the rope, get ready to let people mess you up. I want to be that kind of

church. It's not only personal, it's prayerful. I believe there is very little that I can do, and I think there is nothing that God cannot do. What makes the difference is when we hold the rope and we pray. This last week I had a young man on Monday who, for his high school, had to complete a career day exercise where he shadowed someone to see if he would like that job. He said to me, "You know, I figure if I can't get a job doing anything else, maybe I could become a Pastor." Well, with that kind of encouragement, how could I say no? And so we spent the afternoon together, we went to visit an elderly person, we sat in a couple of meetings, and he saw a little of what it is like. He said, "I'm sorry. You'll have to forgive me, I'm not really with it." I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Well, I go to Wayzata High School and yesterday, one of my friends killed himself." And that changed the conversation. So we have the afternoon together, and I remember driving home, praying for him, and then I hear, on Facebook, that he and his brother have gathered a group of kids together to pray for this boy and his family, and hundreds of people show up. When we pray and we hold on to the rope, they learn how to pray, and God does what only God can do.

Who are you personal with? How often are you praying for them? It's personal, it's prayerful...and I had to make them all start with "P" because I'm a preacher...it's personal, it's prayerful, and it's painful. What I wanted to say is it's a sacrifice, but I like painful. Take the rope, hold the rope like this, shake the rope back and forth, squeeze it hard, shake it back and forth. Does that feel good? Not to me. They call it rope burn on purpose. We need to hold the rope tightly enough that it is not a hobby for us, but that we are sacrificing for this. It will not happen if we do it with tips. It will not happen if we do it as a hobby as a church. The very first book I ever read where I knew the author was called "The Old Testament Speaks" by Sam Schultz. He was my Old Testament professor; he was a little older than the pyramids at the time, and I thought he was a pretty boring professor. But a nice old man, and when I graduated from college, I felt God calling me to work with high school kids. I got a job—that was the good news, but the bad news was that I had to raise my support. I had to go to all my Christian friends and ask them to support me to talk to kids about Jesus. The problem was, I was a new Christian and I didn't know many Christians. I asked everybody I knew. I even broke down and wrote letters to my professors in college, including Dr. Schultz, who had been wonderful and gave me a C-. And Dr. Schultz wrote me a letter. He is quite old and close to retirement by then. And he says, "Mr. Crosby, I remember you. I always thought you had more potential. My wife and I have prayed and we would like to support you, and so we will give you \$25 a month." I had no idea how little college professors made...twenty-five dollars a month was a big thing for him. Every month for the next seven years I got \$25 a month from him, and four times a year I would get a note from him:

"Dear John, How is your soul? How are the children? What is God teaching you?
Yours in Christ, Dr. Schultz."

About six-and-a-half years into it, I decided I needed to do something else, and Dr. Schultz died. But do you know how Dr. Schultz died? He died with rope burn on his hands.

This church sacrifices when we sponsor thousands of kids, when we build the Upper Room worship and then let it go, when we send out Genesis to launch it as a church, and now where dozens of our people are leaving CPC's comfort to plant Lighthouse on the north side so that black and white will worship together. We sacrifice when we don't do it our way, when we bless The Table on Sunday night—a different place where different people hear the same Good News. That's all budget stuff...where are your rope burns? Don't miss the joy that Laura and I get every time we write a check to Michael. Don't miss the joy.

Lord Jesus, I thank you for this passage of a church fight that reminds the church what it's meant to be. Of a remodeling of a church that sends it around the world. And I pray that you will bless us, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, to do it again. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.