

Title: "Retelling the Church Planting Story"

Text: I Corinthians 1:27-29

This summer, 7 Mile Road has been reconnecting and celebrating many of its various body parts.

Gathering for worship with 7 Mile Road churches from Melrose, Malden, Waltham, Kennebunk, and Hyannis; -and before that with Restoration Road in Wakefield.

I don't think you've been able to gather for worship with 7 Mile Road-ers from Philadelphia or Texas, -but today those of us from the Forestdale Community Church in Malden -are delighted to reconnect with you to remember and celebrate how this all got started about 19 years ago.

Many people at both churches don't even really know the story after all these years.

So Matt and I thought it might be both fun, and a good idea, -to re-tell the story as we gather together to worship God and celebrate His amazing grace in all our lives.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church and said, *"Brothers and sisters, remember what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many of noble birth. But God chose the lowly things of this world ... to nullify the things that are, that no one should boast before him."*

As we come to retell the story today, let's be honest right up front that this is a God story we are telling. -It's not about how smart or wise we were. -It's a story of how amazing God is, and what amazing things God has done.

First, for those who don't know me, my name is Paul McPheeters, and I am the pastor at the Forestdale Community Church in Malden.

- And for those of you who have never been to our site,
- we gather in a sanctuary about 1/3 the size of this one.
 - The sanctuary can pack in about 90-100 people, but it is comfortably full at about 75 people.
 - There is one bathroom, and just like here, there is no parking other than on-street parking in the neighborhood.

It is a little place that by all worldly standards should not be a setting for a thriving church.

I was called there in 1983, having just graduated from Gordon-Conwell seminary.

- If you do the math, that was 35 years ago.
- And at the time there were about 35 people who would regularly gather for worship.
- I was the first full time pastor the church had ever had.
- In prior years, they had had part time pastors who were either seminary students or retired pastors.

They took a risk in calling me to be full-time.

- But a nucleus of people were praying and seeking God, and they felt called to take that risk to pursue what they felt God was calling them to be and to do as disciples of Jesus.

And I took a risk, too, along with my wife Nancy.

- I wasn't sure that I was supposed to be a pastor.
- I thought I was heading towards doctoral studies in order to be a professor at a college.
- Nancy wasn't sure she wanted to be a pastor's wife.
 - But a mentor of mine had spoken into my life that last year of seminary and said, "Paul, if you don't go into pastoral ministry, you are missing your calling."

Well, that was a pretty strong statement, but he knew me well, and had watched my life, and he was serious.

- And I needed someone like that to speak into my life.
 - So accepting a call to this little church was an experiment for us.
 - And I thought we would try pastoral ministry for 2 or 3 years and see how it went.
 - We had no plans to still be there 35 years later.

Nor did we have plans to ever be part of planting another church.

-I didn't even know what church planting was.

But here's what happened.

-First, I discovered I really was a pastor.

-I loved pastoral ministry.

-It scared me to death, and I was anxiety ridden for years, but to my surprise, it also gave me life.

Secondly, for no good earthly reason the church started slowly growing.

-I am not sure how, but God kept bringing people and those people kept growing and inviting others.

-In numbers we grew to about 65 or 75 people every Sunday.

-And if all the people who called Forestdale their church showed up on a Sunday, like at Easter,

-the sanctuary was packed and we had an overflow.

We then took what felt like another risky step of faith, and moved to two worship services on a Sunday.

-And both of those services slowly grew.

-There were about 100-110 people showing up on Sundays and we still had no parking and one bathroom.

We were praying about our little building.

-We thought of moving to a new location.

-We thought of building out the back of the building to add more seating.

-We thought of buying an abutting house and getting more property to work with.

But we're tucked into this little neighborhood, and the City of Malden would not permit us to build out on our little lot,

-and abutting properties would cost a fortune,

-and finding another location in the Malden area was very difficult.

We were growing, but stuck, and didn't know what to do.

Then one day I got a call from the Conference Minister of the Conference of Churches we belong to, (the CCCC).

- At the time I was serving as the Area Representative for the Conference in New England.
- So the nationwide CM called and asked me to join a small team of people from around the country,
 - who were going to a church planter's boot camp in Indianapolis.
- We were going on behalf of the CCCC to learn more about church planting and church planters,
 - and to put together a vision statement for the Conference on where we thought God might be leading us to go in terms of church planting.

I didn't know anything about church planting,
-but because I was the Area Rep for New England I said
"Sure, I'll go."
-Little did I know that it would change my life.

Now, what we were supposed to be doing at that Church Planters' Boot Camp, was pursuing a vision for church multiplication in the CCCC's.

- But to my great surprise, what happened for me was that God met ME there at that Boot Camp and ignited a whole new vision in me for how to lead our church's ministry in Malden.

And it was an "outside the box" kind of vision.

- God opened my eyes to see that instead of trying to figure out how to contain the growth we were seeing in one building,
 - we should think "outside the box" and envision multiple sites for ministry.

It was a vision in which more and better disciples were being made.

- Men and women and children who would be learning to experience God's love and grace, dwell on his word,
 - recognize His work in their lives,
 - and go out and imitate His love by loving others.

It was a vision in which the Holy Spirit would be working through the lives of these people as they lived out that life in the community,
-and God would draw others into the faith and fellowship.

It was a vision of new ministries springing up as people discovered their own gifts, and passions, and callings.

And a vision of on-going ministry within the church in which

- leaders would be leading,
- teachers teaching,
- gifted musicians leading worship
- administrators handling the administration
- evangelists resourced to do evangelism.

Also, because of that boot camp, a vision in which church planters and missionaries would go outside the walls of our church to multiply churches right in Malden and beyond.

That was the vision God planted in me at that church planter's boot camp.

And not only that, God also opened my eyes at that boot camp to see what "church planters" looked like.

And I thought, "O my gosh, I have a guy in my church right now who is just like these young planters.

It was Matt Kruse, who with his wife Grace, and his Mom and Dad, Glenn and Margaret, had been coming to our church for a couple years.

Matt was serving as our volunteer youth leader, while he was going to BU and getting an MBA specializing in entrepreneurial non-profit start up businesses.

-He was a solid Christian, a natural leader, and an entrepreneur.

-He came into my office one day and I said, "Matt, what if the non-profit start up business you set your mind to when you graduate with your MBA is a church?"

He said, "You mean start a new church? Are we allowed to do that?"

-I said, "Yes, and told him about the church planter's conference I had come back from about a month before."

-He said, "I would do that in a minute."

Then he went on to tell me that he had been feeling called to ministry for a while, but he didn't think he could be a settled pastor of an existing church like I was.

- He said he had been wrestling lately with whether he had wasted his time with an MBA degree,
 - thinking that maybe he should have gone to seminary.
- He said he couldn't believe I had just asked him if he would like to start a new church from scratch,
 - a process for which his MBA in non-profit start ups would actually be extremely valuable.

He said, "When do we begin?"

- I told him to go home and talk to his wife first, and pray about it.
- That was a Friday. He came back on Monday and said, "I'm in."
- Now that's a cool story, isn't it?

- And it's also really cool that our church actually affirmed the calling, and stepped out in faith to go along with the idea.
- It happened at one of the most amazing church business meetings I have ever been to in my life.

We felt like God had answered our churches prayers, and this was going to be awesome.

- It was all really great in the beginning.
 - But what I didn't know was how the process of living out that calling would turn my world upside down.

It started the morning after that amazing business meeting when I woke up in a cold sweat,

- and went down into our living room at 6am and fell on my face on the rug and said,
 - "O God. What have we gotten ourselves into.
 - I don't know how to plant a church.
 - And neither does Matt.
 - And his wife is pregnant with their first child, and he's about to graduate from school,
 - and what have we committed ourselves to?"

I was scared to death, and this decision had major consequences for his life, and my life, and our church.

Because, you know, change is never easy, and the changes we experienced as a church were sometimes painful.

- The 20-25 people we sent away were missed.
- Some of them were leaders I had built into.
- Some were Sunday School Teachers.
- Matt Kruse was our youth leader.
- Many of the families were the ones with kids in Matt's youth group.
- Many of them were good givers.
- We had less people. We had less money.

There was a period of three to four years before we recovered from those losses.

- And all those changes did not make everyone was happy.
- I discovered in the process how addicted I can be to trying to make everyone happy.
- God had to cast that idol out of me, and that wasn't easy.

But God has done amazing things because of the risk we all took to listen to His voice, and obey His calling.

- And it is unbelievable to me how much of that original vision has been fulfilled.

Multiple ministries have been birthed outside the box of our little church,

- and outside the box of this church, this first church we planted.

More and better disciples have been formed.

More men women and children discovering God's love and grace and growing in it.

More people discovering their giftings and callings and stepping out into all kinds of ministries.

Churches planted, missionaries sent.

And not just through Forestdale and 7 Mile Road.

- That group that came back from the church planters boot camp,
- went on to ignite a church planting movement in the CCCC that continues to grow and thrive.

And the funniest thing is, that God used Forestdale as a kind of model for not just talking about church planting,

- but doing it.

It began to be said, that if a church the size of Forestdale can plant a church, then anyone can do it.

That's God's sense of humor.

-He can take the "little things of this world" and use them for His great big purposes.

He chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise,
The weak things to shame the strong, the lowly things to nullify the things that are – so that no one may boast before him.

-Truly, from start to finish, it's an amazing God story, and to God be the glory for all he has done. Amen.