

Acts 13:1-5, 49-52
Acts 14:1-7, 21-28
Luke 10:1-12

July 5, 2015
St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Pastor Dan Selbo

“Our Shared Missionary Journey”

Dear friends, greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we're in chapters thirteen and fourteen in the book of Acts. We're working our way through the stories of what happened in the early church and how the message of the gospel was carried from Jerusalem all the way to Rome.

We've come to the point (here this morning) where, for the next few weeks, we're going to see how the gospel really began to spread. Today it's the first of three missionary journeys in which Paul and some of the other apostles began traveling into the surrounding regions and (as a result) how a number of churches were started.

Next week, it's a gathering of the church leaders in Jerusalem and of how they made what was perhaps the most important leadership decision in the history of the church. We'll take that on next week.

Today, (what I want to do), instead of focusing on the stories we find in these two chapters, some the events that took place during this first missionary journey, I want to zero in on who was involved, what the early church did, and what they understood to be true as they went after this task of sharing the message of Jesus with the world.

Under the theme of “Our Shared Missionary Journey”, I want to talk about the people, the practices, and the process; the people, the practices, and the process. And then I want to close with what I believe would be a good epitaph for each of our lives.

Let's get into it. Chapter thirteen: follow with me (or listen) as I read; beginning in verse one: (it says) “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. (It says), While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

Now, I don't want to overstate the importance of what we just read, but neither do I want us to miss how significant it was. These first three verses (in chapter thirteen) set the stage for everything we're going to read from here on out. The three missionary journeys that follow, everything Paul (and the other apostles) do, the sending from the church in Antioch, it all grows out of these three verses.

Pastor John Piper, a well-known author and theologian, currently serving as chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, says this about these verses (I quote): he says,

“This moment of prayer and fasting resulted in a mission's movement that would make Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within two and a half centuries, and would yield billions of adherents to the Christian faith today with a witness in virtually every country of the world. Thirteen out of the twenty-nine books of the New Testament were the result of the ministry that was launched in this moment of prayer and fasting. I believe it is fair to say (he says) that God was pleased to make worship and prayer and fasting the launching pad for a mission that would change the course of world history. Is there not a lesson there for us?” (end of quote).

I believe there is a lesson there for us; more than one. Let's start with the people. Did you notice the listing of people in those opening verses? Do you know anything about those people?

Go down the list. (It's quite a diverse group.) It starts with Barnabas; he was a Levite from the island of Cyprus. Then there's Simeon who is called Niger...literally, Simeon called “the black one.” Dark-skinned, he most likely came from North Africa. Then there's Lucius of Cyrene who became one of the first bishops in that region. Then it's Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch. Herod was the one (as you know) who had John the Baptist killed and who was part of the crucifixion of Jesus. (It's quite the irony that he's there.) And then you have Saul, who was a persecutor of the church.

That's quite a list. It's hard to imagine this group of five coming together. What brings them together? Why this particular bunch? It's certainly not their backgrounds or political leanings. It's not their interest in finding a “cause” for which to live; they each had many of those. This was nothing new.

What was new, what brought them together, was the fact that they'd each been saved. What was new, the reason they were there, was because of what had happened in each of their lives. They were lost and now they were found. They were dead in their sin, and they had been given new life in Christ. That's why they were there. That's the reason they had come together as they had.

Now, does that sound familiar? Does it sound anything like what's happening right here? Do you think there's a connection between what brought them together (back then) and what brings us together today?

I don't want you to mishear this. You're all good people. I love all of you. But I wouldn't get out of bed every Sunday morning, get dressed up and come to this place just to hang out with you! It wouldn't happen. (And I know that works both ways.) I get it. It's not what brings us together, why we're here.

What brings us together is the gospel. Why we're here is because of the power of the Holy Spirit and the person (and work) of Christ. We're not here because we're more religious than anyone else, more devout, whatever. We're here because of Jesus. We're here because we've been called and chosen in him.

That's how the church started. That's the church today. (This was quite a list.) It says they were "prophets and teachers." Those were their spiritual gifts.

A spiritually gifted prophet was one who understood the times, recognized what was happening, and spoke out. They were the voices of God. You might even say "the conscience of God" or "the warning from God" to the people. They were prophets.

They were also teachers. They understood the scriptures. They knew how to communicate. They passed on to the people what God has said. They were gifted teachers.

Now, put that together, and nothing has changed. That's who they were. That's who we are. We're a people united by the gospel and gifted for the sake of the Church. (That's who we are.) We're not some random bunch that just likes to hang out. We're not (together for) some random cause because we have nothing better to do. (We have a lot to do.) We're here because of Jesus and we're called to work together so the world might come to know him.

One of the ongoing challenges in the church is to find ways to work together constructively for the sake of a cause greater than us. Forget about our backgrounds. Set aside our personality differences. Don't even worry about who you might like and who you don't. That's not what matters. What matters is the reason we're here. What matters is the One we're here to serve.

We're not here for us. (I trust you know that.) We're here for him. We're not here because we thought this was a good idea to come together in the church. (It wasn't our idea; and if it was, it wouldn't have been good.) It was God's idea, and it is good, and we're here because we belong to him.

This is good stuff. Let's keep moving: the people, the practices, and the process. Let's talk (for a moment) about the practices. There were three practices taking place when this all happened. There were three disciplines (being practiced) when the Holy Spirit empowered it to happen. You see it here in chapter thirteen. You find it many other places throughout the book.

It says they were worshiping. They were spending time praising God. It says they were fasting. They had chosen (together) to set aside a time not to eat. And it says they were praying. They were intimately and intentionally seeking to know God's will.

Now, we don't have time today to dig into this too deeply, but I do want to say a word about each of these three disciplines and about how they each can (and do) play a helpful role.

Starting with worship, God commands us to worship. It's the third commandment out of ten. (We all know that.) It's not an option in the Christian life. It's not a question of whether or not we should. We should. God has commanded it. There's no reason (beyond that) we should need.

Now, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." In other words, it's not a hard and fast rule that we have to (in every case) obey. But it is a command. It does make a difference. If it's not a priority in life, then God's not a priority in life. It's that important.

Here's how it works and here's why this is so important. Our mission in the world is born out of our worship in the church. A church that is serious about its mission to the world is a church that takes seriously its worship of God. The two go hand-in-hand. It says they were worshiping.

It says they were fasting. I don't know how many of you have ever tried fasting. It's one of those spiritual disciplines that seems (these days) to have been set aside. It's not easy. It's not always comfortable. It

takes some attention. Bottom line: it gets your attention. If nothing else, it's a reminder of the spiritual hunger we all have that only God can fill.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." He said, not "if you fast", but "when you fast." It was a discipline our Lord encouraged. It was a discipline that takes discipline.

Now, I don't want to get into it here today. It could be the basis for an entire message; a series on the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. I think we would all benefit.

I'm not suggesting you try it. I'm not implying that you should not. Jesus said, "When you fast, don't let others know; if you do, that's your reward...If you don't, there's a greater reward that comes from God." It's that greater reward we're seeking.

It says that when they chose and sent out those first missionaries, they were fasting. They were hungry to know God's will; hungry to hear his voice. Whatever you do (or you don't do) don't ever lose that hunger. They were fasting.

And it says they were praying. They were seeking to know the heart of God. I'll be right up front with this particular discipline. Here's what I think. Here's why I think the church (in America) today is failing in its mission. I think it's failing in its mission, because the church in America today is not starting its mission in prayer.

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, go and train more laborers. Therefore, come up with a better plan." (That's not what he said.) He said "The harvest is plentiful; the laborers are few. Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest would send out laborers into his harvest." Pray that the One who can bring in the harvest would be in control of the efforts of those trying to bring it in.

Don't miss the point. Planning for mission without praying for mission is worthless. Planning for mission without praying for mission is a dead end. You be the judge of what's happening in your own life. We all want the church to grow. We all know people who still don't know Jesus. And I hope we're all willing (if given the chance) to take the chance and share the faith.

But are we praying? Are we spending time asking God to prepare the soil? (You be the judge.) This isn't just "a pastor thing"; it's an "all of us thing."

Think about the people you know. Think about the people who might be receptive, and then pray for them; and not once, not twice, but every day. Pick out that one (or those two) that you know and start praying. (We're in this together.) Let's commit together to be praying together; not that we might change the world, but that God might change (a certain part of the world) through us.

It says they were worshipping; they were praising God. It says they were fasting; they were hungry to know God's will. And they were praying; they were seeking to find out who God was planning to send out.

And that leads to the final part: the people, the practices, and the process. I'll keep this simple. It's very straightforward. Here's the process the church followed when it sent out Paul and Barnabas on that first missionary journey. It's the same process the church follows today when it sends people to witness and to serve. And (again), this isn't just for pastors and missionaries and church leaders, but for every one of God's people.

Here's the process. Three simple steps: the Spirit leads and the church follows. The Spirit calls and the church confirms. The Spirit sends and the church supports.

The Spirit leads and the church follows. I don't have a crystal ball I look into every morning that tells me where God is leading. I don't have any insights into the will of God any more than you. What I have is what God has said. What we have is God's Word.

Every morning I sit down with his word and read it. Every day I open his word and ask where he is leading and what he wants. And then I pray and I listen and I do my best to respond. God is faithful. The Spirit is at work. Our work is to listen and to follow.

The Spirit leads and the church follows. The Spirit calls and the church confirms. Do you know how many ideas I've had (over the years) that turned out to be (not-so-good) ideas? I don't know either. I've lost count. What I do know is that whenever I have these ideas and I believe they are Spirit-led, what confirms it is what happens when it's brought to the church.

Maybe God is leading you to do something in your life. Maybe God is giving you an idea that you think is good. (Here's my advice.) Check it out with the church. Check it with a few trusted sisters and brothers in the faith.

If the direction is Spirit-led, the confirmation will happen when it's shared. If it's not (or if it's not the right time) the Spirit works in that as well. Trust the Spirit. Check it out with your church family. God is good.

The Spirit leads and the church follows. The Spirit calls and the church confirms. The Spirit sends and the church supports.

Now, the obvious application of this is with pastors and missionaries and other leaders who have made this their life's work. Pastor Judy and Jim, (Mary and I) are grateful for the support this church has offered, as are the others on our church and school staff.

But this isn't just about church workers, those who do this on behalf of the rest. This is about all of the church (including all of you) who do what you do on behalf of Christ.

The Spirit sends and the church supports. If the Spirit is leading you to do something in your life, you need to listen and to follow. If the Spirit is calling you to do something with your life, you need to confirm that calling with others in this fellowship. And if the Spirit is sending you to go anywhere or to do anything, (no matter how big or small it might be), then don't try to do it on your own, but allow the church (in whatever ways it can) to provide the support you need.

"Our Shared Missionary Journey." Let me close with what I believe would be a good epitaph for each of our lives. Looking back, trying to summarize what our years on this earth were all about, how about this. From Acts 13, verse 36, speaking about King David, (it says), "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep. When David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep."

How about that for an epitaph? Looking back, trying to summarize your life. What do you think? "He served God's purpose in his own generation; then he died." "She served God's purpose in her own generation; then fell asleep." I like it. It's why we're here. We're in this together. Amen.