**The Book of Acts: *The Church in the Power of the Spirit***

**Sunday September 6, 2020**

**Acts Sermon #12: “Outreach, Nurture, and Mission” (Acts 11:19-30)**

In this short little vignette in Acts chapter eleven, we get a very instructive glimpse of the early church in action. It is a picture of cooperative ministry with different Christian people and congregations working together collaboratively without feeling threatened or being competitive. While we can’t recreate the early church of Acts in our present context, we can learn many valuable lessons from its example. In this passage Luke presents a picture of the true church, reaching out to others with the good news of Jesus, nurturing new Christians through teaching and fellowship, and engaging in mission by sharing with others. This may seem like an overwhelming set of tasks for us, given the many challenges that we face. But we are not left to our own devices to do God’s work in the world. Verse 21 is a wonderful word of encouragement for us, “*The hand of the Lord was with them*.” This is not our church, it is the Lord’s church and whatever challenges we face, the Lord of the church will give us the resources we need to face them.

The passage begins with a reference back to the spark that lit the flame of the gospel mission – the death of Stephen and the ensuing persecution of the church (Acts 11:19). Efforts to stamp out the flame of the gospel in Jerusalem led to its igniting elsewhere. To use another metaphor, the scattering of the Jerusalem church spread the seeds of gospel beyond the borders of their homeland. Over the past few Sundays we have observed in Acts the resultant growth of those scattered seeds as different characters have come to faith in Jesus. These were mostly people that those first Christians would not have met if they had remained in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Christians spread out to the north and to the west, as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. Initially, they shared their faith with their fellow Jews in these regions, but soon they received the impetus to reach out to outsiders (Acts 11:19). Some Christians from the island of Cyprus and Cyrene in North Africa came to Antioch and spurred on the church to reach out to *Greek-speakers*, both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:20). In the spirit of collaborative ministry, these believers from outside Judea came alongside the church in Antioch and helped them to share the good news about Jesus with new people.

The church in Antioch, comprised mostly of Jewish Christians, was not threatened by the evangelistic ministry of these Christians from abroad. Nor did they try to put the kibosh on their efforts to share the message with outsiders. Instead, “*The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord*” (Acts 11:21). I wonder how we would have responded if we were the church in Antioch? Would we have been comfortable with this outreach to new and unfamiliar people? Would we have recognized the hand of Lord giving us the people and the resources to share the good news with everyone around us? We need to be open to being pushed outside of our comfort zone for the sake of the gospel.

Evangelism or faith sharing is an essential activity for the church, but as people become followers of Jesus, they need to be *nurtured* and *taught* in order to grow in the Christian life. The next part of the chapter nicely portrays this, as Barnabas arrives on the scene to lend a hand for this important task. These new Christians needed to be grounded in the established Christian faith, represented by the apostolic tradition. So, the church in Jerusalem, the seat of the Twelve, dispatched their representative Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22). When Barnabas arrived, he could clearly see that the God was active within the church and he was very joyful. He then encouraged the congregation “*to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion”* (Acts 11:23).

The close connection between these emerging Christian communities, such as the one in Antioch, and the Jerusalem church was an important one for the well-being of the Christian church. The evangelistic outreach into new frontiers brought new life into the church, but the foundation for this ever-expanding edifice was the tradition of the twelve apostles in Jerusalem. The Twelve served as the vital link between the ministry of Jesus and the early Christian community. They were the bearers of the Christian tradition from which the mission of the church ebbed and flowed. So it is not surprising that as the church spread outward, the apostles ensured that the church’s mission was in keeping with the truth that Christ has passed on to them. At key points the apostles in Jerusalem provided guidance and direction in order to keep the church on track. When several Samaritans came to faith, the Jerusalem church sent out Peter and James to check out the situation (Acts 8:14-17). Shortly after Saul’s dramatic conversion, he made his way to Jerusalem to meet with the twelve apostles (Acts 9:26-30). Right after Peter’s ground-breaking mission to Cornelius and the resultant conversion of many Gentiles, he needed to report to the other apostles about this significant development (Acts 11:1-18).

The church in Antioch did not push back in response to the involvement of the Jerusalem church. No one in Antioch was complaining that the twelve apostles needed to mind their own business and leave us alone to do our ministry. They recognized the importance of this vital link to the past. They did not get so caught up in the novelty of the influx of new believers that they neglected their essential connection to the established Christian tradition. Now I realize that this term *tradition* is a loaded one as it can mean different things to different people. In this context traditionrefers to that which is foundational for the Christian faith. As witnesses of the life and teaching of Jesus, the twelve apostles were the bearers of this tradition and they passed it on to the emerging Christian communities. In an effort to be relevant and fashionable, the contemporary church may be tempted to jettison the ancient aspects of our faith and forge ahead with new ideas. But we cannot ignore the foundations of our faith. Scripture, of course, is primary, but we’re also the recipients of two millennia of theological reflections on Christianity. We blessed with a rich and ancient tradition of Christian spirituality and liturgy that informs our contemporary practice. If we sever ourselves from our roots, we run the risk of becoming like tumbleweed, swept to and fro by the winds of change.

Introducing people to the Christian faith is only a beginning step. We need to nurture and help people to become mature followers of Jesus. During Barnabas’ initial visit to Antioch, “*a great many people were brought to the Lord”* (Acts 11:24). But he soon realized that more work needed to be done. So he travelled to Tarsus to find Saul, and they both returned to Antioch. Barnabas and Saul “*were there a whole year, meeting with the church and teaching a lot of people*” (Acts 11:26). Following Jesus is so counter to the way our world works that we all need help to live for Christ. Careful instruction and long-term nurture are necessary to equip every Christian to withstand the corrosive influence of a culture that is so self-centred and self-seeking. The teaching office of the church is essential. The Sunday sermon, Sunday school, Bible study groups, and Soul Sisters are all elements of nurture, teaching, and discipleship. But we always need to be seeking other ways to nurture, teach, and help people to grow in Christ.

The chapter closes with a reference to the fund raising activity of the Antioch church on behalf of the Jerusalem church. This scene offers a fitting culmination to this passage as this new congregation engaged in mission. *Evangelism* introduces people to the good news about Jesus and *nurture* ensures that these new Christians are grounded in the faith. But *mission* enables the church to put faith into action. When Agabus, a prophet from Jerusalem, warned the Antioch church of the coming famine, the congregation sprung in to action and took up a collection to help out their fellow Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:28-29). Then, they asked Barnabas and Saul to act on their behalf and deliver their gift to the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30). The fruit of the Antioch church’s faith was revealed in the sharing of their material resources with their less fortunate brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

Luke’s vivid picture of the church in Antioch features the crucial activities of *outreach, nurture, and mission.* In each instance, the church in Antioch didn’t do ministry on its own. People from outside their congregation came to help them out and equip them for ministry. Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene came and engaged in evangelism to their Greek-speaking neighbours. Barnabas and Saul arrived and spent a whole year nurturing the faith of these new Christians. Agabus, a prophet from Jerusalem, visited the church and alerted them to the coming famine that would impact the Christians in Jerusalem. In response to his prophecy the church sprung into action and gave funds to assist their sisters and brothers in need and they appointed Barnabas and Saul to deliver their gift. The hand of the Lord was with them and he gave them the people and the resources they needed to do *outreach, nurture, and mission*. Let us devote ourselves to these essential tasks and let us pray to the Lord of the church and ask him to grant us the people and the resources we need to minister to our world.