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

**Sunday September 13, 2020**

**Acts Sermon #13: “Trials and Triumphs in Mission” (Acts 14:21-28)**

In the narrative of Paul’s Damascus Road experience (Acts 9:1-19), three important details are revealed concerning his future ministry:

• *He will be God’s chosen instrument to carry the name of Christ*

• *He will carry Christ’s name before Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel*

• *He will be shown how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ*

The large narrative section of Acts 13:1-14:28 dramatically fulfills these words in its depiction of Paul and Barnabas’ first mission trip in Asia Minor. In the whirlwind itinerary of chapters 13 and 14, Paul and Barnabas cover a lot of ground, visiting exotic-sounding places like Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis, and Paphos. The message of the gospel was spreading out to the ends of the earth as its messengers were taking long journeys in sailing ships to distant lands. The universal scope of the good news was indicated by this new phase of missionary activity to new frontiers and new people. But Paul and Barnabas’ first mission trip was not trouble-free as they faced resistance and even hostility almost everywhere they went. Paul was being shown how much he would suffer for the sake of Christ. Yet amidst these troubles on the mission field, there were also successes as people responded positively to the message and became followers of Jesus. This section of Acts offers us a clear message - whenever God’s people engage in mission, there will be triumphs and trials, successes and failures, acceptance and rejection, belief and unbelief. *Yet through it all*, *God is doing his work and opening up doors of faith for people to come in*.

This morning’s Scripture lesson tells of the final leg of Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey and their return to Antioch, Syria, the church that commissioned them (Acts 14:21-28). This passage serves as an apt conclusion for this section and it also anticipates the events that are to come in chapter 15.

The passage begins with a description of their ministry in the Lycaonian city of Derbe. Luke tells us, “*After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia*” (Acts 14:21). Last week, I mentioned that *outreach* and *nurture* were two crucial activities for the church. Here, in this passage, we see Paul and Barnabas engaging in these key aspects of ministry; they reached out to others with the good news and they nurtured them to become faithful disciples of Jesus.

In our Western culture, these activities are challenging for the church. Sharing the good news with others or *evangelism* is looked upon with certain degree of uneasiness within the modern church. We’re right to be hesitant about possibly offending people. We don’t want to come across as pushy salespeople making a pitch in order to sell a product. We don’t want to treat our neighbours like some kind of project that we need to complete in order to get a passing grade. We don’t want to be a bullhorn on the street corner blaring out an impersonal message that falls on deaf ears. Instead we want to have *spiritually significant* *conversations* with people where we treat others with dignity and understanding. John Bowen writes in his book, “Christian evangelism, after all, was started by Jesus, who consistently affirmed people’s humanity and dealt with them gently and appropriately. Nobody could have described his approach, in evangelism or in life, as dehumanizing, violent, or inappropriate” (*Evangelism for ‘Normal’ People,* p. 20). Evangelism as a *conversation* involves respecting others, listening to them, and realizing that it is a gradual process, like sowing seeds. If we take an approach to faith sharing that respects the dignity of others, perhaps we can reclaim *evangelism* from its negative connotations.

*Making disciples* or *discipleship* involves helping people to grow towards maturity in their relationship with Christ. This requires a caring community where there is nurture, instruction, comfort, challenge, vulnerability, and accountability. But we live in a culture that promotes a privatized spirituality with a “mind-your-own-business” attitude. Moving beyond superficial talk and speaking honestly about our spiritual lives is risky business. We’re afraid of being judged by others. At the same time, we appear to be satisfied with achieving the bare minimum in terms of discipleship. As long as people show up in church every Sunday and engage in the outward acts of Christian worship, we assume we’ve done our job. But *making disciples* means so much more. It is a genuine interest in the spiritual health of other people that is expressed in concrete and relational action. When the Christians in Galatia were in danger of going off the rails, Paul passionately expressed his concern for them, “*Oh, my dear children! I feel as if I’m going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives*” (Galatians 4:19). While this may seem like a tall order, we need to have this kind of concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The ministry of nurturing new Christians into mature disciples of Jesus continued as Paul and Barnabas departed from Derbe and revisited the Christian communities in Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch on their way home (Acts 14:21). On their initial visits to these communities their evangelistic preaching received a mixed response as some people accepted the message while others rejected it and with varying degrees of hostility. Paul and Barnabas did not wish to leave these fragile communities to their own devices, so they did some important pastoral follow-up on their return visits. Luke tells us that:

*• they strengthened the souls of the disciples*

*• they encouraged them to continue in the faith and*

*• they reminded them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God*

Paul and Barnabas did not sugar coat the Christian life for these new believers. Instead, they alerted them to the reality of suffering for the faith and in doing so they encouraged them to stick with it, even in the toughest of times. Their grim tidings were not theoretical for they had experienced first hand the trials and tribulations that come with the Christian faith.

Before moving on, Paul and Barnabas made provision for the governance within these new Christian communities. They handpicked leaders (called *elders*) and after they prayed and fasted, they committed them to the care and direction of the Lord (Acts 14:23). Again, they did not forsake the churches that they had planted, but they appointed capable leaders to shepherd them through the difficult times ahead.

On their way back to the coast to set sail for home, Paul and Barnabas travelled through the regions of Pisidia and Pamphylia (Acts 14:24-25). When they arrived back in Syria, they immediately went to their sending church in Antioch and reported on their mission trip through Asia Minor (Acts 14:26-27). The mission had its beginnings in Antioch as the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, set apart Paul and Barnabas for God’s work. The church prayed for them, placed their hands on them, and sent them on their way (Acts 13:1-3). The Antioch congregation was the place where “*the believers had entrusted them to the grace of God to do the work they had now completed*” (Acts 14:26). We need to be always attentive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In many ways we are all called to participate in God’s mission, yet we all play a different part in that work according to the gifts, abilities, and interests that God has given each one of us. We need to be more intentional about committing each other to the grace of God to do the work that he has called us to. Instead of simply plugging people into certain roles, we need to seek the Spirit’s leading, commit people to God’s work, pray for them, place hands of blessing upon them, entrust them to God’s grace, and release them to do the work. And when a season of ministry is completed we need to celebrate the successes with thanksgiving to God.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Antioch, Syria, they got the church together and reported on their trip (Acts 14:27). Even though they had encountered hardship and hostility throughout their journey, they spoke about the good things that God had done! The focus of their talk was not on what they had accomplished, but on “*all that God had done with them*” (Acts 14:27). From their perspective, God was the One who had done the work and they were merely his instruments. This is a lesson in humility for us, lest we become overly proud about our achievements for God. Through all the ups and downs of their first mission trip, Paul and Barnabas recognised that God was at work. They knew that that the positive response to the gospel was not due to their eloquence or rhetoric, but to God, who “*had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles”* (Acts 14:27). Who is God opening a door of faith to in our neighbourhoods? May God give us the eyes to see and the courage to step out into the places where he is opening the doors of faith.

**The First Mission Trip of Paul and Barnabas**

