

Sermon Text for June 16, 2019

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Ruth 1:15-18, Acts 11:19-26

“Stay for a while”

I spent this past week in New Bern, North Carolina working with four different church from our ministerium and Chestnut Level Presbyterian rebuilding a house that had been devastated by Florence. We literally had to take out all of the joists of the house and start from scratch. I learned how to put flooring down, others in the group were taught by Ron Crawford how to do things they never imagined they could do. Ron was that hovering person who gave us a task in a gentle and amiable way and then when we did it, he would always say, that was perfect. We called him Barnabas over the week. I knew I had to prepare over the week for this Sunday and I knew it was Trinity Sunday but I completely forgot it was father’s day so when one of the pastors who were on the trip, there were three of us, asked me what I was preaching on and I said Ruth, he said that is an interesting Scripture for father’s day. How are you going to tie that in? I have no idea, there may be no connection at all, but let’s see.

We are still in Acts and over this past year in Acts we have seen so many important people who have contributed to the explosion of the earliest church. Remember, when we read from Acts this is taking place about 50 or 60 AD, or about 20 or 30 years after Jesus is crucified. There are no churches, just groups of people who gather together, covertly at times under the cover of night to worship God. This church grew at a terrific pace, each one of them reached one with the love of God. They shared all things in common. They trusted each other and loved each other.

Over this year we’ve seen the struggles that they have had, but each time they pulled together and through the Holy Spirit continued to grow. We’ve seen the work of Peter and Cornelius just recently. Dorkas and Barnabas, Saul or Paul. Each of them contributing in a unified manner to the cause of bringing people to Jesus Christ, what we call evangelizing.

Today we see a community gather together, a most unusual community in a city called Antioch, gather for the sake of teaching and being taught. Oh make no mistake

about it, they went through their population boom, but today we catch a rare glimpse of what happens that is absolutely crucial for the members themselves to keep them excited, enthusiastic, equipped, and ready to go back out.

I recognize that lately almost exclusively we have talked about the outreach ministries of this church. The need to be open to all who want to come and worship here. Well, what about the members who have faithfully attended or those beginning to get involved, what about a word for us? That is exactly what happens here in Acts today. There is a brief, but extremely important hiatus that is taken here and the emphasis switches from outreach to inreach, from evangelism to teaching the believers. We are going to take that break ourselves today and see a very important switch that takes place in the church.

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Let me tell you about Antioch. It was the third largest city in all of the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria, 500,000 people lived there. It was a pagan, fun-loving cosmopolitan, sports crazy place. It was Las Vegas with a Nascar track thrown in for good measure.

It was the most unusual place to find the birth of what becomes in Acts the mother missionary church of all of Christianity. But that is exactly what it becomes. Remember a few chapters back there was Stephen who gave a sermon and as a result of that sermon he was stoned to death. Well we begin this Scripture by hearing that the Stephen event scared the Christians and they scattered, some went to Antioch, this large city. Some of the Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene began to preach to the Cornelius', the gentiles, the outsiders, and share them the gospel. We've heard enough of that over these past weeks.

Verse 21 tells us that a whole mess of these people believed and turned to the Lord. Look at vs.22, this is a curious verse. It tells us that Jerusalem got wind of this growth. The mother church for the PC(USA) is found in Louisville. They had to check it out to make sure that the growth and the excitement was legitimate and that things that were taking place were not out of the norm for the Presbyterian Church.

You know that we are very much a connectional church. We are a part of a denomination that keeps us together and that allows us to share our resources and work

together on the same page for the glory of God. Well, Jerusalem wanted to check it out so they sent one of their representatives to check things out. Even though they hadn't sent the missionaries to Antioch, they nevertheless had to give their stamp of approval. Guess who they sent: Barnabas.

Remember Mr. Encouragement? Don't you love him? He showed us what it means to be a church of encouragement instead of some of these churches that you hear about that tear each other down behind each other's back. He goes to Antioch, being sent by Jerusalem and in vs. 23 it tells us that he encouraged them. What else would you expect? The growth was very legitimate and he basically tells them: Keep doing what you are doing. Stick with the Lord, or as my translation states, remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion.

What if this church was noticed in Louisville and they sent a representative, a Barnabas to check us out, what would they find? How would they report back? Would we hear the words of encouragement that states: Keep on doing what you are doing, or you need to drastically change your direction because you are way out of control and way out of the direction where I want you to go.

I think they would be really pleased. They would see a church that loves to come together in worship and do so to the capacity of the size of their worship space. They would see a church not afraid to step out in faith in matters financial and also in matters of ministry that tears down walls of division. They would see a church that loves kids and has a myriad of programs offered for them and incorporates them in worship. Jerusalem through Barnabas saw in Antioch a great church, alive and kicking. Louisville would see the same and our encourager would say well done, God has given you and will give you all that you need to overcome whatever differences may come your way. Stick with the Lord.

The more Barnabas encourages, something happens, uh oh, the more the church grows. The more the Christians of Antioch see that they are doing what God wants them to do, the more they grow. Uh oh, growth, you know creates its own set of issues. Barnabas looks around and says: help, I need help. And he goes and gets Beth Feiler, Walter Kondratowski, Tess Miller, Angie McVey, Amy Stauffer, Lynn Underhill, Laurie Fulmer, Heather Schnader, Karen Cooper, Chris Henkel. Wait, sorry wrong church.

Barnabas goes and gets Paul. He goes and gets someone whom he already knows. Someone he had introduced to Jerusalem as his friend, when they refused to receive him on his own. Someone that he knows is probably better equipped, more talented, and blessed in a variety of ways more than he was.

You understand how difficult this is and what this means about Barnabas. He wasn't threatened at all by Paul, in fact he put the church and what he knew Paul could do ahead of himself. He saw Paul as a colleague, as someone who was going to get the job done and build the church up probably better than he could. Paul gets to work, but doing something very different from what we expect him to do. Every place we have seen him he has been out there preaching and bringing people to Jesus Christ.

In verses 26 and 27 it states: "for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people." Why did Barnabas need help? To take care of their own. Not to go out and get others in. Not to outreach, but for inreach. Who do we have on staff whose sole function is inreach? Do we have someone whose job it is to just make sure that we are growing spiritually as a congregation? It is exciting and fun to always be out in the community. To constantly try to reach other people for Jesus Christ to join our family. But our family needs to be cared for. Paul did not come to bring people to Christ, but to teach.

In Acts Barnabas reached out because he knew the believers were not going to stay if they weren't taught. Today, I know you have a couple of assignments that you are working on. You are praying specifically for an individual to be healed and you are confident that God will respond. Today, just ask yourself, what are you doing to be taught to be equipped in order to be prepared for the work that God is calling you to do?

Come and stay a while after church, or come an hour early and stay awhile so that you can grow in your faith. Think of how Jesus did that. At age 12 he stayed for 3 days in the temple learning. Before he begins his ministry he goes to the desert to fast and pray for 40 days. During his three years he is constantly going off by himself to pray.

I am convinced that it is not by coincidence that as vs. 26 states that it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians". They were called Christians because they were committed to stay for a while and learn, and be taught, by those that the church has asked to teach. Let us learn. Amen.