

Active Compassion: A Pattern to Follow. . .

Acts 13, 14

Last week we began to discuss our vision for this church over the next 3 to 5 years. In relation to outreach, we pictured it this way: In five years we want each of us here at Faith to be able to look across the room on a Sunday morning and be able to identify at least one other person that we've helped lead to faith in Christ. We understand this to be a team effort: one person might invite, another might befriend, another might pray for, and another might serve in some way. Together we represent Christ to people who need to see the life that He offers. But we each have a role to play.

And it begins with compassion. When Jesus saw the multitudes, He felt compassion for them because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. People who are far from God lack the basic protection and nourishment and abundance that only God can give. Out of compassion we want people to come to faith in Christ and experience God in every area of their lives. If you weren't here last week I'd really encourage you to listen to the message; you can find an audio podcast on our web site (www.faithmanhattan.org).

Today we are going to talk about a key component in this process of leading others to Christ: intentionality, purposefully developing honest friendships with people who need Christ. Some of these friendships will involve a deepening of relationships that we already have; others will involve initiating new relationships.

When you think about it, this is exactly what we send missionaries to other cultures to do. We send them to places like Indonesia, Hungary, Arab Gulf, and India primarily to develop relationships with people who need to know God. Our missionaries do a lot of other things, but this is the main thing. They intentionally develop relationships, live out the life they have in Christ, and explain to people what they are seeing. Most often they do this in community, not in isolation from others.

Since this is the very thing we want to do here in Manhattan, it only makes sense that we would learn from our missionaries and pattern ourselves after their intentionality. We've often said that we want to have the same type of impact here at home that they have in other cultures. We've identified this as a priority for us as a congregation over the next 3 to 5 years; you can read a fuller explanation of this on the insert in your bulletin.

In light of this conviction, we are going to do two things today. First, we are going to look briefly at Acts 13 and 14 to notice how the church at Antioch did this very thing that I'm describing. They sent out missionaries, and when they returned they learned from their experience. Second, we are going to hear from Robynn and Lowell Bliss some of the things that they've learned about intentionality from their time in India.

Let's look first at Acts 13:1-3. ***Learning from those whom we've "sent."*** In this passage we have recorded how the church at Antioch sent out Barnabas and Saul (Paul). Verse 1 records those who were prophets and teachers in Antioch:

1 Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

Saul (we know him by the Greek version of his name - Paul) had been a believer for 13 or 14 years. Barnabas had befriended Paul and welcomed him into the fellowship in Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul had been close friends/brothers for many years. Notice that the church at Antioch was seeking God very deliberately when these two were identified as missionaries:

2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

In retrospect it made great sense to send these two, given what they'd been through together and given their gifts. And yet they didn't rely merely on "common sense"; the Holy Spirit made clear that these two were set apart for a specific work. I suspect that this wasn't the first time that the church at Antioch had thought about sending people to other parts of the Roman Empire. After all, God told Paul up front that he would be an apostle to the Gentiles and that he would suffer greatly for the kingdom. Yet they also had specific direction from the Holy Spirit to send out Paul and Barnabas at that time.

We have this same conviction about the missionaries that we've sent out. Typically a person will come to our elders and those who oversee our missions outreach and lay out what they sense God is calling them to do. At that point we seek God to discern whether we too can say that we believe God is calling that person(s) to the mission they're proposing. We've so appreciated those who have come humbly and invited this type of involvement in the process of discerning a call. When this happens, there is great buy-in and support on the part of the church.

3 Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

The rest of Acts 13 and Acts 14 record what we now refer to as Paul's first missionary journey. They went to cities in Asia Minor sharing the gospel and leading people to Christ; then they returned to those same cities, strengthening the believers they found there and organizing them into churches. Gentiles were actually coming to Christ and following Him just like the original Jewish disciples had done!

Significantly, this is what we read in Acts 14:26-28:

26 From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. 27 When they had arrived and gathered

the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they spent a long time with the disciples.

Paul and Barnabas went back to the church that sent them out and reported what had happened. They explained what God had done in bringing Gentiles to faith in Christ. Then, significantly, they “spent a long time with the disciples.” Presumably they weren’t merely killing time; they were processing what had happened and learning everything they could.

We have been blessed to have missionaries who have come back from their respective fields and “spend a long time” with us here in Manhattan. We have the opportunities to hear how the Gospel is bearing fruit in other cultures so that we might pray more effectively and so that we might live more effectively.

In light of the importance of learning from our missionaries and in light of our desire to pattern ourselves after our missionaries – especially when it comes to developing intentional relationships with people who need Christ – we’ve asked Robynn and Lowell Bliss to come and answer three questions for us today. The Blisses have served with Christar as church planters in northern India for the past 14 years.

Learning “intentionality” from our missionaries:

[Note: You can hear the Bliss’ answers to these questions on the audio podcast on our web site; go to www.faithmanhattan.org and click on the podcast icon.]

Tell us what you do in India.

What does “intentionality toward unbelievers” look like in India?

What does your experience of “intentionality toward unbelievers” look like now that you’ve been in Manhattan for a year?