

## ***A Church “On Mission”***

Acts 13-14

Today and next Sunday morning we are going to be thinking about our outreach efforts here at Faith. If you have ever checked the box on the connections card that says “regular attender” you should have received an email that gives an overview of what we’re doing these two weeks.

Today we are going to talk about the type of church we believe God is calling us to be: a church on mission, a church that wholeheartedly pursues the mission to make disciples near and far. Next week we’ll talk about the role that an outreach pastor might play in this endeavor. As I explain in the letter we sent, we’ve been considering adding the position of Outreach Pastor for several years; we sense that this might be the time to do so.

Manhattan is a very dynamic place spiritually. Partially because of what God is doing at K-State, every year people leave Manhattan to represent Jesus in other cultures. A couple times each year I have a conversation with people who inquire about Faith being their “sending church.” I have developed a standard speech that reflects how we have thought about missions over the past 25 years. These are not only my personal convictions; these are the convictions of the leadership and membership of Faith quite broadly. The speech goes something like this:

When we send people to serve in other parts of the world, we are saying to them, “We believe that Jesus is worthy of the worship of every grouping of people on earth. Because Jesus is worthy, it is worth it for you to leave fathers and mothers, farms and houses, careers, friends, and the comforts of this culture. And there are no guarantees you will come back; some people give their lives in other lands. But we believe that even that sacrifice is worth it because Jesus is worthy.

“And so if we are your sending church, we will commit ourselves to support you financially, with prayer, and with encouragement. Sending agencies can do some things much better than we can: passports, logistics, strategies, putting together teams, evacuation plans, etc. But nobody can love you the way we do.

“If we are your sending church, we will affirm your calling and we will support you. And I will tell the people of Faith that we need to live the same type of life here that we are sending you to live there. How dare we say that it’s worth it for our missionaries to sacrifice and suffer and then think, ‘But us . . . we’re busy people; we don’t need to sacrifice anything for the cause of Christ.’ No, actually we believe that there should be continuity between how we live ‘here’ and how our missionaries live ‘there.’ We should pursue the same things here that we send them to pursue there. We should be the same type of church here that we are sending them to plant elsewhere.”

That little speech reflects our conviction about the continuity that should exist between what we do here in our own culture and what we send people to do in other cultures. We believe that we should “own” the mission of the church as much as those we send to other cultures.

A church in the first century that embodied this type of continuity was the church at Antioch. Acts 13 and 14 depict the church at Antioch as both a “sending church” and a “receiving church.” Chapter 13 begins by describing how Paul and Barnabas set out from their “home church” in Antioch; chapter 14 ends by describing how they return to the church in Antioch and report what happened among the Gentiles. In between, Luke records what we refer to as “Paul’s first missionary journey” - how Paul and Barnabas travel to different cities establishing local churches. The church at Antioch illustrates how the local church is at the heart of God’s plan for the nations.

***Antioch: a Church “on mission.” (Acts 13-14)*** In verse 1 Luke gives us a list of the prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch. They were a rather diverse group of men from various cities in the Roman Empire.

13:1 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.

Barnabas, whose name means “son of encouragement,” was one of the first to believe. Saul was originally a Pharisee who was zealous about persecuting the church; Acts 9 records how God confronted him on the road to Damascus and did a miraculous work in his life. Some people suggest that Simeon was the “Simon of Cyrene” who carried Jesus’ cross, although such an identification is very uncertain. Lucius was from Cyrene, a city on the north coast of Africa. Manaen grew up as a childhood companion of Herod of tetrarch - the one who had John the Baptist beheaded and the one whom Jesus called “that fox” (Luke 13:32). And so this was quite a fascinating collection of leaders in Antioch. Verses 2 and 3 state very simply:

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

We see here a number of things that were true about the church at Antioch. **First, as a sending church they were attentive to the will of God.** Verse 2 records that the Holy Spirit spoke to them “while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting.” The term “ministering” simply means “serving,” but when it is used in a spiritual context (such as here) it has the connotation of “worshipping”; worship is a primary way that people can serve/minister to God.

They were also fasting – going without food for a period of time – in order to seek God with greater intensity. When you first try fasting, all you can think about is food; but

when you become proficient in fasting, your spiritual senses are heightened and you are able to seek God more clearly. The church at Antioch was able to use fasting as an effective way to enhance their seeking the Lord. The tense of the verbs here suggests that worship and fasting were an ongoing practice in the life of this church. They were in the habit of waiting on the Lord's leading in this way.

In the context of worship accompanied by fasting, the Holy Spirit made the will of God clear to them. The Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Perhaps they were praying about their responsibility to take the gospel to other cities – we don't know. What we do know is that they had put themselves in a position to hear the voice of God; they were attentive to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit made clear that Barnabas and Saul were to be set apart for a special work among the nations.

As a local church, we have the same responsibility to be attentive to the will of God as it concerns our mission. Luke isn't laying down a formula here, but it is fully appropriate for churches to set aside times for prayer and fasting. We should seek God with the confidence that He wants to lead us; we mainly need to put ourselves in a position to discern that will. As was the case at Antioch, we believe that the leadership should be involved in seeking God in these ways.

**Second, they were obedient and willing to "send."** (*Acts 13:3, 21-23*) The Holy Spirit told them that two out of the five "prophets and teachers" in the church were to be "set apart" for this new work. Even though these two represented 40% of their prophets and teachers, the church at Antioch was willing to say, "If God desires for Barnabas and Saul to serve Him elsewhere, that's what we want too." Verse 3 says,

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

The implication is that they prayed and fasted in relation to the upcoming ministry of Saul and Barnabas. After they had sought God in this way, they laid their hands on them – signifying their blessing – and they sent them away. Saul and Barnabas would have left Antioch with great confidence: confidence that God had called them to that ministry and confidence because the church at Antioch had affirmed that calling. They would need this confidence when they met with opposition and persecution.

As a "sending church" the believers in Antioch sought the Lord's will and then followed His leading. Over the years we have tried to do the same thing here at Faith. When someone expresses a desire to be sent to another culture to serve God there, they enter into a process whereby our outreach leadership, in conjunction with our elders, seek God alongside them. In general, we want to send the type of people that we'd want as leaders in this church. We shouldn't send people to do in other cultures what they haven't done in this culture.

If you read the rest of Acts 13 and Acts 14, you see that as Paul and Barnabas traveled to cities in Asia Minor, their focus was on **planting churches**. They weren't content being able to say that they had preached the gospel in these towns; they wanted to establish functioning local churches with recognized spiritual leadership (i.e., elders). If we aren't establishing churches in the places we're involved, somebody will have to start all over again every single generation.

Third, ***They “received” back from those they had sent. (Acts 14:24-28)*** In these verses Luke explicitly describes how Paul and Barnabas return to the church that sent them out.

24 They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. 25 When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 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.

We sense in these verses that Paul and Barnabas were accountable to the church at Antioch. Luke mentions in verse 26 that Antioch was the place "from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished." It only made sense that they would return to that church and explain in great detail just what God had done through them. They were able to explain how God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (v. 27) – news that would have brought great joy to the believers in Antioch since their church was composed partially of Gentiles who had believed. In verse 28 Luke says that "[Paul and Barnabas] spent a long time with the disciples" in Antioch. Antioch became Paul's "home base." Paul would return to Antioch after the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:35) as well as after his second missionary journey (18:22). The church had an ongoing relationship with Paul; they were both a sending church and a receiving church. And so this church serves as a model for us to imitate.

We aren't explicitly told what the church at Antioch did with the insights they received from Paul and Barnabas. But I would bet that the insights they gained from Paul and Barnabas informed how they represented Christ there in Antioch. Hearing that the Gentiles were turning to Christ all over Asia Minor surely informed how they reached out to the Gentiles in their city. What they heard from Paul and Barnabas would have expanded their vision and increased their faith.

***Faith: our efforts to be a Church “on mission”:***

Here at Faith we want to be a sending church and a receiving church. A highlight for me in the history of Faith was Wednesday night, May 6th. Many of you were here when Musa shared with us. Musa is a leader in the Meyah church in Papua, Indonesia. Some of our missionaries work with Musa and the Meyah people. Their church wanted to send Musa to the U.S. to send their personal thanks to the churches that have sent them

missionaries over the years. Musa gave a wonderful presentation about what God is doing there. He presented us with several gifts, including a \$200 “love offering” from their churches. Musa returned home with great joy. Here’s what we heard back from our missionaries:

Today in the village there was a praise/thanksgiving service for the good trip to America. There were probably 1000 people that attended - all hanging out in the yard, the road, down the road, in the back, everywhere! They had come from all 10 Meyah areas, bringing food and smiles. They came in dumptrucks (like 30 people to a dumptruck!), motorcycles, 4-wheel trucks, walking, you name it. Groups had matching shirts. Musa held up the cross that Steve made, and all the people cheered when he told them what Steve shared about the 2 kinds of wood, and also the idea of unity in Christ. They had to have a mic system so that everyone could hear. They were so blessed. Their favorite picture was the one of Musa kneeling and the elders/pastors of FEFC praying for the Meyah church. It seems to have hit a very deep nerve in their desire to know and be known as fellow believers in Christ over here.

If we are willing to “receive” it, there is much we can learn from Musa and the churches he represents. We have much to learn about finding contentment in the midst of hardship, being willing to sacrifice for the cause of Christ, the importance of saying “thank you” to the people who have given to us, the simplicity of following Christ, etc.

Over the years, as we have tried to be both a sending and receiving church, one of the things that we’ve heard and seen over and over from our missionaries is that “good words and good works go together.” In many cities all over the world, it is common to find some churches that preach the gospel and others that meet tangible, physical needs. But we’ve learned (largely) from our missionaries that the two should go hand in hand: the good news of Jesus should be accompanied by good works. This is what almost all of our missionaries have done wherever we have sent them. The gospel is accompanied by servanthood that makes tangible the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Of course this is an emphasis found in the Scriptures. We are told to “bear witness” - to give a firsthand account of what God has done in our lives through Jesus. The Alpha course we offer three times a year is one way that we declare our faith. We invite friends, coworkers, and family members to come and hear teaching about the Christian faith and to have honest conversation about what they have heard.

But we are also told in Scripture to enter into others’ suffering as Jesus did. In Titus 3:14, Paul gave this instruction:

14 Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.

We don’t have to go out and create felt needs so that people will be interested in Jesus. Rather, we need to meet some of the “pressing needs” that already exist. In this way our

good words about Jesus are accompanied by good works. This is really the heart behind another core outreach here at Faith called Love Manhattan.

I've invited Robynn Bliss to come share because Love Manhattan really flowed out of her experience. Robynn has a unique vantage point because she and her husband Lowell (and 3 kids) were sent by Faith in 1997 to serve in India; they now live in Manhattan, serving as environmental missionaries through an organization they've founded called Eden Vigil. I've asked Robynn to come share her experience with us.

***Robynn Bliss' story:***

*In 2007 Jesus "redeployed" us. It's a long story but we knew he was moving us from South Asia to Manhattan Kansas. As I processed that move it struck me that Jesus must have Kingdom Purposes in mind and yet I had no idea how to minister to people here. I remember asking someone how to reach people for Jesus in Manhattan. Her response was, "I don't know! You're the missionary!" She seemed like such an intentional living person. I was so shocked by her response. I asked a few others. No one had anything very tangible or helpful to tell me. So....I consciously decided to pretend that everyone here was from South Asia! I would do what I knew to do! I would do what I'd been sent out by this very church to do....but I'd do it here!*

*Here's a little bit of what I mean:*

*\*I recognize I'm here for the Kingdom! My life has significance. I firmly believe Jesus asks us to live somewhere for a reason. We were brought here on purpose!*

*\*Lowell and I intentionally think how we can intersect more with those who have yet to believe. We've gotten involved. I joined the PTO. I volunteered in the lunch room at Bluemont Elementary and then TR. Lowell joined the Friends of Sunset Zoo board. He's now a CASA—a Court Appointed Special Advocate for kids in the legal system. Those were all strategic decisions. How can we hang out more with people that need hope? Those seemed like good ways to start.*

*\*In South Asia we learned to think creatively and energetically about how we might present the message of Jesus in ways that people could actually hear it. In those days we had long conversations about how to boil down the Good News to it's sweet and redeeming essence. There were so many misunderstandings and misperceptions about faith and Jesus and church and what it means to relate to God. I think it's true here too.*

*\*When I was 21 I worked for a summer in Banff—a mountain resort town in the Canadian Rockies. I found myself intimidated about sharing my faith. It seemed strange and awkward to suddenly bring up Jesus into a conversation with a coworker. During that time I had an epiphany of sorts. We were all created by God himself to relate to God himself! That's how we were made! To believe is actually more normal than not to believe. That truth transformed the way I live. Since then I've learned to talk openly about my relationship with Jesus with anybody and everybody: my joys, my frustrations, the prayers He's answered, the prayers he hasn't. I offer to pray for people. I follow up*

*later with questions. Did Jesus answer prayer? If He didn't I express my annoyance. "Shoot! I was really hoping he'd answer that one!". If He does, I offer up sincere praise! "Yay! Thanks God!" There's no need for me to be apologetic about believing. In some ways it's strange NOT to believe!*

*\*When our kids were little it didn't seem like I had time to have conversations with others about the gospel. Initially that frustrated me! But then I started asking Jesus to help me insert a little truth into every conversation I have --even the short ones with strangers and store clerks. The chances for longer forays into more of the message make me down right giddy...but who knows what God might do with sprinklings of grace drenched truth!?*

*\*When we lived in South Asia Lowell worked full time as a curriculum designer. We also ran a guest house and a retreat center. Our work was in many ways our calling. It's the same thing for all of us here! Your job is the holy arena God has placed you in for divine Kingdom purposes. You don't have to be a full time Christian worker to have a significant ministry! You have a chance to show people what life in the Kingdom looks like! You get to interact with people and real life and live out for them authentic up and down faith and hope and joy! It's like he gave you your job...so you can quietly do your "real job"---!*

*\*I try to be myself. Usually I'm relaxed. Jesus is in charge. We don't have to defend him or his reputation. He just asks us to bear His image to the world. To be ministers of reconciliation. To extend grace and acceptance to people. To introduce them to the One who created them who is crazy about them and who longs for a relationship with them. For that matter I'm not trying to impress Jesus either when I share my faith, or when I love on my neighbor. There is no sticker chart, no points, for having spiritual conversations. Jesus is already crazy about me too. I can't impress him. He loves me fully as I am—a normal middle aged, hormonally challenged, emotionally stir fried woman...and He can't get enough of me! It's all true for you too!*

*\*Our primary mission is love. We are called to love. It's a simple (and as horrendously difficult) as that! Love our neighbour, love our post man, love our barista, love the noisy kids on our street—, love the person we meet who is so incredibly different than I am, love our spouses, love. Love becomes the goal but it's also the means to the goal. It's one of the reasons I appreciate Love Manhattan! We want to be the BEST church FOR Manhattan... Being engaged with people, loving them, extending grace and hope, living out for them in honest ways what it looks like to relate to God, getting involved in good things that others in our community are excited about...I believe these are all ways to be that kind of church.*

*Lowell and I try to be the same people you sent out years ago to South Asia. These are the very things we did there. All of us are ministers: ministers of the Holy Mysterious Marvelous Good news! We get to be the containers for the Treasure. You asked Lowell and I to take that message out years ago...but it's a message we're still committed to....we just live in a different town now!*