

Encouraging

Acts 11:19-30

August 27, 2023 West Valley Presbyterian Church

We have been working our way through the book of Acts ever since Pentecost. And the reason why is so that we could carefully study what happened when the church got started in the first place, 2000 years ago. I felt that was really important for us at this point in our church life. We don't have a manual on how church planting should be done in the Cupertino of 2023. But we do have the Bible, and specifically, the book of Acts. We will be talking with the church planters, who will be coming to visit us, on Monday September 4th. They feel called to reach out to the younger people here in Silicon Valley, which is still the tech center of the world. They have a strong sense of what they feel called to do. Which is great! But what do we do, as the legacy church? I don't know. Our denomination doesn't know all the details of what our church should do and what the planters should do. That's because our situation now is very different from what it was even 30 years ago, when I was trained in how to grow the church.

But God knows what's needed. He knew what was needed 2000 years ago, and he knows what's needed now. We've learned how the Holy Spirit worked within the lives of the church leaders and the church members 2000 years ago. And because the Holy Spirit was at work, even what seemed to be setbacks – like persecution – turned out to help the church grow. The opponents meant to stomp the church right out – but they couldn't. Instead, the church grew and grew through the power of the Holy Spirit. We saw that for ourselves as we've studied Chapters 2-10 of Acts all summer long. I hope that our study has helped us to trust God now – trusting that the Holy Spirit is moving in our midst. We don't know exactly what to do; but God does, and I hope and pray that we can all take a deep breath and trust him.

Today we are wrapping up our series on Acts; and our passage today has to do with one of the most important things we can do as we head into the unknown: and that is, to encourage one another. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us through Acts 11:19-30.

¹⁹Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²²News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Thanks be to God.

A month ago, we saw how Stephen's death and the scattering of the Jerusalem church led to starting the growth of the church in other areas. We saw how the Holy Spirit worked with specific examples: Philip bringing faith to an Ethiopian, and Peter bringing faith to a Roman centurion and his family. In today's passage we see how the faith spread among Gentiles more generally, among large populations in the big city of Antioch.

What I find really significant is that when the Jerusalem leaders hear about wholesale conversions of Gentiles in Antioch, who do they send? They send Barnabas. Why Barnabas? Why not Peter or Philip or one of the other official apostles? Well, they send him because of his gift of encouragement. We saw in Acts 4 that Barnabas is a nickname. His given name was Joseph; but he's never called that. Barnabas literally means, "Son of encouragement." And everyone calls him Barnabas because he's so good at encouraging people. We also know from Acts 4 that he is very generous; he sold his property and gave the money to the apostles in Jerusalem to distribute as they saw fit. Apparently the church leaders felt that a generous man who's really good at encouraging people is just the one to send to this brand-new Gentile church.

And that's just what Barnabas does. When he arrives and sees the grace of God at work in people's lives, he was very glad; and what does he do? He encourages them. Specifically, he encourages them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Encouragement is the first thing that these new converts need. If they're not encouraged, they'll wander off and return to their pagan ways - which would be easy to do. So they need encouragement to keep at it, to keep loving the Lord with all their hearts, today and tomorrow and next week and next year.

And the second thing they need is good, solid teaching. So what does Barnabas do about that? He goes to Tarsus, which was a whole week's journey by boat and foot from Antioch. He does that to encourage Saul - who will soon be known as Paul - to come back to Antioch with him. Saul has extensive rabbinic training, so he is just the man to teach the Gentiles all about what God had done in the lives of his people up to this point, and what he is doing in the lives of his people now. Barnabas goes and explains to Saul that they'd be a great team. Which in fact they are. Together, the encourager and the teacher, they build something entirely new. Not a congregation of Messianic Jews. Not a congregation of pagans. A congregation of formerly pagan Christ followers. With an entirely new name, to fit their new identity: a congregation of Christians.

Just think – if Barnabas hadn't gone to Antioch in the first place to encourage this small band of former pagans, we might not even be here today. Encouragement helped us then, and it helps us now, to accept and embrace the new things God does in our midst.

For example: last week Ryan Anderson was here for pulpit supply. He is a brand new candidate; and preaching his very first sermon in an unfamiliar church to a live congregation can feel a little like stepping off a cliff and hoping you won't fall. You hope the Holy Spirit will bear you up. But you don't know for sure. That's where encouragement becomes really, really important. And you all did a really good job of encouraging him. You made an effort to greet him, and tell him how much you enjoyed his sermon. Many of you encouraged him in starting his seminary classes. Many of you also told him that you'd be glad to have him come and do supply preaching again. Thank you for that! Encouraging him at a scary time for him was so kind of you. You helped him to trust God's leading, and that really means a lot. Your encouragement made a difference in his life, and I thank you.

I know from my own experience how important encouragement can be. As many of you know, I was raised Unitarian, and married another Unitarian. God called us to become Christian, be baptized, and join the Presbyterian church, when we were 30. A couple of months after that, I felt God calling me to quit being a chemist, go to seminary, and become a pastor. I didn't like that idea, so I enrolled in a graduate program at UVA in NT history instead. That wasn't good enough for God, though; so after a year I gave in, applied to seminary, and went before the Inquirers' Committee of our local Presbytery to start the candidacy process.

And there I hit a major bump. The Inquirers' Committee normally signed up anyone in good standing in their local church, who was interested in becoming a pastor. But they'd never dealt with a recent convert before. And they didn't think much of former Unitarians or female pastors either. So even though I met their criteria – I was in good standing at Westminster Church and was interested in becoming a pastor - they grilled me on the theology of the dual nature of Christ. And then they voted to reject me. I was devastated. And do you know what got me through that devastation? The encouragement of my pastor and my church friends. They urged me to try again; and they encouraged me to research and write an extensive theological paper on the dual nature of Christ, which I did, using the analogy of how light is considered to be both a wave and a particle at the same time. The second time, the Inquirers' Committee apologized, and accepted me to begin the candidacy process. I would never have gone back before them again, had it not been for the encouragement of my friends. Brothers and sisters, I am here to say that encouragement can change someone's life.

We are going to have plenty of opportunities to encourage one another in the next few years. The church planters are certainly going to need our encouragement. Leaving a steady job and a steady paycheck to step into the unknown is hard. Financially, they hope and pray that things will work out; but there's no guarantee. That's hard. Just moving across the country is hard – as you know if you've ever done it. All the details of your life get thrown into the air like so many leaves in a storm, and it takes months to get everything settled into a new normal. Leaving your friends behind, and trying to make new friends, and raise financial support, is hard. It takes a lot more energy to make new friends than it does to rely on the old friends you've known for years.

Yes, I think that God is calling them to this place at this time; and you're going to hear more about that when they visit us, in person, on Monday, September 4th at 10 am. But just because God is calling them, does not mean it's going to be easy. They will need our support and our encouragement, especially in the chaotic first few months. You know how to encourage people; I saw you do it just last week! So, we can do this! We can keep on praying for the church planters, every day at 5:18; and we can also pray that the Holy Spirit will help us encourage them, in our thoughts and our words. We can encourage them by helping them find a place to live, and helping them get settled.

We can also encourage them by remembering that we are not their bosses. They will answer to a committee of Presbytery, not our Session. We aren't hiring them; we are supporting them, because they can reach people that we can't. We don't speak Mandarin. We don't work in tech and we're not 40 years old. But the planters do fit the people around us. Caitlin speaks fluent Mandarin, and Joel is a musician and a chef. They have both worked in tech and they are both in their thirties. They can reach the people that we can't; and they can bring them to new lives in Christ.

And, we will also have plenty of opportunities to encourage one another as well. The next year or two won't be easy for us either. We are used to doing things as we've always done them; and it won't be easy to adjust our budget – or, later on, our schedules – so that we can support what the church planters are called to do. So when we hit bumps in the road – which we will – we need to encourage one another. We need to urge one another to think positively, rather than to gripe or complain. We need to be willing to try something different.

The Holy Spirit really is present in our midst. And that's encouraging. He's here. So we can trust him as we make a big step in faith. We have seen good things happen: people baptized, people joining, people sharing what God is doing in their lives. We can trust him as we begin a new chapter here at West Valley. Let's pray.

(After prayer, invite people up to place contributions for Maui Food Bank during the final song, if they wish. Strictly optional.)