



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for September 20, 2020
“inside OUT: Set Apart”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Acts 13:2-3

Antioch

Antioch was the springboard for world evangelism in the earliest days of the church. It was from the church in Antioch that the church began to expand. You might say the Antioch church was a mission-sending enterprise par excellence. They were all about going forth.

The list of names we will read in just a moment from Acts 13:1 is reflective of the worldwide make-up of that church. That list also reflects what William Barclay calls *“the universal appeal of the gospel.”*

Barnabas was from Cyprus, Lucius from Cyrene, Simeon was a Roman, Manaen was an aristocrat, and Paul was a Jew. God had brought them and others together for one purpose, and one purpose alone, to share the good news about Jesus.

The church in Antioch was blessed with those who were careful to listen for the voice of God. They were recognized as prophets. The church was also blessed with any number of teachers who stood ready to instruct those who were new to the faith.

It was out of the church in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas were sent on the so-called First Missionary Journey, all with the blessing of the Holy Spirit. It’s clear from scripture that the church in Antioch was all about leaving plenty of room for the movement of God’s Spirit. They wanted to make sure they were in lockstep with the will of God before they ever sent the first person out.

All that said, let’s look to the scripture. This morning’s lesson is from Acts 13:1-3.

Acts 13:1-3

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

² While they were worshiping 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 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Called

Down through the years I have sat through any number of interviews hearing from persons seeking ordination in the United Methodist Church. One important part of that interview is hearing about a person’s call to ministry.

Everyone's call is distinct to that person. There is, though, a common tread. Those who are called have a clear sense that God is the one calling them into ministry.

My own call to ministry started when I was in high school. I offered my life to Christ pretty early on. I was in 8th grade at the time. My life has never been the same since. Soon after that decision I began to get a sense that God might be calling me into the ministry and I was ready to oblige.

I was offered opportunities to teach, preach, and reach out. All along, I was affirmed by those who were a part of my home church. More importantly, I was affirmed by the Holy Spirit that God was doing the calling.

I continue to affirm to this day the decision to heed that call. I have said often that I don't want what I am doing now predicated on what I decided some fifty years ago. I have continued to affirm God's call upon my life day by day.

If you think about it, we are all called to ministry. That's just a part of what it means to be a Christ-follower. The direction of that ministry can take varied forms. The common thread is God's leadership in directing us.

As we have done throughout this series we have heard from those from our congregation who are involved in ministry in one form or fashion. Kim Culler is one of those persons. Kim has a distinct calling to minister to those in prison. I am thankful she's heeded that call. I am also thankful for the great work she is doing.

I am thankful that Kim not only heard the Lord's call, but listened as well. She responded to that call and has a fruitful ministry to this day.

In the Old Testament, young Samuel was in bed one night and heard someone calling him in the night. Mistakenly, he thought it was Eli the priest calling him. Three separate times Samuel went to Eli to see what he wanted. After that third time, Eli made it clear that it was not him calling, but God, and if God called again Samuel was to say, "*Speak Lord for your servant is listening.*"

A couple of things from that:

- When God calls he stays at it. He is persistent in his pursuit.
- There is a big difference between simply hearing and listening. Listening involves getting out of the way and letting God speak.
- There is also a big difference between just listening and acting upon what you've heard.

In regard to hearing God's call upon our lives it comes to us to discern what God is trying to say and then act upon it.

That's what was going on in Antioch. As we said, the people there left plenty of room for God's Spirit to move. Discerning what God wanted wasn't left to just Paul and Barnabas. The whole church was involved so that in the end they were all able to hear the Spirit say, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*" (Acts 13:2)

I get the sense there was a high expectation of call in that church and that everyone considered how they might be called as well. In Antioch, people weren't allowed to sit in the stands or mill along the sidelines. They were called to get into the game. That sort of thing applies to us as well.

Lisa mentioned it last week in regard to discipleship. I want to mention it this week as we seriously consider Christ's call to "*go and make disciples.*" When it comes to church we gather only to get us ready to go.

I have often likened our coming together, and that's been a lot different these days, to what goes on in a locker room during a game. We come together to seek encouragement and instruction to help us with what's going on out there. The game of the Christian life, if you will, is played out as we go about our daily lives.

I have seen many a bulletin where the names of the staff and their titles are listed. At the top of that list, though, is the word, *ministers*, which is followed just to the side by the word *congregation*. The work of ministry is not left to the pastors and staff, but to the congregation. The ministers of the church are those who make it up.

And we are called to do the work of ministry.

Set Apart

The church in Antioch took seriously the responsibility for sending people out. In the case of Paul and Barnabas, the church not only recognized God's call upon them, but they set them apart for the work God was calling them to do.

When the church in Antioch was preparing to send out Paul and Barnabas, they came around them and laid hands on them. It was a way of setting them apart for the work of ministry. I remember the night I was ordained, when hands were laid on me. I will never forget how heavy those hands felt. The burden of ministry can be heavy at times and the memory of those hands has helped to remind me at that.

The memory of those hands has also helped to remind me that I am not alone. The church is with me and for that I am eternally thankful. The church is with you in whatever you are doing. You are set apart to do the work of ministry.

During these days of Covid-19 where the laying on of hands might not be the thing to do, we can, at least raise our hands in the direction of one another as a reminder that we too are set apart.

Sent

We are set apart then to be sent. We are not set apart to sit, but to get up and go. That sort of thing is lived out in all sorts of ways. Over the past few weeks we have heard for any number of people about how they are being set apart to do the work of ministry, including Kim this morning. In a word, as followers of Christ we are a sent people. It's just in our DNA as followers of Christ. I have known people:

- who have cared for the homeless, fed the hungry, tended to those in need of recovery, and worked for justice.

- who have reached out to young people, and others who have tended to the needs of the elderly.
- who have ministered to singles, and those who have been there for those who are married.
- who have traveled far and wide, and others who have stay close to home.
- whose every desire it is to make a difference, all in the name of Jesus.

What a different world it would be if everyone felt as though they could make a difference. You don't need to be a Paul or Barnabas to make a difference, only one who is well-connect to Christ, raised up by the Spirit, and faithfully wants to do right by the call God upon your life.

(Slide of Multi-Directional Sign) Sometimes trying to figure out where to go can be like reading this sign. You don't know which way to go. That's where the sort dependence upon the Holy Spirit as displayed by the church in Antioch becomes so important.

Such dependence can lead from a sign like this to a sign like this.

(Slide of "This Way" Sign)

Spirit

Remember we said the church in Antioch was all about leaving room for the Spirit to have its way. You and I can learn from that. We need to leave plenty of room for the Spirit to move as we consider what God might be calling us to do, as individuals and as a church.

My Wednesday night men's small group is reading through Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez*. In talking about the hand of God upon us to do the work of ministry, Wilkinson as a pretty pointed question, "*When was the last time your church got together and pleaded for the filling of the Spirit?*"

I want to call us to that sort of prayer. "*Pleading for the filling of the Spirit*" is critical for any fruitful ministry. Doing so, is a deliberate act. It takes our focus off what we want and puts it on what God wants. It's the very thing that will help us understand not only our calling, but where we are to go and what we are to do as those who are set apart for the work of ministry.

God bless us all.