

Message: Acts 13:1-14:26 I; Witnesses... V: Paul & Barnabas

Introduction:

Today's passage is an important one because it marks a major shift in the life of the early Church, and a major shift in the life of Saul. We'll see Paul committing himself to work and a way of life that will shape all his experiences from this point forward. I hope, from this point forward this morning God can make use of this message for us. Let's pray for that.

Prayer:

Setting Apart:

Today's passage starts this way:

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.

Luke knows how to tell a story. He sets us up in Antioch, and presents us with the congregation's leaders--here, ones who act as prophets and teachers for the congregation. He begins the list with Barnabas, and ends the list with Saul, and you know, primacy and recency effects are in play, here. We get that these two are the most significant among the group.

As a congregation they've gathered for worship. They're fasting, and the Holy Spirit says--in however the Spirit says anything--"Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

I deeply appreciate this. Because this is the Holy Spirit pushing Saul and Barnabas gently from their safe nest. The "work to which I have called them" goes unspoken here, and yet we see the two after this do what they've been doing already. Their missions, together, align. We know Saul's work: He's meant to be "proclaim God's name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." Barnabas, if we've noticed, aligned himself with Saul early; he took on Saul's work as his own. Claimed it, and this claim, here, has been affirmed by the Holy Spirit.

We should notice that God nudges us by means of other people. It's in the community of the Church that sets apart Paul and Barnabas, encourages them to obey the Spirit, and it's in the context of the worshipping community of Christ that they hear the Spirit. We should notice that most truly, the work that Barnabas is called to is to support Paul in his work, and consider what that means for those of us who are called to work, but are not called to be its primary mover, maker, shaker.

But think, for a moment, what can happen in a congregation when its two most important leaders are clearly called by God away from that congregation? In the end, I guess the options are hopelessness or hope; a realization that they're participating in God's work, or a godless sense of fear and failure. But Antioch, as we'll see, chooses hope, and celebrates their call into mission.

On Cyprus: Salamis

4 The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed

from there to Cyprus. 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

John had joined them from Jerusalem. Saul and Barnabas had gone to Jerusalem to deliver the cash Antioch raised to support the Jerusalem Church, having learned that a famine was coming to Judea. And John Mark had . We remember John, because his mom was hosting the house church that Peter stumbled to after being released from jail. The three of them continue to practice the pattern that the Church has had up till now, which is to go first to the Synagogue, and engage their Jewish peers.

They don't stay in Salamis, though. We're told they travel all around; and we're meant to assume that as they go, they're testifying to what God's done wherever there are those who'll listen. They end up in Paphos, and what happens is this: A real spiritual fight for the soul of Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus. He's incredibly interested in what Barnabas and Saul have to say, but is being dissuaded from listening by his assistant. His assistant is a "Jewish sorcerer," we read. And that means something. It means he's not

very great at being religiously Jewish. He's just not. There's no such thing as a faithful Jewish Sorcerer. You can be one or the other, you can't be both. He's practicing divination, trying to, by mystical means, make things happen for himself and for Sergius Paulus. He's also a "false prophet," which, as we remember, is someone who "prophecies" what they want, pretends to speak for God but speaks in their own interest. And in fact, that's what Bar-Jesus/Elymus does when Paul and Barnabas arrive. We read this:

On Cyprus: Paphos

6 They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, 7 who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. 9 Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, 10 "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of

all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? 11 Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun.”

Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. 12 When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

We're meant to do as we've done before, and see this is God triumphing over those who are against God. This is God beating self-interested faithlessness. What we realize is that Elymus' metaphorical blindness to God, which was self-chosen, has turned into physical blindness to everything, forced upon him. He's received as a fact what he paraded around. But temporarily. One wonders if, in the end, he'll end up "amazed at the teaching about the Lord" just like his boss did.

And we should notice something we may read past. Bar-Jesus means "Son of Jesus." Not a big deal; his father's name was Jesus. It wasn't radically

uncommon. But “son of” can mean, metaphorically, a student or follower or one who takes after another person. Bar-Jesus is definitely not a metaphorical “son of Jesus,” though, right? He’s not following God at all. And yet: Paul, who is a “Son of Jesus,” who does take after Christ, and who was himself temporarily struck blind by God, he ends up, as a “son of Jesus,” calling down the same temporary blindness he experienced on this “Bar-Jesus” who has nothing to do with God. There’s irony there that we don’t notice, and I appreciate enough to point out.

We’re meant to see the difference between this follower of Jesus and the “Son of Jesus,” Elymus, who has nothing to do with God. Whenever God allows us to meet someone who can be a foil to us, a mirror for us: Someone who is like us in many, many ways, but unlike is in critical ways, we should be grateful, and do what we can to learn from what could be our failures, if it weren’t for the gracious work of God.

What was read to us today ends on this note:

To Perga: John’s Departure

13 From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed

to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.

We no longer read here “Barnabas and Saul,” but “Paul and his companions.” Notice that. Luke is now orienting the rest of Acts around this person who so deeply shaped and shapes the Church. We aren’t talking about this section much except to say that John’s leaving, his departure at this point. Perga is north of Cyprus, on the mainland. John’s leaving is hard on Paul. Soon, we’ll see as he and Barnabas fight about whether to bring John Mark along with them. Paul doesn’t want to, apparently because John had already left once, which he may have seen as failure. Barnabas and Paul actually part ways, and Barnabas returns to Cyprus with John to keep doing the work he’s doing.

Conclusions: The Church’s Discerning Role

We could discuss so much in today’s passage. We could talk about the important truth that God nudges us, moves us, through God’s People to do what we’re supposed to do. It is in the community of the Church that Paul and Barnabas are set apart and are encouraged to obey the Spirit. Its in the context of the worshipping community of Christ that they hear the

Spirit. So how has the Church helped you in discerning what work God has called you to do? How can the Church bless you in it? We are not agents for ourselves, we're agents for God; and yet, biblically, it's impossible to be an agent of God apart from God's People.

Conclusions: A Necessary Help

We could discuss how it is not bad to feel called to help someone else in their work, as Barnabas was set apart here alongside Paul. Not all of us have to be the primary leader of everything: we can, in fact, be critical to the mission someone else is primarily responsible for or called to first.

That's not something we celebrate, because in an age of individualization of everything, we've come to believe that if we don't have a personal, unique sense of calling apart from others, then we're second-class. Because, of course, our society of self-actualization says we are second-class. And yet: the harsh reality that crashes against our false ideology of total individualized calling is life itself, which is full of communities and companies of people. If everyone had a distinct, unique work to do, then nothing would ever get accomplished on any scale at all. Nothing

would hold together. Sometimes the work we're called to is a work someone else is primarily responsible for; and yet, without our presence, it would fail. Without Barnabas, Saul would not have the influence or reach he has. Have we been called to work that we are not primarily responsible for? And if so, what has that been like for us?

Mostly, though, let's end on this.

Conclusion: Allegiance

I think that how today's passage begins is the moment when Saul allows himself to be, oh, institutionalized again.

We often picture Paul as some sort of maverick. I don't know why. Because he was fiery. He was, oh, passionate. He spoke in declarative sentences, you know? But we need to remember that Paul always placed himself under an institution. He never, ever quavered on matters of conscience, but he was a company man. When following Pharisaical Judaism, that is, Pharisee-led, Judaism, he writes in Philippians about how impressive his credentials were. "If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on

the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.” He was all in. His allegiance was clear.

Here, having served the Antioch Church, he allows himself to be ordained into the missionary work that we’re about to read about. He doesn’t go it alone; he goes it with the Church at his back, and alongside him. He goes because the Spirit confirms through the Church that he should go. He gives his allegiance to God’s People again.

He’s already had his life threatened twice, he has spent a year at Antioch, he’s delivered their gift to Jerusalem. But today’s moment is the day when Paul begins to do what Jesus asked of him not just for Jesus, but do what he does as an agent of the Church, and it marks some sort of change in him. He commits himself to the company; he condemns that which stands against it. His loyalty is all in, not just the organization, but the people. He’s given his allegiance.

Allegiance: Condemnation

But when we give allegiance, we give condemnation.

To give allegiance to something is to necessarily condemn something else. That's alright. Christians stand against things. Paul can't be for sorcery and false prophecy and Jesus' condemnation, while also being for miracles, and true prophecies and Jesus himself. But as I reflected on Paul, it occurred to me how important it is that we reflect carefully on what we stand for and what we stand against. That is, what we give allegiance to, and what we condemn.

I've been struck lately with regard to how there's always someone else willing to do our thinking for us. Whether it's some corporation who wants our business, some app that wants our clicks, or a government that wants our service, there's always someone who'd rather we offload our commitments to them, rather than make them ourselves. They'd rather we ignore pledging allegiance and making condemnations, because then our allegiance can be claimed, and any condemnation we might give can be, if directed at them, ignored, if directed at all, toward their ends, with no reference to God.

It's unspoken, but what we see today is Paul aligning himself with the Church, and embracing its support in

the clear work God had given him. I think this commitment to be not only for God, but for God's Church, no matter what, is an amazing, rare thing.

Allegiances: Salt & Light

And look, there's a place to be salt and light when it comes to the groups we're committed to. Paul wheedled, cajoled, condemned, persuaded, celebrated, presented himself as a rhetorical foil, mirror, and standard. Paul wanted the Church to be and do something, and that something was at times counter what the Church was. Not at times: was often counter what it was. We can't wait for something to be perfect before we commit ourselves to it. And once committed, it becomes our task to speak against it, now and then, even as we stand for it and with it? Does this make sense?

Allegiance doesn't mean total alignment. Allegiance doesn't mean total alignment.

In the same way patriotism expresses itself in criticism of the ways one's nation fails, over against nationalism, which silences criticism, so giving our allegiance to something means we do it fully. and critically. And to do it fully is to now and then sit when

we're told to stand or sit when we're told to leave. It just is. Paul spends most of the New Testament correcting people's failures, but he never, ever quits the Church. And that's...remarkable, really.

So while we could talk about how important it is for the Church's voice to help us confirm the work we believe God has called us to, or talk about how it is good to be called to a work that we're not necessarily in charge of, what I really want us to think about this morning is our allegiances.

Questions:

To be alive is to make allegiances; but what or who are we loyal to? Because what or who we're loyal to will necessarily determine what we condemn. And there is a fight, largely unnoticed, for your loyalties and allegiance. Today Paul aligned himself with the Church, and never unaffiliated, never gave up his allegiance, even though the Church was rarely in alignment with him. He never ghosted, never gave up, never abandoned this institution, this People of God, that he knew God was present in, despite all the ways they got God wrong. That's an example to live up to. Living up to it starts by questioning our own allegiances. So let's.

What institutions and people are you loyal to? How does your loyalty express itself?