

***Message: Acts 11:19-30:  
Witnesses to the Ends of the Earth III: Antioch  
Happenings***

***Introduction:***

Last week we saw as God poured out the Holy Spirit in an undeniably public way upon Gentiles. Nobody looked for this, expected this. It was a huge deal, witnessed--well: Facilitated!--by the most important Apostle, Peter. He brought witnesses with him, and took the news to the Church in Jerusalem. We talked about Peter's realizations, his awareness that God was way more merciful than he'd thought God was. And in that scene the Church realizes that God wants all People to be a part of His People, that God's mercy is for more than those who were born Jewish. Luke gives a huge chunk of Acts to this moment, and from here on out we see his focus shift. He begins to talk about this Gospel going "to the ends of the earth," that is, throughout the Roman Empire. And we'll begin to see the very political, very important, very demanding conversations that the Church has to have about just how "jewish" these Gentile Christians have to be.

But first, in today's passage, we're introduced to Antioch. It's a city, not a person, and Antioch functions

as a critical center for the rest of Acts. The congregation in Antioch becomes an enormously important congregation for the Church. Today we'll talk about the budding relationship between Antioch and Jerusalem, and how it could matter for us.

First, of course: Prayer!

### ***Prayer:***

Today's passage starts with a reminder of what we mentioned last week, which was this idea that for the first Jewish Christians, they almost certainly thought that when Jesus told them they'd "bear witness" to him "to the ends of the Earth," that what they heard was a mandate to go to Jewish people, not Gentiles. Luke takes us back to that original diaspora of frightened Jesus' followers. We read:

***19 Now 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.***

Phoenicia was a coastal region that ran from Judea to what we think of as Turkey. It was a region, not a

specific Roman Province, and was technically in the “Syria” we keep hearing about in Acts, which is more or less where Syria is today. Antioch was at the very northern end of Syria, and an incredibly important town in ancient history, and particularly in ancient Christian history. It’s in Turkey, now. Some of these Jewish Christians even got on a boat and sailed to Cyprus to tell their fellow Jews about what God had done through Jesus. This wasn’t that unusual for a Hellenistic Jew, more so for a Judean, of course.

***Insert Map:***

But these faithful people, men and women, were Jewish Christians looking for Hellenistic Jews so that they could explain to them what happened to Jesus.

***20 Some 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.***

Look at this map again. Look how far away Cyrene is. Remember that Cyprus was an island place. First, it’s no surprise men from these two places end up in Antioch, because Antioch was a port city and these are

ports. But beyond that, I think it's compelling that these far-flung Hellenistic Jewish Christians, from far away port towns and an island, not normal, regular places, are the ones who just began talking to Gentiles, Greeks, about Jesus. There would have been fewer Hellenistic Jews in these places; they would have been a little more relaxed about interacting with Gentiles, because they would have had to. Luke points out that it's not the Jerusalem insiders who go to the Gentiles, but the Hellenistic outsiders.

***21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.***

There's no mention, now, of the Holy Spirit causing a huge ruckus like the Spirit did at Cornelius' house. People will argue that the Spirit only makes a huge scene when new people groups are brought into the family of God. I'm pretty unwilling to be all that dogmatic when it comes to what the Spirit can or can't do, honestly.

If we read closely we realize that there are sort of two separate communities of Christians happening in Antioch, now. There's one Church, one congregation,

but for the first time we have a situation in which there are Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and while there's a period of union, we'll realize soon in Acts that the confusion about how to live together in light of their huge cultural divisions will come to a head.

But word reaches the Jerusalem congregation that Antioch is going gangbusters. So they send some help.

***Barnabas, again!***

***22 News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When 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. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.***

Notice: The Jerusalem congregation doesn't have to send someone to encourage them. They do because they genuinely want to encourage this new congregation. The timeline is choppy, but Luke presents this as happening after the Spirit has come upon Gentiles. This is the first congregation in which

Jews and Gentiles are joining together, and the mother church in Jerusalem wants to nurture this. They send Barnabas, whose name means “Son of Encouragement,” because what this congregation needs is encouragement. This is the model of a church that has resources sending leadership to help encourage another congregation, despite having no specific connection to them. And Barnabas’ presence matters for this little congregation: As a result of his presence, the news, which is really good news, of what God has done in Jesus for the world gets shared, and people get what it means for them.

But part of what makes Barnabas so encouraging is because of his loyalty to his friends.

### ***Map, Again:***

#### ***Getting Saul:***

Antioch isn’t that far from Tarsus. About 150 miles; Tarsus itself is about 600 miles from Jerusalem. Barnabas is practically next door to Saul. Or to where Saul was from, where he and other faithful Christians sent Saul after Hellenistic Jews tried to kill him. So Barnabas decides to go look for Saul.

***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.***

Barnabas finds Saul, who was probably peeving off somebody, brings him back to Tarsus, and they spend a year teaching people about God. It's a good year. Everything about today's passage speaks to this idea that the church at Antioch is a healthy congregation, doing all the right things. And it's the first place where those who follow Jesus are called Christians.

Christians means "little Christs." It's a name that is pejorative, a slander that other people would have called these folks, who never stop talking about Christ. The Church did a powerful thing, though, which was to take this pejorative slander and claim it, and say that they weren't just talking about Christ, they were becoming "little Christs," which is what Christians actually means.

We'll learn more about the Christians in Antioch, their, oh, leadership community, and Saul and Barnabas in

the next couple of chapters, but Luke keeps the story he's telling moving along this way:

### ***Jerusalem Prophets:***

***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.***

This famine that Agabus prophesied about becomes an enormously important backdrop to the New Testament. Part of Saul, soon called Paul's, journeys around Rome are to collect funds for the Jerusalem church, which is hit hard by this Judean famine. Antioch sets apart Barnabas and Saul as emissaries back to Jerusalem, and they send these two with a special gift of cash to help the Jerusalem Christians stay alive.

### ***Summary:***

What's weird to me about today's passage is just how little actually takes place. It feels almost like a filler passage:

The Antioch church is growing, Jew and Gentile together. The Jerusalem church hears. They send Barnabas to encourage the congregation. Barnabas goes, and decides to get Saul to help him. They build the congregation for a year. Prophets from the Jerusalem church come, and one of them prophecies a famine. The Antioch church decides to make sure the Jerusalem church survives it when it comes. They send Barnabas and Saul with money to help.

What I love about this is just how much is actually happening here. Antioch is become a new center for the Church, a sort of Gentile center. The Church has two poles, right now: Jerusalem, and Antioch, and they are mutually engaging each other. Without Jerusalem's investment in Antioch, seen in sending Barnabas and these prophets, too, the Christian community in Antioch would have been immeasurably worse off. Without the money Antioch sends to Jerusalem--sends before famine even comes--perhaps some of the Christians in the Jerusalem church wouldn't have survived. And we'll see over the next few chapters

these two congregations interacting together, partnering together, working together, and, oh, deeply disagreeing, too, but in a way that leads to constructive, healthy growth for the Church.

### ***Noticing: Help***

What I want us to notice now though is the way Jerusalem offered help to Antioch, and Antioch received it. How Antioch then offered help in return to Jerusalem, and Jerusalem will receive it.

Again: Jerusalem heard news from Antioch, and offered them what they needed, and Antioch welcomed it. Antioch learned that Jerusalem would need help soon, and gave what they could in anticipation of that need.

### ***Noticing: Trust***

There's trust behind this, of course: Belief that the other party, the other group, is on our side. In this case, there's a trust that the other really is trying to become a "little Christ," trying to become like Jesus, and so, we can make assumptions about their character and their integrity. There's the trust in God and the Spirit, that the news from Agabus is true. There's trust in themselves, that what they see with

their own eyes of God is believable, actionable.

***Noticing: Help, Again:***

But the basic relational movement in this scene is this: Help is given and received and given back. It is offered and welcomed and then returned.

And so the questions I have for us are these:

***Questions:***

First: Who needs help? What have we heard? What do we know?

Secondly: What help have we been offered? Have we welcomed it? And if not...why? It may be because that, oh, umbrella of trust is absent. And I understand how that can happen. But if it's because we somehow believe that self-reliance is a virtue, we have to re-examine that. To decide not to "trouble someone else" is to keep from them the chance to bless us, which is what Christians are called to do for one another.

A last question: How can we return the help we've been offered?

If we're looking at principles to take from this early,

critical, and developing relationship of mutual blessing in the Church, I think at least one principle is the idea that Christians, out of everyone, ought to offer, welcome, and return help to each other when they're able. To withhold help or reject it aren't Christian virtues.

### ***Attending To The Audience:***

But I know who I'm talking to. I'm talking to people who will always offer help, but will not always welcome it. In the church we don't get to just be givers; we also have to be receivers. It's something we rehearse every time we have our threefold communion. But that's not enough; it's twice a year, and we're not always around, right? There's no mention, in this moment, that Antioch needed the encouragement Jerusalem sent in the form of Barnabas, no request for his help teaching and leading them. But Barnabas went to get Saul because he clearly wanted his help in helping Antioch. In a similar way, when we do have needs, it's not good, maybe not even Christian, to just wait around and hope that someone will show up with what we need. It is important that we ask, that we go the way Barnabas went.

And in this offering of help, receiving of help, returning

of help, the moral of the story is that the church grew--grew in faith, grew in number, grew in capacity. It's directly because they received the help that they were given in the form of Barnabas that Antioch was healthy enough, more than a year later, to give help in turn. All of us have received help from someone in this room, whether or not we had the Christian bravery to ask for it, and all of us, I hope, have returned help--if not to those who helped us, then to others.

The most immediate application is to ask who we, as a congregation, can help, and pray that they would receive our help, and consider someday that they might return it to us when we ourselves need it. That's ongoing, honestly: With tenants, with the Food Pantry partners, with other Brethren congregations around Columbus, but also regionally through our representation at the Seminary, on the Regional Leadership Team and Mission and Camp Teams and boards. And because that's ongoing, I think it's better that we ask ourselves, again:

***Conclusion:***

Who needs help? What have we heard? They aren't under any obligation to receive our help, but maybe we are under an obligation to offer it.

What help have we been offered? Have we welcomed it? We're not forced to, at all, but it's good to know why we do or don't want the help that we've been offered.

How can we return the help we've been offered? There came a moment, the right time, months after they received help, when Antioch was able to bless Jerusalem. They took the opportunity. Are we sensitive to the opportunities God gives us to return blessing when we receive it?

If the idea of any of these things--offering help, welcoming it, or returning it--feels uncomfortable, we really should ask ourselves why, and then take the next step to consider our trust levels lately: How much we trust God, trust others, even ourselves right now.

I'm sure whatever we discover as we offer and welcome and return help, if we risk the littlest bit of trust in God or someone else, we'll be blessed.