

Holy Troublemakers

Trinity CRC, August 30, 2020 AM
Installation of new Office Bearers

Acts 13:1-12,42-52
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Beloved Church,

Sometimes I can't help but feel that we've made church a lot more institutional than it started out as. Not that protocols and good order don't have their place for an institution to work well. The Bible even tells us in First Corinthians that things should be done in good order. It seems, however, that Christians often get disillusioned and lose zeal for Christ and the Gospel when they get plunked into a church and everything is prescribed and organized. That's what the institutional church can do. Doesn't have to be the case, but it can happen quite easily. We lose sight of Christ and just live by rules and protocols. We end up hearing things like, "That's not how we do things around here" instead of "Let's do this new thing because it furthers the Gospel!"

For that reason, it's good to go back to the book of Acts periodically and see what church looked like in the early days. In Acts 13, we get a glimpse of at least part of the office bearer selection protocol, which is fitting since we've just installed our new elders and deacons this morning. But more than that, Acts 13 is the story of Gospel-centred and Spirit-directed leadership in the church.

Recognizing the Spirit

One of the first things that grabs my attention in this chapter is that the church leaders recognize the leading of the Holy Spirit and follow or obey. The leaders recorded in v.1 include people who had been appointed to serve the church in Antioch.

There are all kinds of things to notice about this church and its awareness of and willingness to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. I'm going to fairly quickly list several of them.

First of all, it was generous.

In Acts 13, we meet the Antioch church. She had recently made a donation toward famine-relief for the church in Jerusalem which was really struggling. Paul and Barnabas had delivered that money and were just coming back. So we note that God's people in Antioch were generous. They put others ahead of themselves. That's a sign that they were a Spirit-directed church. If there was a need that the Holy Spirit brought to their attention, they responded with joy and generosity.

Secondly, it was listening

We notice in v.2 that while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said something to them about new leaders. They heard the Holy Spirit speaking to them. They discerned the leading of the Spirit. They had ears to hear and were eager to respond. And I think we can safely assume that they heard the Spirit because they were busy staying in touch with the Spirit as they gathered for worship and also spent time in prayer and fasting. The early church, already clearly spelled out in Acts 2, was busy worshiping, praying and fasting. In those ways, she grew in her ability to hear and willingness to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, it was missional.

The last verse of chapter 12 tells us that Barnabas and Paul had just returned to Antioch from their trip to Jerusalem. Here the story of the early church's expansion shifts from its focus on the ministry of Peter which we heard about in chapter 12 last week and moves to Paul's missionary journeys starting here in chapter 13. Along with that, the focus moves more from Jerusalem and the Jews to the wider world of the Gentiles.

The author of the book of Acts is Luke who also wrote the Gospel of Luke. He himself is a Gentile and he writes this book to help us see how the Holy Spirit—at the command of Christ—is pushing the boundaries of the church outward. This chapter starts in Antioch which is clearly outside of what is Israel of that day, perhaps about 300 km north. From there the church spreads as the Spirit leads and empowers. But Antioch was one of the first strongholds of the Gospel that took root outside of Jewish territory. Remember, Acts is the story of Gospel going out from Jerusalem and Judea to ends of the earth. The Spirit-directed church of Antioch was eager to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ spread!

Ever since Pentecost, the Gospel had been spreading abroad. One commentator says, ...the first half of the book is predominantly concerned with the mission of the young church to Jerusalem and Judea, with forays into Samaria and to various Gentiles but nothing too ambitious as yet. In other words, Jesus has been announced as the true Messiah, the God-given and God-anointed King of Israel, the one who would bring redemption to Israel and to the world.

We can rejoice that the early church was pushing the boundaries beyond Israel because we are recipients of that obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Fourthly, the church is diverse

Along with spreading out or being missional comes diversity. The believers are not just Jewish converts. In chapter 13, the leaders of the Antioch Church that are recorded are called prophets and teachers, the office bearers of the day. The four men listed are Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius and Manaen.

Barnabas is known as the Son of Thunder and his name means encourager. He is a Jewish convert. Then we read of the man called Simeon. He's also called Niger which—interestingly—is the Latin word for dark or black skin from which the word negro also comes. We aren't sure but some believe he could very well be Simon of Cyrene, possibly a friend of the next guys who is called Lucius of Cyrene. Cyrene was the capital city of Cyrenaica which is in modern Libya in north Africa. Simon of Cyrene is the guy who "just happened to be" in Jerusalem walking by as Jesus was going to the cross and the Roman soldiers made him carry the cross of Jesus. That moment changed his life and, clearly, he returned to Cyrene sharing what happened to him and to Jesus! Whether Simeon is Simon or not, we can safely surmise that he is dark-skinned as would be Lucius from Cyrene. We don't know much at all about Lucius except that he's from Cyrene as well. Both are almost certainly dark-skinned African men. And then there's Manaen who we are told is a member of Herod the tetrarch's household. So, he's obviously a Gentile—Roman—who converted to Christianity. That's a pretty diverse group of leaders in the Antioch church which is likely a good representation of the larger group.

It's obvious that the Spirit has been leading the church outward. The gospel has gone from Jerusalem as far as Antioch where we find clear evidence of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic church—Jews, Gentiles, brown and black people. And regardless of racial or ethnic background, these people have become one in Christ and are now leading the church because of their devotion to Jesus.

We must be thankful to God that the list of leaders shown in Acts 13 is diverse. Jews, Gentile, black, brown or white. This reminds us that Jesus came for all people, including African-Canadians, Black Canadians, Indigenous peoples, Caribbean people, Nigerians, Ethiopians, Jews, Europeans, Asians, and the entire world. All are welcome in the family of God. Christ has come for all peoples.

Just as he reached out to all sorts of people while he walked the dusty roads of Palestine, so, when the Spirit came, he propelled the gospel to all peoples and makes us one—regardless of skin colour and ethnicity. We are united in Christ and a mosaic of beauty in the eyes of God as well as a light to the world where we are seeing racial tensions on a daily basis. Such ugly tensions should never be the case in the church. Our God is colour-blind. He sees us all through the lens of Jesus. We are one in him.

Praise God for the diversity in the church. It's a mark of being Spirit-directed.

There are more things to notice but for now let's leave it at these four. The church recognized the Spirit's work in their midst. That led them to listening, generosity, mission and unity in diversity.

Holy Troublemakers

The second major point I invite us to think about is the reputation of the church as holy troublemakers. **Jesus'** love for all sorts of people made him a troublemaker among the Jewish elites of the day. They had their vision of what God's people should look like. They allowed their vision to shape the organization, if you will, and so to thwart their ability to see God's greater plan of redeeming all kinds of people. They looked at Jesus from their own seat of power and saw their organization being threatened by a man who claimed to be from God. Jesus was a troublemaker to them.

And how was Jesus a troublemaker? Well, we know all sorts of ways that Jesus rubbed the Jewish leaders the wrong way. He cared more about the mission of God to bring the Gospel to all peoples than he did about keeping the religious establishment happy. He poked the religious leaders in the eye every chance he got. Not that he was looking to do that. He was just looking to bring people into the joy and freedom of God. He said, for example, "I have come that you may have life and have to the full!" Jesus didn't uphold the institution per se; he held up the values of God's kingdom and lived them out.

So he did crazy things like hang out with sinners. These are the people who didn't have a place in the institutional church of the day. Boys and girls, Jesus ate at the home of Zacchaeus, a hated tax-collector. Why? Because Jesus saw how he was hurting. Zacchaeus was a persona non grata among the Jews. He was a traitor, as they saw him, because he was a Jew working for the Roman government! But Jesus just saw a man who needed to experience the love of God so he went to Zacchaeus' house. Our Lord was a troublemaker for befriending such a man.

Jesus shared water with a woman who was not only a Samaritan, but who'd been married and divorced several times. She drew water at noon each day so she wouldn't have to rub shoulders with the other women of the town who drew water in the morning. She lived a life of shame and didn't have a true place in her world. She didn't belong. So Jesus sat with her. He drank with her. He talked with her. He loved her. He welcomed her into the family of God. For this, he was a considered a troublemaker.

Jesus healed a man born blind. He wanted the man liberated to live a full life. But the Jewish institutional temple leadership protested that he did it on the Sabbath! They were not interested in the

man but in themselves and their power. But our Lord cared for the man. For that reason, he was considered a troublemaker.

Jesus went into the temple courts. And on at least one or two occasions he threw over the tables of the money changers and chased out the animals that were being sold there. He was considered a troublemaker by the religious establishment but he was concerned about all people—Jews and Gentiles alike—being able to worship God freely, without the expense and the limitations put on them by the temple-keepers.

Even as he went to the cross, my friends, our Lord Jesus was crucified not for any true wrongdoings but only because he got under the skin of the leaders of the religious institution who perceived him as a threat to their power. But Jesus was not interested in power for himself. He came to serve humanity so that all of us might know the grace and love and God. That we all might be able to live in the freedom that he gives. Jesus was a **holy** troublemaker, only truly interested in the well-being of humanity—both temporally and eternally. He rocked the boat of the institution but only for the good of all people.

Our calling today—both as office bearers and others—is to follow in the footsteps of our Lord. The early church in Acts faced opposition just like Jesus did. As the church spread, she was increasingly seen as a troublemaker. As I mentioned last week, the Jewish leaders managed to get Herod Agrippa on their side. We are told, the reigning king of the Jews himself (Herod, is trying) to squash this ridiculous nonsense (of the Christian faith) and prevent it spreading; but they have (all) failed. The chief priests have been left spluttering angrily into their beards in Jerusalem; Saul of Tarsus, the most prominent and violent of the Pharisaic persecutors, has been converted; and now Herod Agrippa, having had an unsuccessful attempt at killing off the church's main leadership, is himself suddenly cut down with a swift and fatal disease (at the end of chapter 12).

The church is breaking down walls between peoples. They are perceived as troublemakers in the world, but they are doing the holy work God ordained of drawing all sorts of people to Christ. They are **holy** troublemakers, in that sense. They are doing the holy work of rebuilding what sin has torn apart. The church is bringing people back together who were torn apart by sin at the Tower of Babel. Redeemed through Christ, we are able to **put** the focus on God where it belongs and not think that we can make a name for ourselves. The name we profess and the One we give glory to is God for his redeeming and restoring love in Christ. We do this only through the ever-present Holy Spirit who makes us all one, uniting us in our diversity.

Chapter 12 ends the first half of the book in an almost comedic way as it describes how Herod dies in v.23 after taking glory for himself, always trying to secure his own kingdom. But, says v.24, the word of God continued to increase and spread.

That, my friends, is so important to remember. Herod dies, but not the word of God. It grows. People die. But the word of God lives. Sometimes people think they are important. Herod figured he was a big shot. But God took him off the job in short order and the word of God increased and spread. Herod wanted to squelch the church and the spread of the word, but God said, "Oh no you don't!!"

I think that's a great reminder to everyone of us. Whether we're a leader in the church or not, we all need to remember that we're not that important. The church will survive without any one of us. It doesn't grow because we're so good or important. It grows because God is so good and the gospel, the word of God is so good and true and powerful. God does with the Spirit-inspired word what we can't do.

He builds his church. And Herod can't stop it. The leaders of the temple couldn't stop it. I can't stop it. You can't stop it. God moved the church in Acts 13 to send Paul and Barnabas out. And out they went, spreading the gospel. And those who opposed them—like the sorcerer Bar-Jesus in v.6—soon learned that God is all-powerful and you can't stand in the way of spreading his word! Right then and there, the Roman proconsul believed! In Pisidian Antioch—the story recorded in the middle of chapter 13 which we didn't read—Paul preaches more and within days, we read in v.43, many people followed Paul and Barnabas as they were following Jesus. And a little later, almost the whole city comes to listen to the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ. V.48 says again that many believed. So we better get in line rather than get in the way because Spirit empowered church is unstoppable, regardless of the opposition.

People of all sort of backgrounds came to hear the word of God and believe in Jesus Christ. All are welcome. So, in some way, the church should be leading the charge in our day for equality for peoples of all colours. Sin has made us elevate one group above another. Think of things as wicked as the residential schools that separated children from their parents in Canada, think of slavery and apartheid. We need to seriously confess how the church has sometimes been at the forefront of causing disunity and inequality throughout the centuries. We've done it in Canada, in South Africa and in many other places. It takes courage to stand against the division sin has brought into our world. But we have the Holy Spirit to empower us and we need our church leaders—like the ones in Acts 13—to help us love our neighbours—whoever they are—the way Jesus showed us.

I love that this church has colour and diversity. God loves that too. But as far as we've come, we have still farther to go. We need to be holy troublemakers in our world today. Not smashing windows and lighting fires. But preaching the gospel. It stirs souls as the love of Christ burns in people's hearts and changes their minds about people they previously didn't know, people they didn't trust or love because of some external difference in colour or culture or traditions.

I pray that we never settle for less than the fullest expression of the Gospel we can live out. Let us be a people who are known as a worshiping and praying and fasting community who loves God and loves our neighbours for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel. Let us be ready to oppose those who trample on people and join with Jesus in lifting up the sinners, the hurting and the alienated. Thank you, deacons, for helping us do so through supporting ministries like the Mosaic Centre and the Rock Outreach. Keep challenging us to do more. Congregation, let us be holy troublemakers who do not sit idle when our fellow human beings are being oppressed and held in financial bondage or spiritual bondage or anything else that enslaves. As pastors, elders and deacons, we need to hear the Holy Spirit calling us to action today, to lead the church in helping people be free from all that enslaves and to live in the freedom and power of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Congregation, let us never settle for allowing the institution of church to hold us back. Instead, let us as members of that church be champions of the Gospel who know and love Jesus and desire to see others—all kinds of people—knowing and loving him too. To that end, let us pray always, "Come, Holy Spirit, come! Empower us with vision and passion for ministry."