

January 25, 2009
3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Proclaim the Word of Christ

Pastor Michael Ewart
Text: Acts 13:1-5

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I can remember once as a kid spinning around in circles as fast as I could, as many times as I could until I fell over. When I stopped spinning and fell over, it felt (as sure as if it were real) that world was still spinning around me. You've done that before, right? You know how that feels. You try to get up and walk, but you stumble because things aren't standing still. Everything is moving.

This feeling I just described is how I feel most days in this modern, fast-changing world we now live in. The rate of change is staggering, isn't it? You think you've got a grasp on one technology and – zoom – it's already zipped past you. A new and better technology has taken its place. Or... you feel you're finally getting comfortable in your job. Then suddenly they change all the rules on you. You have to do thing in a new and "better" way that sure doesn't seem better to you. Or maybe you lose your job and have to find a new one where of course everything is completely different. Even something so simple as the look of our neighborhood Burger King. It never changed. It was always the same. But if you haven't noticed already, take a look at it again when you go home today. It's changed too! You almost can't recognized the remodeled building. Everything is changing. It's dizzying, isn't it?

And as if it's not enough that the world is changing, our church is changing too. In the past 2 ½ years 4 out of our 6 called workers have changed and we also have different school and church secretaries. We have changed our entire structure, including the constitution and bylaws.

Are you feeling dizzy? I know I am. How do we keep our bearings? How do we keep from stumbling around? How can we anchor ourselves and keep our sense of direction, both in our personal life and as a congregation? We can learn something from skaters. I've always been amazed at how they can spin around so many times without losing their sense of balance. If you watch them closely, they keep their head and eyes fixed an object as their body turns. Then when their head has to turn, they turn it around as quickly as possible and refocus on that same object, repeating that over and over again with each turn.

As life spins all around us, we will keep our bearings by keeping focused on one object that always keeps us balanced, firmly grounded, and secure. And that is the cross. The cross is the proof that we are forgiven. That we are loved by God. That eternity awaits us. Whatever else moves and changes in our life or in our congregation, that cross never moves. It never changes. It is always there testifying to who we are in Christ Jesus and where we are going. It also reminds us of our mission both as individuals and as a congregation: Our mission is to proclaim the message about that cross. We are to proclaim the word of Christ so that others in this spinning world can also get their bearings, stop the spinning and come to know God's truth.

In today's sermon text, we read about a church that was in the midst of great changes. Let's take a closer look at that church, and learn how to focus our church... and our lives... on our unchanging mission to proclaim the unmoving cross of Christ.

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.

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." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

The church in Antioch was a church in transition. The church was apparently formed when Christian Jews, fleeing persecution in Jerusalem, went north to Antioch. There they preached the good news about Jesus, and many believed. There many Greeks also heard and believed. But for the most part, the Gospel was preached to the Jews. At that time God was making it more and more clear to his church that the Gospel is for all people. That was one of the huge changes in thinking going on in this church.

The church in Antioch was richly blessed by God. When believers in Jerusalem heard that a growing church was formed in Antioch, they sent Barnabas there to encourage the young group, and to teach them God's truth in more detail. The book of Acts also tells us that Barnabas went to Paul and brought him to Antioch also. For a whole year, these two great preachers and teachers served this congregation. But our text tells us that there were also three other prophets and teachers. (By the way, here the word prophet is likely used in its broader sense... one who proclaims God's word by God's authority.) There was Lucius of Cyrene (most likely one of the founders of the church.) Simeon who was called Niger, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch. These three men are mentioned together with Paul and Barnabas, and apparently had similar gifts of preaching and teaching. What a blessing for this congregation to have 5 excellent preachers to instruct them in God's truth!

The congregation also seemed to be a very diverse group. Simeon was likely a man with dark colored skin, Lucius was from Cyrene in North Africa, Manaen was brought up with Herod, the same one who beheaded John the Baptist. Barnabas was from the island of Cyprus. In addition to the Jews in the congregation, there were also a fair number of Greeks. But all these people had something in common... they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. Every single one of them had their focus on the empty cross of Christ. This diverse group was one in faith. They had a single purpose... to glorify God by serving him, sharing his Word and loving one another.

APPL: Friends, we are a diverse group here at Good Shepherd as well. Just taking a stab in the dark, I guess we have members who have a net worth ranging from more than a million dollars, to a net worth of negative several thousand. We have some lifelong Christians, and some who are new to the faith. We have members ranging in age from newborn up to age... take a look around... maybe 39? We have some ethnic diversity, though it would be great if we'd see more. Great diversity. Yet complete unity. We all alike recognize we are sinners unworthy of God's love and kindness. We all alike fix our eyes on the empty cross of Christ because we know there we find God's unconditional forgiveness and acceptance. We have one faith, and a single purpose... to glorify God by serving him, sharing his Word and loving one another.

Back to our text. In a fast-growing congregation with gifted leaders (like the one described in this text), sinful pride is a temptation. The attitude can easily become "look at us and what we're doing!" instead of "look at our great God and Savior who did all this!" But this wasn't a problem in Antioch. When the Holy Spirit spoke to them, we are told they were "*serving the Lord and fasting.*" They trusted fully in the Lord, and they *looked to him for*

guidance. Despite their blessings and successes, they believed that without God, they could do nothing. When determining God's will for their congregation, they didn't make their own plans. They asked the Lord to reveal **his** plan. And God did just that. The Holy Spirit told the congregation to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the work he had purposed them to do.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let's follow the example of the church in Antioch whenever we face a time of transition. Pray to God earnestly. Wait for the Lord to make his will known. Our sinful nature doesn't seek God's guidance. We want to do things our way and in our time. But you can be sure – our way is always the wrong way when we fail to take into account God's way. Be faithful in your service to God and in prayer! Rely upon the Lord and seek his guidance in all.

The church in Antioch not only listened to the Lord's instructions, *but they followed God's will also*. When the congregation understood that it was God's will that Barnabas and Saul were to be missionaries to the Gentiles, they willingly sent them out to do this work. Certainly, there were many logical reasons they had to doubt this decision! Doubters in the church might reason: Two-fifths of our church leadership is being sent away! Our church is growing. We need more leadership, not less. The people know and love Paul and Barnabas – we need them here. And what's this idea of sending them to the Gentiles – not to God's chosen people the Jews? And let's not forget how dangerous travel is these days. What if Paul and Barnabas are beaten, robbed or killed? What if their ship sinks in a storm? There were plenty of reasons to doubt God's directions. But the church in Antioch didn't worry about such things.

Instead, they again showed their full reliance upon the Lord by praying and fasting. They knew their will was not important in this matter. God declared his will, and it would be done. In a commissioning service, they laid their hands on the two missionaries and sent them on their way.

How often have we failed to do the Lord's will even when we knew what it is. And we are very good at thinking up plenty of logical reasons not to follow the Lord's will. "I know that I honor, worship and praise God when I give my offering at church. But if do I won't have enough for... a car / school / fix the roof / etc." We know the Lord's will, but we don't do it. "I would come to the Sunday morning Bible class / mid-week Lenten services etc., but I too much to do around the house / or... I need to relax after work / etc." We know the Lord's will, but we don't do it. "I know I should tell my friend / neighbor / relative about the dangers of the sin and the salvation we have in Christ, but I don't bring up religion because they don't want hear it / I don't know what to say / they'll probably think less of me / there are more important things to discuss / they wouldn't come to church anyway." When we fail to seek God's guidance, we are sinning. When we know God's will and don't do it, we are also sinning against God. We are forfeiting God's blessings. We are inviting his displeasure and anger. We can be sure our decisions will be bad when we fail to seek God's guidance or fail to heed his will.

Confess these sins to God, and plead to him for mercy. Then look to that empty cross once again, and know that Jesus died for these sins too. You are forgiven.

Again, we look at the text. Paul and Barnabas set off for the island of Cyprus. This was Barnabas' homeland, so he would have been the tour guide on this trip. But they don't waste any time sightseeing. "*When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.*"

They knew their purpose was to preach God's Word, and that's exactly what they did throughout the island of Cyprus. They first started preaching at the Jewish synagogue. This was

the best place to begin because the Savior had been promised first to the Jews. They had the Old Testament and its prophecies of the Messiah. They had the truth, but they didn't yet hear of the completion of God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. What were the results of this preaching? Our text is silent. Perhaps we can assume that since nothing is mentioned, the results were not spectacular. But this isn't the point. Paul and Barnabas were faithfully preaching the Word as the Holy Spirit had instructed them. They moved throughout the island preaching God's Word.

Paul and Barnabas show us that God's Word must be preached no matter what circumstances we may face. Has our church had a large turnover in staff in the last 2 ½ years? It doesn't matter... God's Word must be proclaimed. Is our facility here aging and maybe not as modern as we would like for bringing in guests? In spite of this, God's Word must be proclaimed. Is our country suffering one of the biggest financial crises ever? And are our personal finances also suffering? God's Word must be preached. Do our attempts to share Christ sometimes fail? Do we sometimes meet hostility? Do some change their opinion about us to one that is unfavorable? God's Word must be proclaimed. Whatever the obstacles, whatever the challenges, whatever the failures, whatever the shortcomings, whether we're settled times or time of transition, whether we are comfortable or very uncomfortable, always, all the time, God's Word must be proclaimed.

The empty cross of Christ is always before us. It is always the evidence of our forgiveness and God's love. It is always the answer to our biggest problems. And it's always the answer to the biggest problems faced by every single person in Omaha not worshipping Christ today. The Word of Christ must be proclaimed.

Keep this stable, unmoving truth before your eyes, even if all else seems to be spinning around you. Follow the example of the church in Antioch and of Paul and Barnabas. Seek God's guidance. Follow his will, no matter what. Proclaim his Word no matter what the circumstances. And trust in God's power which always works for the fulfillment of his promises. When we do these things... the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will guard and keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.