

COME TOGETHER

ACTS 11:19-30/GALATIANS 2:11-14

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

JUNE 29, 2014/3RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Today is the first Sunday of our summer worship schedule, and we are beginning our summer worship series called “The Early Church, Our Church” where we will be looking at seven cities, seven churches full of ordinary people, and looking at what they have to say to *our* church in *this* city all these years later.

Summer is a time when many of us travel (as we see this morning! ☺). We see new cities and towns, perhaps even new countries. We eat in different places, we sleep in different beds, we possibly visit different churches.

In general we are exposed to new and different ways of doing things. Traveling to different places and seeing new things can teach us things.

So, this summer we’re going to go on a bit of a road trip through the seven cities of Paul’s missionary journeys. Today we begin with Antioch.

[A quick word at the outset of this worship series. Due to the fact that I will be away for a number of Sundays this summer, whether because of the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in Winnipeg next week or holidays later in July and early August, this worship series might be somewhat sporadic in how it unfolds. Occasionally, guest speakers may depart from this theme and do their own thing. But we will meander our way through these seven cities over the course of the next ten weeks or so of summer.]

To begin with, it’s worth pointing out that even the very fact that we’re *talking* about cities is remarkable. The gospel first spread through ordinary people in ordinary cities and towns throughout the ancient near eastern world.

All the strange names you encounter in Scripture, all the hard to pronounce names, all the places you’ve never heard of—each one of these bears witness to the theological truth that God has always advanced his mission and story through very ordinary means.

This should not be surprising to us. After all, Jesus is God made flesh, God *with us*—Immanuel—God *with us* in our cities and streets, *with us* in dusty towns and synagogues and churches, *with us* in our houses and markets.

The presence of ordinary cities and ordinary churches in our Scriptures is yet another reminder that Christianity is not primarily some ethereal philosophy or metaphysical system, though it has implications in these realms too; it is, rather, fundamentally a *story* and a story of God at work in the spaces and places of ordinary human lives.

OK, so where is Antioch? What kind of a place was it? And what can we learn from it for today?

[PowerPoint]

Antioch

- today, the city is called Antakya and is in the southernmost part of Turkey
- then, a city in Syria
- third largest city of the Roman Empire at that time
- population of half a million
- seat of Roman provincial administration of Syria
- strategic place in the eastern part of the Empire – trade hub, lots of roads going in and out; harbor on the Mediterranean... center of travel and trade between the east and the west
- in time, it will become the capital of Gentile Christianity

We should rewind a bit. You'll recall that at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to dwell upon the believers in Jerusalem.

After that, these spirit-filled followers of Jesus set out to spread the good news around the known world. And they did! They traveled far and wide, covering long distances in spreading the good news about Jesus Christ.

It is roughly five hundred kilometers from Jerusalem to Antioch. This is an afternoon drive to Lethbridge to Edmonton for modern Canadians used to swallowing up huge distances by car, but it was of course a very long journey in the ancient world!

As they traveled and shared, they discovered a very peculiar thing; the God of Israel—the God that was assumed to be *only* Israel's God—was flinging wide open the gates to include all kinds of people into the family of God.

Gentiles had previously been thought to be unclean, sinners by good God-fearing Jews, but now the Spirit of God was showing these new believers that God loves all people the same, that all are welcomed in, that all are offered forgiveness and salvation based on what Christ has accomplished in his life, teachings, cross, and empty tomb!

It took the fledgling church a while to get used to this idea. The first Christians were primarily Jews, and it took them a while to unlearn long-practiced habits of exclusivity, long-held beliefs about purity and uncleanness and insiders and outsiders.

But this was not the case, at least initially, in Antioch.

The city had a large Jewish population which made it an initial target for the first missionaries, including Peter and, later, by Paul and Barnabas, as our text from Acts makes clear.

But at least some of the initial missionaries to Antioch were also Gentiles. Acts 11:20 says that “some men of Cyprus and Cyrene” proclaimed the Lord Jesus to the largely Greek population. And a great number of them were became believers and turned to the Lord.

This news is what causes the Jerusalem church to send Barnabas and, later, Paul. They wanted to ensure that these new Christians were helped along in the faith. It says that Paul (called Saul still here) and Barnabas taught the church in Antioch for a year and that it was here, in Antioch, that the believers were first called “Christians.”

(The word “Christ” is a Greek translation of “Messiah” [“anointed one”] and means “follower of Christ” or one who “adheres or belongs to Christ.”)

Antioch was a strategic city geographically. We already noted this. It was also a strategic city theologically and missionally.

It was a diverse, multicultural city, and it was a place where the first church was characterized by diverse groups of people—Greeks, Jews, and all kinds of other people—who came together under the banner of Jesus Christ.

They not only came together to celebrate and worship the risen Jesus. They also united in mission and common purpose. Verses 27-30 talk about how this new church full of all kinds of different people heard a prophecy about a famine that was about to overtake the known world.

These new Christians—these people who *adhered* to Jesus—determined that each, according to their ability would send relief to the mother church in Jerusalem!

The brand new converts were coming to the aid of those who had long been a part of the story of God!

Ironically, this is happening in twenty first century Christianity today as well, if in a bit of a different way. Historically, the church went *out* from places like Germany, England, Spain, Portugal, and others, and brought the gospel (and all kinds of other unfortunate things) *to* places like Africa, South America, and Asia.

Today, the “west” (Europe and North America) is said to be post-Christian and the formerly evangelized/colonized nations from the global south are sending missionaries to *us*.

But it’s not all roses in Antioch, as our second text from Galatians 2 makes clear.

Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch when Peter arrives on the scene. Peter, it seems isn’t quite ready to entirely relinquish old divisions.

He was happily eating and fellowshiping with Gentiles, setting aside old Jewish regulation about not consuming Gentile food or drink.

Until certain *other* people “came from James.” Then, Peter refused to associate with the people he had formerly been eating with!

Paul says that Peter did this because he was afraid of the “circumcision faction.” This is simply a way of referring to a group who believed that following Jesus authentically required continuing to observe Jewish ritual and purity regulations, whether dietary or otherwise.

So Peter goes back and forth, depending on who is present.

As I said, it took a while for the early church to unlearn some of their old habits in light of the newness of life offered by Jesus.

It’s interesting to note how Paul describes Peter’s behaviour here (acting one way with Gentile Christians and another way with this faction of Jewish Christians). Listen to how Paul puts it:

They were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel.

For Paul, the very truth of the gospel is at stake when people erect old divisions that have been abolished by Jesus Christ.

Paul makes this even clearer in a letter to a difference church in a different city (a city Stefan will be looking at next week). Ephesians 2:14-16:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Antioch was, in many ways, a model church in terms of how it put the truth of these words into practice. But it was full of imperfect human beings like you and I, and like you and I, they didn't always put the truth of what they knew and had experienced into practice, as they should have.

So, what does first century Antioch have to do with twenty-first century Lethbridge?

Quite a lot, actually, and in at least two main areas.

Diversity & Difference

We are still in the process of learning how truly be a diverse and hospitable people, all these long centuries later.

We can always do better at welcoming the stranger and of learning how to live and worship with people who are different from us.

There is increasing diversity in our global Mennonite family of faith. There are Mennonite churches all over the world.

Even here in Canada, we are a diverse bunch. On any given Sunday, we worship in at least fifteen different languages. Here in Alberta, we have Vietnamese, South Sudanese,

Chinese, Spanish, Chin, and other languages and people groups represented in our faith family.

This is truly worthy of celebration.

But often we worship in cultural and linguistic enclaves. We come together from time to time, to be sure, and we are united in the same provincial and national bodies. But we are not truly integrated as I hope we will one day be. It would be wonderful to see all these languages and people groups worshipping *together!*

And what about people whose theology and practice differs from our own, whether inside or outside of our Mennonite church? Often we build walls between one another based on hot button issues, as we discussed a few weeks ago. We have theological enclaves as well, even if these aren't as noticeable!

(We will be discussing this at the national Assembly in Winnipeg next week!)

I think that if the Apostle Paul were to observe some of the ways that our churches remain a bit fragmented, he would say the same thing to us as he said about Peter in Galatians 2.

You are not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel.

Whether in first century Antioch or twenty-first century Lethbridge, we must always be looking for ways to break down walls between people and to celebrate our common bond as human beings and as followers of Jesus.

Generosity

Those Christians in Antioch simply gave as they were able. They saw a need and they did what they could to meet it.

They were just getting their feet wet in this new reality that was a multi-ethnic church seeking to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God, but one thing they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was that those who called themselves “Christians”—those who *adhered* to Jesus—were called to follow the pattern of Jesus himself, and give selflessly to those in need.

Perhaps they had heard the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps they had heard Jesus' words about giving a cup of cold water in his name, or about how any act of service performed to the "least of these" was an act of service to Jesus himself.

Or, perhaps, they had simply seen, in Jesus, an example of the stunning grace and generosity of God.

Whatever the cause, they knew that to be a Christian was to be generous, was to be a giver.

A final word. When we look at these two features of the church in Antioch—a willingness to live with difference and diversity (or at least continue to make the attempt!) and a commitment to generosity, we see that the former is a function of the latter.

Generosity and grace are behind a willingness to extend hospitality, to tolerate difference, to be open to others as God has been open to us.

Generosity with others and generosity with our finances and material possessions often go hand in hand. At least they should. As those who are bonded to Jesus we ought to be people for whom generosity, of all kinds, virtually oozes from our pores!

Because, of course, God has dealt generously with us. God has given his very self for our sake. God has given us forgiveness, salvation, and an imperishable hope. God has promised that nothing can finally separate us from his love.

So, may God help us to be generous people in every domain of our lives both individual and collectively. May God help us to *come together*, to be generous with each other, forgiving graciously, accepting freely, welcoming joyfully people of all kinds. May God help us to never be a barrier to anyone taking even the smallest step toward getting closer to Jesus. May God help us to give, as we are able, whatever it looks like, wherever there is need.

This is what God wants for his churches, wherever and whenever they are found.

Amen.

