

Until The Whole World Hears
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 45:20-24a, Revelation 7:9-17, Acts 11:1-26

Our third Scripture reading today comes from Acts 11:1-26. Listen now to God's Word. "The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 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. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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."

"Time for church." That's one of my earliest memories...mom and dad calling, the three of us piling in the car and heading to a place called church where we worshipped God together. I remember potlucks and plays, choir and handbell rehearsals, youth group, pastors, preaching. They all happened at the church. I still remember the church of my youth. I remember the long narrow sanctuary and the red velvet pews, the two pulpits high above the congregation and the big organ in the center. My memories are connected to a place and time.

And yet the building isn't what mattered. It was the people...the people who loved me, who valued me, who showed me that Jesus Christ was the way, the truth, and the life. Since then, I've worshiped in schools and movie theaters, giant megachurches and rural chapels. The Bible teaches that the church isn't a place. The church isn't a business or a committee or a social organization. The church is the people of God, called out to enjoy His salvation and to spread His love. Wherever the people of God live and work and pray, there's the church.

Because the church is the people of God together, we have a calling, just as we are called individually. Last week, we looked at God's calling to us as Christians to **GROW**. This week, we're going to look at the back of our cards to understand the Church's calling. The church **LOVES**. The passage we heard this morning from the early church is going to lead us through this paradigm. What we read this morning isn't an explanation of the church; it's a snapshot of the church in action at a critical point in history. It will guide us through the mission and calling of the church that we see throughout the rest of the New Testament.

The defining characteristic of the church is the first, **L** – the church leads people to Jesus Christ. Nothing else is more important. Today's passage describes what happened when Gentiles first entered the church. Remember that Jews believed all Gentiles were unclean by nature; they ate unclean animals, made sacrifices to idols, and didn't worship the one true God. Paul had to have a vision three times in order to go to Cornelius' house to share the Gospel with him. But God leads Peter to Cornelius so that Christ might encounter and save him. The early church leaders get the full report and praise God because even the Gentiles can receive Jesus' salvation. From that point, we hear where great numbers of Jews and Gentiles alike are turning from sin and being saved. The word is being spread by everyone in the church...Jesus saves!

When I thought about our responsibility as individuals to share the gospel in comparison to our responsibility as a group, as a church, my first question was, "What's the difference?" Here's how – as individuals, we share who we are, what we know, what God has done for us. It's our personal testimony. People are drawn to Christ because they see our honesty and transparency, and through your testimony someone may come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord. But no single person can explain to a new believer or seeker everything about the life of faith. In the church, some of us are teachers who know how to answer questions patiently with biblical knowledge. Some are enthusiasts who encourage us with their commitment and energy. Others are prayer warriors who show us how to spend time alone with God. Still others have gifts of leadership, service, and fellowship. Someone may come to faith based on one person's testimony by the leading of the Holy Spirit, but the truth of the good news becomes clearest when they see the whole body of believers operating together. The church can't save anybody, but we can lead the way to the One who does.

The church also comes together to support those who lead us in faith. Together we support the work of God by financially supporting teachers and preachers and musicians, those who have spent their own resources and energies dedicating their lives to leading us on the journey with Christ. We send out and support missionaries who take the gospel to places where it isn't being preached, where people long to hear that God cares. As a group, we care that people are dying without the knowledge of Jesus, and together, we are going to do something about it.

The second part of the paradigm is **O** – the church offers opportunities to learn and serve. In our passage today, we see the entire church sharing the gospel, but we also see them in community learning together. The church in Jerusalem was organized enough to send Barnabas as a teacher and encourager to Antioch, and eventually he brought Paul with him to guide them. There's a pattern of learning, then serving. We continue to grow in our knowledge and understanding of the gospel, then God sends us out to share that love we have come to know.

The early church didn't have programs as we think of them, but they did offer opportunities. They met in small groups as community. They studied the Bible together. They fellowshiped together. They gave people opportunities to know who Jesus is; they were out in the marketplaces and fields working and living but also sharing the gospel.

As a church, we have a lot of what we call "open doors" to introduce people to the church. We've had folks come in the doors for Angel Food, through euchre, through Bible study, through the website, even through being a voting site. But there's more we could be doing. What other ways can we offer opportunities? Maybe through classes – helping people understand parenting or finances from a Christian perspective – or maybe through expanded children's programs. We also offer opportunities so that we can fulfill our calling to serve. Angel Food helps the community, but it also helps us grow by serving. Giving to the church is an opportunity for us to expand our faith in what Christ can do in our checkbooks.

We offer opportunities first and foremost to fulfill our first calling – to bring people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The opportunities we create as a community of faith are not simply for ourselves, but they are designed to lead us closer to God while at the same time giving us the ability to invite our friends and neighbors to enjoy the peace, comfort, and salvation Jesus offers to all who would come to Him.

The third call of the church is **V** – the church values all people. As I mentioned before, this passage is a stunning moment for the church, the point at which the good news of Christ becomes something for all people. It is the moment when the church truly becomes evangelical. The Jewish faith was not evangelical, not as we think of it. You were a Jew based on race. Anyone who was willing to submit to the Old Testament law and follow its practices was welcome to convert, but the people of Israel never attempted to introduce God to the other nations. Many of us heard the story of Jonah growing up as kids, and that showed how the Jews regarded other nations. Jonah didn't want to go preach to the Ninevites because they were the enemies of the Jews and – Jonah thought – the enemies of God. Jonah has to wind up in a whale before he'd go give God's message to Gentiles. Things hadn't changed much by the 1st century. Peter went reluctantly to the Gentiles, and the Jewish Christians called him on it.

But by the time the whole event is over, the Gentiles are shown to be a part of the Kingdom of God. The promise that God made to Abraham nearly two thousand years before, that all nations would be blessed through his offspring, was coming true. By the time the book of Acts is over, Paul is living in Rome, preaching the gospel to the heart of the empire that encompassed much of the known world. We share in the blessings of the gospel today because God opened the church to Gentiles – the people that were once believed to be unredeemable, shunned by God and destined only for His wrath.

What we learn from the Bible is that all people are created in the image of God. All of us bear His mark. That image has been marred by sin, barely recognizable under the scars. And yet, that image still remains. I've read a bit about the restoration of the Sistine Chapel. Almost five hundred years of smoke and decay had made the Sistine Chapel a pale shadow of its former glory. Some figures were virtually invisible. But through careful restoration, those images now shine in colors that most of us never knew Michelangelo ever used. While some believe that it should have been left untouched, most cannot help but see that a magnificent piece of art has come alive again. The same is true for all of us. God is the restorer, the transformer, the one who can take His lost image in us and make it shine for the world to see.

This means two things for us. First, we have to remember that God is a transformational God. God doesn't want sin in our lives. He wants to change us so we can be free from sin. The truth is, God values us, God loves us enough that He doesn't want us to stay in sin. So when we talk about valuing people, it doesn't mean that we believe that everything goes. We have to confront sin, but not because we don't love people. It's precisely because we *do* value them that we are upfront about God's judgment of sin, not to condemn them but to show real love to them.

The second thing to remember is that everyone can be transformed, the image of God can be restored in everyone, and so we love and value everyone. No one is unwelcome. The rich and the homeless, the arrogant, the humble, the frugal and the greedy, the divorced mother of three, the soldier, the kid with tattoos and the retired widow and the gay attorney and the straight adulterer, the upright citizen who believes he might not need God and the alcoholic who knows he does – everyone has a seat in this church, a place to learn, a place to be loved, a place to find God's massive love and redemption and salvation, a place to be transformed, a place to turn away from sin and find the righteousness that comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We value all who walk in our doors.

The fourth call of the church is **E** – the church explores God and His Word. The only way that Peter was able to reach out to the Gentile world was because he was listening for what the Holy Spirit was doing. But he wasn't doing that alone. He went before those who were very concerned about his eating with Gentiles and speaking with them. Together they examined the Scriptures and the words of Christ and realized that all peoples were to be reached through the Gospel. Meanwhile, we see Paul and Barnabas teaching the people in Antioch about the LORD. Throughout the New Testament, the message is to study the Scriptures. In Acts 17, the Berean church is praised for examining the Scriptures carefully to see that what they were taught was true. In Acts 18, a disciple named Apollos is commended for proving from Scripture that Jesus is the Christ.

As individuals, we study God's Word to be in relationship with Him, to know His love for us and how we should live to express our thanksgiving and love for Him. As a community of faith, we read the Scripture together to not only grow our knowledge of the Word but to test our own thoughts and understandings of the Word. Because try as we might, we do make mistakes when we read Scripture. We sometimes read one verse or chapter of Scripture and make that our rule for life, not realizing that Scripture as a whole has something more to say to us on the subject.

Even pastors can make this error. The other day, I was watching a clip of Joel Osteen explaining why he won't eat pork. He told his whole congregation he wants them to do what he does and eat turkey bacon. He believes that God doesn't want us eating pork because God said not to do it in the Old Testament. I wanted to shake Joel just a little bit and say, "Haven't you read the New Testament?" Because today's passage is right where God lifts the ritual and dietary restrictions of the Jewish law! God never did away with the moral or ethical law, but God removes the ritual law because His people are no longer going to be set apart by what they eat or what kind of clothes they wear. They are going to be set apart by the way they live.

But there's more to getting to know God than just learning about His Word. We get to know God Himself by praying together. We lift up each other's burdens and praises. We ask God what He wants us to be doing. We seek out the Spirit's leading. We pray alone for relationship; we pray together to strength each other, to be Christ's hands and feet to one another, to encourage each other and to share our joys and sorrows. When we explore God together in these ways, we get to know Him. Jesus promised us in Matthew 18:20, "when two or three come together in my name, there I am with them." As a church, we explore God together so the whole community gets to know Him, and those who are just coming to know Him will see Him.

The final call of the church is **S** – the church supports its members. We have to remember that until they heard his testimony and the testimony of others about the Gentiles coming to faith, the church believed that Peter had sinned by breaking God's law and eating unclean food. But they didn't just kick him out – they listened to him and judged his words carefully. They supported him through a very difficult situation. The church sent Barnabas, a man full of the Holy Spirit, to Antioch first to encourage the believers, then to spread the word.

We support one another. It's that simple. When someone has a need, we should be ready to help. When someone needs prayer, we're there. We talked last week about how we live in a world without much community; many people are truly on their own. The church isn't just their primary defense; it's their only defense. When people in our community of faith are sick or hurting or exhausted or stressed, we are the first responders. We can't fix every hurt or pay every bill, but we can be a loving presence.

Supporting one another means being real with one another. Often, American Christianity is about putting on a happy face, pretending that everything's fine and that nothing's wrong, but that's fake. There are days when we are truly joyful and it shows. But on days when we are sad, when the dog died or the doctor called or the car broke down, it's OK to be miserable. It's OK to be angry at an abusive dad or heartbroken about a relationship that ended. Romans 12:15 tells us, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." The Bible has an entire book called Lamentations and another called Job which might as well be Lamentations: The Sequel. Support is about being there through it all – the great and the terrible.

Supporting one another can be the greatest way we can reach out to the lost. Jesus said in John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." When someone at the office sees the support you give and receive through the church, when a friend notices how we truly care for one another, they will take notice. They will know that's something they don't have. Through that support, we can make Christ known to them.

We've talked over the last two weeks about God's call for the individual Christian and for the church. This is what you and I were made to do. This is who are meant to be. Take a look at this card often. See how God is calling you. Because there's nothing more fulfilling in the world than fulfilling the calling we were made for.