

Sunday January 26th, 2025

Acts 13:13-43

Series: "Lessons from the Early Church"

Sermon: "Visit to Antioch of Pisidia"

There was a man just sitting at his neighbourhood bar simply staring intently at his drink on the counter in front of him for over half an hour. Suddenly, a big, trouble making biker stepped up beside him, grabbed his drink and gulped it down in one swig. The poor man suddenly begins to cry. "Come on, man, I'm just giving you a hard time," says the biker. "I didn't think you'd cry. I can't stand to see a man cry."

Between sobs the first man says, "This is the worst day of my life. I can't do anything right. I overslept and was late for an important meeting, so my boss fired me. When I went to the parking lot, I found my car was stolen and I don't have insurance. I left my wallet in the cab I took home, where I found my wife in bed with the gardener and my own dog bit me. So, I can try to work up the courage to put an end to my life, and then you show up and drink down the poison."

Have you ever had a bad day? Of course you have; we all have them. But always remember it could be worse. Iraqi terrorist Khay Rahnajet didn't pay enough postage on a letter bomb. It came back with "return to sender" stamped on it. Forgetting it was his bomb; he opened it and was blown to bits. That's a bad day!

Or have you heard about the fact that the cost of rehabilitating one seal after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska was \$80,000. At a special ceremony, two of the most expensively saved animals were released into the wild, amid cheers and applause from onlookers. One minute later, in full view of everyone, a killer whale ate both. (Inspire 21) So I ask you, what is the answer to a bad day?

Proverbs 15:30 reads, "Bright eyes gladden the heart; Good News puts fat on the bones." Now don't take this "fat" literally. The writer says that good news gives you emotional prosperity. It makes your heart feel lighter, and your day more bearable. The word that describes this "fat" is encouragement. And Chuck Swindoll is right when he states that "Many Christians are dying on the vine for a lack of encouragement." (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, P.178)

In other words, without encouragement we become diminished in our ability to thrive and grow and minister. When we are discouraged, all kinds of negative things happen to us and the longer the discouragement persists, the more desperate for relief we become. We make rash decisions that seem like they will help us, only to discover that they create even greater problems. In a state of discouragement, we run away from someone or something.

In discouragement we blame someone else for our despair. In discouragement our relationships suffer, our work suffers, and yes, our faith suffers. It is no wonder that the one thing we long for from other people is encouragement and when we don't get it we feel betrayed. So, it is no surprise, I think, that when Paul sets out on his first missionary journey, and lands in Antioch of Pisidia in what is now called Turkey and what is the first thing the Synagogue leaders ask him for? Verse 15, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for us, come and give it!"

When Paul and Barnabus arrive at Antioch for the first time, it would appear there are no Christians present. Instead, the two missionaries head to the synagogue to share the salvation story of God's deliverance of Israel, and his gift of Christ Jesus. You might wonder why Paul and Barnabus would even make the effort to go to Antioch. They first had to travel 150 miles by boat, disembarking at Perga.

Then they did not remain in Perga, but headed immediately to Antioch, traveling by foot over land. This was not an easy journey. To reach Antioch, the two men would have had to navigate the hills that surrounded Antioch, and these hills were notorious for roving bands of bandits. However, they arrived safely, to meet a group of devout Jews who were essentially cut off from Jerusalem.

But God's hand is in everything, and it is clearly present here. Antioch was not a major Jewish worship center, but it was a strategic place to spread the gospel. Antioch was located on major trade routes that went east and west, as well as north and south. In Antioch there was also the Roman garrison that controlled the whole region to the south. So, if the gospel took hold here, it was sure to spread out into other locations, especially among Gentile converts.

However, let's go back to our friends in the synagogue for a moment. Again, this was a Jewish community that was rather isolated. There was discouragement here, likely because they were surrounded by non-believing Gentiles. There had likely not been a new teacher, or Rabbi, come to them in a very long time. News of recent events in Jerusalem would not have likely reached them, so Paul was seen as a devout Pharisee. It was not an opportunity to be missed.

"Give us some encouragement, some hope," they asked. Never one to forgo an opportunity, Paul, whose name was changed in this city from Saul, rises and in very detailed fashion lays out the salvation story of Israel. This is a familiar story to those present that day, but suddenly Paul adds something new. He tells them the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, demonstrating from the scriptures that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promises.

Now it may surprise you to learn that Paul received a rather warm reception in this synagogue. This message about Jesus was new, exciting, different, and although they did not immediately embrace Jesus as Messiah, they did follow Paul and Barnabus from the synagogue and ask them to come back and tell them some more. Paul's message was one of hope, and they were hungry for it. But they were also selfish about it.

Read on, and about a week later, Paul has opportunity to preach to the whole city including Gentiles. The Jewish leaders were jealous. They thought this message of encouragement was for them alone. So, the Jewish leaders took to slandering Paul and Barnabus and argued against everything they said. Not because they disputed the message but because they were jealous. Then Paul said that he had simply followed God's instruction to share the good news with the Jews first, and then the Gentiles as it says in Isaiah 49:6.

The Jews were enraged, and they started a riot which forced the two men to flee. On their way out that shook the dust from their feet as the Lord had commanded his disciples to do.

Now we could argue that the effort in Antioch was a failure, but the church did get started there, because we know Paul returns at least two more times, once on each of his missionary journeys. Paul never gave up on reaching the people of Antioch, and eventually their need for hope overcame their jealousy. Perhaps the greatest lesson to come out of Antioch is the recognition that what people need, and long for, is encouragement. Notice the leaders of the synagogue did not say to Paul, “Give us some more theological insight.” Their souls did not want any more debates, they wanted hope.

“Without hope, people perish” or as I stated earlier, they wither on the vine. People who are discouraged are still breathing, but there is little life in them. I am beginning to see in this passage the vital work of encouragement. When I think about Jesus and the people he encountered, I see that among the healing and teaching, all of them wanted encouragement. Zacchaeus, despised by his fellow Jews, an outcast, longed to hear from Jesus that he too was a son of Abraham.

The woman at the well in John 4, who has been forced from one man to another, longs to know there is a spring that never goes dry. Ten lepers, standing at a distance, long to know that their remaining days could be more than misery and isolation. A condemned thief hanging on the cross beside Jesus, longed to know that there was something beyond this world. Every man, woman, and child on this earth: is longing for some encouragement.

As a church, one of our vital missions is to encourage or build each other up. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, our gifts were given to us to help, to encourage the entire church. Sadly, many of us do not see the importance of such a ministry of encouragement. We can be somewhat blind to the needs of our brothers and sister sitting in the pew beside us. We sometimes can’t, or do not want to see behind the façade that we like to project to each other.

The story goes that one day, a diver was enjoying the aquatic world 20 feet below sea level. He was enjoying the sea life when he noticed a guy at the same depth, but with no scuba gear at all. The diver went down another twenty feet and soon the other man came and joined him at the same depth. The diver went another few feet and sure enough the other man soon was there beside him.

This confused the diver, so he took out a waterproof chalkboard set, and wrote, “How in the world are you able to stay under this deep without equipment.” The guy took the chalkboard erased what the diver had written, and wrote, “I’m drowning, you moron!” How can we be so oblivious to the pain of others and the vital needs of others, when we know intimately those same struggles?

Perhaps like the Jews in the synagogue we are blinded by jealousy. We are jealous of those who receive the attention we so sorely desire. Perhaps we see those who seek help as being weak. Perhaps we just do not think it is our problem, so we can simply ignore the suffering of others. It may also be that we are not attentive enough to the words and expressions of others. When someone around us has a physical issue, we are quick to recognize their need for help. But maybe we are not so savvy when it comes to the inner needs of others.

Sunday January 26th, 2025

That is why in many ways the Bell Canada program “Let’s Talk”, is taking on traction with people. This is the annual program just held where people are encouraged to talk about mental health issues. Olympic athlete Cara Hews is one of the programs chief spokespersons.

Our human need for conversation, and particularly our need for encouragement is growing at an incredible rate. More and more experts are sounding the alarm that our digital world is not connecting people, but rather it is separating people. Most of the human communication is nonverbal. We cannot truly, or fully, communicate with someone via text messaging or tweeting. We may be sharing information, but we are not sharing ourselves.

Despite Mark Zuckerberg’s intention, friendships are not built or maintained on Facebook. Our society is becoming less, and less, skilled at talking about the issues of our hearts. To text someone that you are having a bad day is nowhere near as intimate as sitting across from each other in a coffee shop talking about it. A hug is far better than an emoticon. I am with our Jewish friends in the synagogue of Antioch. “Brothers or sisters, if you have any word of encouragement for us, come and give it.”

How often have we sat in a church meeting and wanted to scream such a request? How often from a hospital bed, a jail cell, a senior’s residence, a single parent home, or even our own places where we work and live, have we ached for such a word? How many husbands or wives have been silently withering away inside, because they yearn to know they are cherished; that their value extends beyond the daily chores and paychecks?

How many children long for a parent, or grandparent, or teacher or coach to express appreciation for them simply because they are, who they are? How long has it been since we felt joy, hope, or the abundant life? I would bet the farm that most people in this room would trade all the church programs, in every church on the planet, to receive regularly a dose of encouragement. So, now the question becomes, what do I do, if I am lacking in encouragement?

You may not like my answer, but I think I am onto something. Paul was not alone in Antioch. He traveled with someone else. His name was Barnabus, which means, “Son of encouragement.” We haven’t mentioned him today, but Barnabus may be the clue to solving this question about encouragement. I think Barnabus represents a fundamental truth. If you want encouragement, the best way to get it is to be a person who encourages others.

If you want more hope in your life, then perhaps you need to dispense some to others. We need to become sons and daughters of encouragement. Or maybe we need to see things the way Bruce Larson does in his book *Ask Me to Dance*. These are his words...

You ever feel like a frog? Frogs feel slow, low, ugly, puffy, drooped, pooped. I know. One told me. The frog feeling comes when you want to feel bright but feel dumb, when you want to share but are selfish, when you want to be thankful but feel resentment, you want to be great but are small, when you want to care but are indifferent. Yes, at one time or another each of us has found himself on a lily pad, floating down the great river of life. Frightened and disgusted, we’re too froggish to budge.

Sunday January 26th, 2025

Once upon a time there was a frog, only he wasn't really a frog, he was a prince who looked and felt like a frog. The wicked witch had cast a spell on him and only the kiss of a beautiful maiden could save him. But since when do cute chicks kiss frogs? So, there he sat, an unkissed prince in frog form. One day a beautiful maiden gathered him up and gave him a big smack! Zap! There he was a frog--turned handsome prince and they lived happily after. So, what's the task of the Christian? Kissing frogs, of course! (Tales of a Tardy Oxcart, p. 5)

I might rephrase that last line to “What’s the task of the Christian? Why, transforming each other with encouragement.” Boy how this world needs more Barnabuses.