



Sermon Transcript

May 17, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption

The Kingdom of God Goes Local

Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on May 17, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Acts 11:19-30

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ And when he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch, the disciples were first called Christians.

²⁷ Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ And one of them whose name was Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). ²⁹ So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 13:1-3

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² 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." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Introduction

Last week we saw the viral nature of the kingdom of God. We noted that with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (which is what the letter “P” stands for in our acronym CASKET EMPTY) the kingdom of God has gone viral. We saw in Acts 2 that in the span of one day, they went from 120 followers of Christ to 3000 who repented of their sin, turned in faith to Jesus and were baptized. In fact, a common refrain throughout the book of Acts is found at the end of Acts 2, “*and the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*” It is all so exciting!

The viral nature of the kingdom of God is seen throughout the book of Acts as the gospel spreads from region to region throughout the Roman Empire. By the time we get to the end of the book of Acts, the gospel of the kingdom of God has spread from Jerusalem to Rome. The book of Acts begins in the city of Jerusalem and it ends in the city of Rome.

You also see the viral nature of the kingdom of God as it climbs over the walls of racial prejudice—reaching Jew and Gentile alike. The viral nature of the kingdom of God also tears down walls between social and economic classes bringing the wealthy and noble into fellowship with the slave and the poor. The viral nature of the kingdom of God also elevated the role of women in the work of the church; they were among the number of those gathered with the 120 on the Day of Pentecost. In explaining what happened on Pentecost, quoting from Joel 2, Peter says, “*your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.*” The book of Acts calls out by name the strategic contributions of women to the mission of the church, women like Lydia and Priscilla. Truly the viral nature of the kingdom of God in the book of Acts knows no boundaries. Persecution can’t stop it from spreading. Prison cells can’t lock it out. Geographical boundaries can’t halt the spread of it. The dividing walls of race, economics and sex come tumbling down when the viral nature of the kingdom of God takes root in the heart of a people.

Here we are 2000 years later and the viral nature of the kingdom of God has continued to spread from generation to generation. We have the vantage point of looking back on 2000 years of church history where we have seen waves of spiritual renewal and revival take place time and time again. We can go back to AD 432 when Patrick returned to Ireland 25 years after he had escaped from slavery. He returned to a region that was considered to be barbaric and on the outer fringes of civilized society. And through his missionary efforts the kingdom of God went viral. From Ireland, the kingdom of God spread throughout Western Europe. Literally, thousands of people were added to the number of those who gave their lives to Christ.

We can look back to the First and Second Great Awakenings that took place in our own country and in many ways gave birth to the modern day missionary movement that has seeded what is now going on in the Global South—Africa, Asia and South America. That is the region of the world where we are now seeing significant numbers being added to the kingdom of God. I think of the Jesus Movement of the 1970's that saw a movement of the gospel within the hippie and drug culture that came out of the 1960's. And of course, there are the incredible stories we alluded to last week coming out of the Moslem world, where unprecedented numbers are turning to faith in Jesus, many of them encountering Jesus through dreams. It is all rather thrilling and exciting and sometimes breathtaking as we take in the viral nature of the spread of the kingdom of God.

And yet, when we turn our gaze from this global and viral picture of what God is doing around the world and fix our eyes on the local church—Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church—what we see is not always as thrilling or as exhilarating as what we see in the book of Acts or throughout church history or even in what we hear coming out of other regions of the world today. Instead, what we see in the local church—Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church—is all rather . . . ordinary. That is not a complaint. Nor, is it a critical statement. It is just a fact. It is reality. That is life in the local church. Often, our experience in the local church is all rather . . . ordinary. And yet, the viral and global picture of what we just recounted is the result of what God is doing in ordinary local churches like Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church. The testimony in the book of Acts and throughout church history is that the kingdom of God goes viral by first going local. The local church is at the center of the viral nature of the kingdom of God. Perhaps, another way to put it is that God does the extraordinary through the rather ordinary.

This morning I want to champion the local church and the role the ordinary work of the local church plays in the kingdom of God going viral. Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church has been in existence since 1888. For 132 years, the steady and ordinary work of this church—with all of our ups and downs, strengths and weaknesses, successes and disappointments—has contributed to the extraordinary story that God is doing around the world. Through ordinary means, faith has been passed from generation to generation. From this ordinary congregation, sons and daughters have been set apart to serve the church all around the world. From this ordinary congregation, the presence of Jesus has been felt in this community and churches have been planted in the Central Connecticut River Valley and in all of New England. I am grateful for the ordinary work of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church.

This morning I want to look at the local church of Antioch. It is the first local church we encounter in the book of Acts outside of Jerusalem. In and through this ordinary church, God does something extraordinary. He plants this church in a local setting. He cultivates this church through local people, He calls and sets apart this church for a unique purpose. Their story is our story. Their story is the story of any ordinary local church who pays attention to the ordinary means of grace.

Planted in a Local Setting

Let me begin by telling you a little bit about the story of the church of Antioch. When I do a membership class and tell the story of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church, I start at the beginning of our story. I like to tell people how this church was started as an outreach to Danish sailors living in the city of Hartford. That is how we began. We were a church planted in a local setting that sought to reach a specific group of people living in the city of Hartford. Well, what is the story of the beginning of the church at Antioch? And what can we learn about the local church through their story?

The city of Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It had half a million people living within the city. It was located on the western coast of the Mediterranean Sea, 300 miles up the coast from Jerusalem. It is like Boston is to Philadelphia, 300 miles up the eastern coast. Antioch was a well developed city. It was a place of business, travel and culture. Like the Roman Empire of that time, it was a rather pluralistic culture—a mixture of Greek and Roman and Jewish culture. The Greeks were known for their love of knowledge and gaining wisdom. The Romans were known for their brute strength and their love for power. The Jews were known for their religion. All of these forces were present in the city of Antioch. The Jewish population of Antioch was about 65,000 people. At some point in Antioch's history, walls were built to fence off the various groups from one another. Jews lived in their quarter; Greeks in theirs, Romans in theirs. And yet, while often being segregated, there was this diverse culture that co-existed with each other and no doubt, rubbed off on each other, as they did business and lived life among each other. It is not too different than what we find in many of our modern cities today. That was Antioch.

In Acts 11:19 we discover that the reason why the viral nature of the kingdom of God makes it's way to Antioch is because of the persecution against the church that took place in Jerusalem. We are told in verse 19 that the church scattered after Stephen was martyred. In fact, before his conversion, Paul (then named Saul) was in hot pursuit of rounding up as many Christians as possible. As a result, the Christians scattered up the

coast to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. The first wave of followers of Jesus came to Antioch and it says that they only witnessed to their fellow Jews. But then in verse 20 another wave of displaced followers of Jesus came to Antioch, and this group *preached the Lord Jesus* to the Hellenists (the Greeks) and it says, what we often see in the book of Acts, *a great number who believed turned to the Lord*. And so when the church in Jerusalem heard what God was doing in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to check it out and he stayed and in many ways, planted the church in Antioch. From the outset, it was a church made up of Jews and Gentiles. It was a church planted in a distinct local setting.

So what is it that is rather ordinary about the planting of the church in Antioch? I want you to listen closely to what I am about to say because this is very pertinent to the situation we find ourselves in as a local church in the context of dealing with the coronavirus, COVID-19. This church in Antioch was planted because of something that happened outside of their control. Persecution came. That is how these followers of Jesus ended up in Antioch. Notice that the thing that happened that was out of their control didn't put an end to the church. It didn't stop the church. Rather, it brought new opportunity for the church. You see the same principle at the end of Acts 11 where a famine—at the very least a drought—took place that impacted the people back in Jerusalem. These things, these hardships—persecutions, famines . . . pandemics are part of the ordinary course of life that God often uses to bring opportunity for the church.

There is a book called *The Trellis and the Vine*. It is a book on church leadership and it was written over ten years ago. It is a book that calls the church back to intentional discipleship—person to person. In this book—written over ten years ago—they imagined this scenario. “Imagine that there was a pandemic that swept through your part of the world, and that all public assemblies of more than three people were banned. And let's say that, due to some catastrophic combination of circumstances, this ban had to remain in place for an extended period of time.” He asks, “how would your congregation function?”¹ I love the question. It is a question that assumes that even if you can't meet on a Sunday, you can still function. How will we function, if at the very least, it is some time before we are fully back to the way we used to be? If opportunity can come out of persecution, what opportunity can come out of a pandemic?

I received an email this week about a church planter from Iran by the name of Amar (not his real name). He had spent five years in prison because of his faith, one of those years in solitary confinement. Prior to being arrested, he had planted 48 churches in Iran. He said that some of the lessons he learned in his imprisonment, might be helpful to us as we go through this pandemic. He wrote to the church in the West, “I remember

when I was in solitary, I discovered many things about myself, my character, about God's love. I realized more than ever when I was alone with him that it is all about Him." Then he writes to us, "I wanted to encourage you that maybe God, in these days, is going to shift our eyes from the things we can see to the unseen things. Because what is unseen is eternal."² How does God want to shift our eyes? What opportunities is he opening up to us if we only take time to look and see?

Over the next few weeks and months and year—a lot of energy and time will be spent trying to figure out what we can do at the church building and how can we do it safely. The church gathered together is important and it is something we deeply miss. But perhaps there is even a greater question we need to be asking because of these circumstances we find ourselves in—circumstances we didn't plan for and are out of our control. What is the opportunity that God is wanting us to see that we may have not seen before? What are the ordinary opportunities that are now forced upon us because of this pandemic? What is God wanting to do through us in this new reality? Look how God has used persecutions and famines in the past. How will God use this pandemic in the present and future? That question is as important, if not more important, than how quickly can we go back to what we once had. It is a question that could lead us to opportunity to see the ordinary work of the local church do extraordinary things. It is a question we are asking and invite you to ask as well.

Cultivated in a Local Congregation

As Barnabas comes from Jerusalem to Antioch to see what God is doing in this major metropolitan area within the Roman Empire it says in verse 23 that "*When he saw the grace of God, he was glad.*" I am sure, coming from Jerusalem where things were pretty tense because of persecution, the church in Jerusalem was naturally concerned for those who scattered, perhaps concerned about what might happen to the church. The very next chapter, Acts 12, begins by saying "*About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.*" So that is what is happening in Jerusalem while the church is spreading to Antioch. And so Barnabas arrives in Antioch and he sees firsthand that in spite of persecution in Jerusalem, a new opportunity has emerged and the kingdom of God is still going viral.

Seeing what God has done in Antioch, Barnabas stays there. Seeing the need to now establish this young church, he goes to Tarsus to get Saul (later to be called Paul) and the two of them spend the next year teaching them. It says in verse 26, "*For a whole year*

they met with the church and taught a great many people.” What did they do to cultivate the faith of this local congregation? To be honest, what they did to establish this local church and cultivate their faith is all rather . . . ordinary. They taught them. They disciplined them. They did the ordinary things any church is called to do.

The first thing I noticed about the ordinary means by which they cultivated the faith of this congregation was that it was transferred from one person to the next. It was life on life. I love how Barnabas is described in verse 24, *“for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”* So whatever content Barnabas was teaching them, along with Paul, he was putting it into practice. You could just see it in his life. He is a good man. You can see the fruit of the Spirit in this man: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. He is not perfect. He was known for being an encourager. He is a man of deep faith. I can’t help but think of the instructions that Paul gives to a young Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12. He tells Timothy to *“set an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.”* And he wraps up these comments with this charge to Timothy, *“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”*

Local churches all over the world are filled with these kinds of ordinary men and women. Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church has been around for 132 years because of these kinds of men and women of faith. In the ordinary means by which they live their faith in front of others, God cultivates the faith of the local church. In 1997, “Mr. Rodgers” received a lifetime achievement award. In his acceptance speech, he remained true to himself—*a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*—and the night of his crowning achievement, he said to this illustrious audience sitting in front of him, “So many people have helped me to come to this night. Some of you are here, some are far away, some are even in heaven. All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take along with me 10 seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are. Those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life . . . 10 seconds of silence Whoever you have been thinking about, how pleased they must know the difference you feel they made.”

I can’t think of a better way to describe the work of the local church. It is ordinary people—*good men and women, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*—who lived it out in the context of the local church. Who was your Barnabas? If you have been in “the church” for some time, no doubt, there are numerous names that come to mind. But take 10 seconds of silence with me to think of them and the ordinary way they lived faith in front of you. As Mr. Rodgers said at the end of those 10 seconds, “Whoever you have

been thinking about, how pleased they must know the difference you feel they made.” They would probably be surprised to hear that you thought of them because in their mind their impact was rather ordinary.

Secondly, I want you to see that Barnabas spent that year teaching them. In verse 23 Barnabas “*exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.*” This tells me that part of the teaching he did was to encourage them to “keep on keeping on” - to *remain faithful . . . steadfast*. It is easy to drift away from faith. The hymn reminds us that we are “prone to wander.” It is tempting to walk away from the church because part of the ordinary reality of the local church is that it is messy. It always has been messy and always will be messy. But at the same time, the local church—as messy as it can be—is the ordinary means by which God does the extraordinary. So Barnabas and Paul were teaching them so that they would “keep on keeping on.”

There are four things that the Reformers called “ordinary means of grace.” Here is what they mean by “ordinary means of grace.” These are the ordinary things that “cause us to grow in grace.” Nicholas Batzig says it this way, “Our growth will be commensurate with our use of the means God has appointed.”³ To be honest with you, these four things are very “ordinary.” There is nothing new or splashy here. This is the ordinary way God works in the local church. Here they are: prayer, bible reading, fellowship with God’s people, observing the sacraments/ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are the ongoing and ordinary things that God uses to form his people.

To what end do we do these “ordinary things?” Notice what it says in verse 26 about this local church in Antioch. “*And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*” There are two key words here in this sentence: *disciples* and *Christians*. Very simply put, a disciple is a follower of Christ. The goal of discipleship is to help followers of Jesus take a next step of obedience. When Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples he said you will do this by “*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.*” Disciples are people who embrace a way of living that seeks to follow Jesus. It is quite evident that the teaching that Barnabas and Saul were doing in Antioch was the kind of teaching and training that led to changed lives. And that change was so noticeable that it was here the followers of Jesus were first called *Christians*.

In Greek the *ian* ending you find at the end of the word *Christian* is often used to describe an ethnic group or people from a particular country. For example the Ephesians were from Ephesus and the Philippians were from Philippi . . . the Americans are from America. It is a way of defining a person’s identity around their nationality or

their ethnicity. Now don't forget how much of a melting pot the city of Antioch was and how diverse this early church was from her beginning. You get a glimpse of how diverse this early church was in Acts 13:1 where we are introduced to five leaders of the church: "Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul." Aside from a Jewish presence in their leadership, there was a man from Niger which implies that he was dark skinned, probably coming from Africa. Lucius of Cyrene was from North Africa. And then there is Manaen who was a man of influence, having once been a member of Herod's court. So the church became the place where the dividing walls erected by society came tumbling down. The reason they came down is because their primary identity was not the color of their skin or the country where they were born and raised. Rather, their first and primary identity that untied them was their identity in Jesus. This was the change that discipleship and teaching brought about in their life. How did this change come about? They were devoted to the ordinary means of grace: prayer, word, fellowship, the breaking of bread. It is all rather ordinary and it is the kind of thing that happens only in the local church.

Set Apart for a Unique Calling

The last thing I want you to see leads us into what we are asking you to do with us in the next week. In Acts 13, these leaders of the church in Antioch are *worshiping the Lord and fasting* and it is at this time that the Spirit of God places a unique calling on them. I believe that God gives local churches unique callings—perhaps based on the unique gifts and the people that make up that local church—he calls the local church to step out in faith and to do the extraordinary things that cause the kingdom of God to go viral.

In this case, the church was to set apart Barnabas and Saul to go on a missionary journey that planted churches throughout Asia Minor. It launched the missionary effort of Paul that saw three major missionary trips that establish the church throughout Asia Minor and eventually landed Paul in Rome. All of this was birthed out of a church that started because of an opportunity that came due to circumstances that were out of their control—the persecution of the church in Jerusalem.

As you participate in this time of prayer and fasting, all we are asking you to do is to ask God to show us what he wants to birth out of this current pandemic. What unique calling is he calling us into? What opportunity is he opening up for us? My prayer is that God would speak collectively to us and lead us. May he take this ordinary church filled with ordinary disciples who are practicing the ordinary means of grace and use us

for the extraordinary work of causing the kingdom of God to go viral.

Conclusion

Let me bring all of this together by making three concluding statements.

1. As we wrestle with ministry decisions regarding the use of the building and how to protect the safety of our congregation, let's not lose sight of the primary question we need to be asking ourselves. "What is the opportunity God is opening up to us as a result of this virus?"
2. Remember the fundamental goal of the church under any circumstance is to make disciples who make disciples. In the book *The Trellis and the Vine* they remind us that "the aim of Christian ministry is not to build attendance on Sunday . . . But to make disciples who make disciples to the glory of God."⁴ And there is nothing stopping us right now from doing that, no matter what happens in the church building. We are working on the one-to-one and small group ministry that we feel is absolutely vital to doing ministry in this current reality. We want to maximize the use of technology to help us as well. Opportunity is all around us. We can still practice the ordinary means of grace. It may look different than what we are used to. And in some ways, it may even be better.
3. Through prayer and fasting we are asking God to set us apart and to show us what he is calling us to do. How does he want to take this ordinary church and use it for the extraordinary work of seeing the kingdom of God go viral? I look forward to seeing the story that God is about to write in these challenging days.

The kingdom of God goes viral by first going local. How so? God takes the ordinary and uses it to the extraordinary. Embrace the ordinary work of the local church!

¹Colin Marshall and Tony Pane *The Trellis and the Vine* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009)

²A letter from World Help www.worldhelp.net

³Nicholas Batzig "What is a Means of Grace?" *Tabletalk Magazine* June 2020, pg. 4

⁴Marshall and Pane, 152

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Take 10 seconds to recognize the ordinary people in your faith story who impacted your life and faith. Who were they and what were the ordinary ways they impacted your spiritual life?
2. What is on thing you are celebrating from this week? What is one challenge you are facing this week?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

How is God revealed in this portion of Scripture?
(Who is God and what is he like:?)

What does this portion of Scripture teach us about the people of God?

What does God require of us from this section?

How does this portion of Scripture testify to Christ?

Taking It Home

4. Discuss what it might look like for you as a group to participate in the 10 days of prayer and fasting from May 21 to May 31.
5. Spend some time praying that God would make clear to us what opportunity he is setting us apart for during this time.