

Called to Serve God's Mission

Acts 11:19-27; 13:2-3

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There is a need in all of us for controlled danger. That is, there is a need for activity that puts us on the edge of life. There are uncounted millions of people right now who are going through life without any sort of real, vibrant kick. I call them "the legions of the unjazzed."

That was written by a man named Phil Edwards, who was a world champion surfer, writing about surfing (*Preaching Today*, Tape 36 manuscript). I've always liked that quotation, even though I've never surfed and hardly know anything about surfing. But I do know some things about myself and I know some things about the church. One thing I know about us is that it's too easy to paddle around in the puddles near the shore. But when we see something of God's vision for us, when we begin to share in God's mission, we realize that we're called to get out in the deep water, out where the big waves are. When we lean into those waves and ride them, we experience the thrill of doing what God created and redeemed and called us for. It's the thrill of being partners with God in God's mission, the thrill of being part of fulfilling God's purposes. That rescues us from the legions of the unjazzed and brings us into the legions of the "jazzed."

Isn't that what the book of Acts is about? God's Spirit fills a waiting group of Jesus' followers. This event makes those followers of Jesus into the church. They begin to praise God and proclaim boldly the good news of Jesus. They see thousands of people become Jesus followers. They see people healed. They stand boldly before authorities who try to quiet them and stop what they're doing. And this church begins to grow and spread across the world, making a difference everywhere they go. At one point they're described as people who have turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

We've been exploring how God calls each of us and ways we respond to and live out that call. Today we're looking at how we are all called to share God's mission. God works in the church to equip and help each of us

hear God's call, go where God sends, and be partners in God's mission in the world.

Usually when we hear talk about mission in the church, we think about foreign missions or cross-cultural mission. Those are important and vital, and they're a big part of what we're talking about. As a church, we support missionaries who serve in many ways in many places. Maybe someone here will be called to serve in that way.

But "mission" can also speak of ministry, service, witness and outreach. We can say that God is a missionary God. Eddie Gibbs, in his book *ChurchNext*, says that the church in the twenty-first century needs to move from being market driven to being mission oriented (ch 2). The term *missional* "draws attention to the essential nature and vocation of the church as God's called and sent people." The church is the instrument of God's mission. And God's mission calls and sends the church to be a missionary church wherever we are. "Mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. *Mission* means 'sending,' and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's action in human history" (51).

Our mission isn't the survival of the church. Our mission is to be disciples and make disciples who follow Jesus in world-transforming ways. God will take care of the church. The call to be a missional church is a call to look outward, beyond ourselves, to see the needs around us, to care for people outside our circle and to look for ways to minister to them, to reach out to them in Jesus' name. One writer says, "The church does not 'have' a minister; it is ministry. ...It does not 'have' a mission; it is mission" (R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 5-6). Swiss theologian Emil Brunner said, "The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning" (*The Word and the World*, cited at <http://www.thomasschirmacher.net/blog/emil-brunner-pro-mission-1931/>, accessed 2/23/17).

Gibbs says the church needs to be turned inside out in order to bring those outside in. "[T]he church will have to be the church in the world—gathering for worship in order to go out in mission. Its programs must be geared to equip and support the people of God in the strategic locations

where the Lord has already placed them to serve as his representatives” (236). God calls us to mission and calls us to serve where we are.

Some time ago I came across a website called membermission.org. I was exploring it some more this week. It has some powerful ideas. Here is a brief summary of part of the Member Mission approach:

As we begin the work of determining just what we need to be doing for and with God, we need a useful way to break down our complicated lives into small pieces or areas so we can look at them individually. ... [W]e have chosen seven areas or fields in which we all operate every day. They are:

1. **Home** (includes family and close friends)
2. **Work** (includes school and volunteer work)
3. **The local community** (neighborhood, town, or city)
4. **The wider world** (society, culture, economy, government, or environment in country, state, nation or world...)
5. **Leisure or re-creation** (any activity used to rest or refresh yourself)
6. **Your own spiritual health** (any activity to meet your spiritual needs; includes maintaining the physical and emotional health that supports your spirituality)
7. **Your share in church life and its outreach**
(<http://www.membermission.org/basic-tools/basic-tools-2-%c2%96-reflecting-on-our-fields-of-daily-life/>, accessed 2/23/17)

We’re called to serve God’s mission in each of those areas of life. Now, let’s go back to Acts and see what we can learn from the early church in mission. The church was being scattered because of persecution. Jesus’ followers had moved from rural Galilee to urban Jerusalem. Now we see the church moving into a major world center. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was a cosmopolitan city with great cultural and

religious diversity. It was here that Christian missionaries began crossing boundaries, telling the good news to Greeks as well as Jews.

We don't know the names of the missionaries and evangelists who led this spread of the gospel. It just says that "those who had been scattered by the persecution" traveled and spread the word. "Some of them" started telling the good news about the Lord Jesus to Gentiles as well as Jews. God's not limited to, God doesn't depend only on the big name evangelists or famous people to get the word out, to carry out the mission. There are many unnamed people in the New Testament and all through the church's history who are faithful to the gospel and the mission. God works through all of us.

Notice God's initiative here. "The hand of the Lord was with them" (v. 21). We could say just as well, "the power of the Lord" or "the Spirit of the Lord." God was making possible the church's mission, witness, and ministry. God is also answering the church's earlier prayers. They had prayed for God to "stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (4:30). Now the hand of the Lord is with them.

Because the hand of the Lord was with them as they proclaimed the Lord Jesus, "a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (21). Later, when Barnabas arrives, he sees examples of God's grace at work. With joy he exhorts the new believers to remain faithful to the Lord. Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and through his ministry "a great many people were brought to the Lord" (23-24).

Part of the church's mission is to help other people come to the Lord, believe in the Lord, become followers of the Lord. Who are people in your life that God is seeking? Who's someone you know who could use some good news? Who needs to hear the good news of the Lord Jesus? Who's someone you could invite to worship or some other event so they can get a taste of what the church is like and how they can become part of it?

As the Lord worked through the followers of Jesus, more people came to know Jesus. God was growing the church. God can still grow a church—despite all the challenges we face today. People seem to have a lot of reasons not to believe. People aren't as interested in what the church has

to say. Some people have been hurt by a church and aren't willing to open themselves up to that kind of pain again. There are many activities that compete with the church for people's time and attention. Still, the hand of the Lord, the Spirit of God, can get through to people. The Holy Spirit can work through us to bless and encourage and invite and welcome people.

I just read a summary of a recent study that asked people not involved in church to give their impressions of major religious groups in the United States. The United Methodist Church had the highest favorability score (55% favorable) of any group in the study. And, personal invitations still carry the most weight with those not currently attached to a local congregation. When asked what would make them interested in visiting a church, 47% said that a personal invitation from a friend would make them more likely to visit. The UMC's commitment to serve others has a lot of appeal. And, our openness to using reason, including trying to integrate science and faith is a positive with non-churched people

(<http://www.umcom.org/learn/good-news-for-the-umc-in-new-barna-research-study>, accessed 2/23/17).

At Antioch, they didn't just leave these new believers on their own to believe what they liked and to act however they wanted to. The church didn't just invite and welcome new people. There needs to be a connection with the good news about the Lord Jesus, with the faith and tradition that hold to the core of the gospel.

So we see Barnabas coming from Jerusalem and giving new believers a connection with an earlier generation of Jesus' followers. There was a tradition that they needed to receive and live out of. Barnabas encourages faithfulness and devotion to the Lord. Later, Barnabas and Saul spend a year teaching these new believers. Ironically, Saul was why witnesses were scattered because of persecution. Now he's one of their teachers and prophets. Maybe they forgave him and accepted him. That's a work of God's grace, a sign of character shaped by grace (Robert Wall, *Acts, The New Interpreter's Bible*).

Experience and tradition, conversion and nurture belong together. Life in Christ is not confined to one experience. It's a life-long relationship, a journey of becoming like Jesus. Here in Antioch, the disciples were called

“Christians” for the first time. The word Christian is rare in the NT—disciple is more common. But as Christians we identify with Christ, we claim his name; he shares his anointing with us; we live in relationship with him and we seek to be like him.

The Antioch church also becomes a center for mission. Acts 11 concludes by telling about a famine. The poor believers in Jerusalem and Judea would suffer greatly. So these new disciples in Antioch determined that according to their ability, they each would send relief to their brothers and sisters in Judea. That’s another sign of God’s grace at work among them.

A church that serves God’s mission cares for the needs of others. The church isn’t isolated congregations all doing our own thing. The church is congregations connected to each other, sharing grace and guidance and nurture and resources. John Wesley referred to the early Methodist movement as the “connexion.” We still talk about the connection in the UMC. When we give to the church, most of the money stays here to support this church’s ministry, but some of it goes to the connection to help other churches and missionaries and relief agencies and schools and hospitals.

There are many ministries we can support and be involved in. Nancy and I have sponsored a child through Compassion International for many years (<https://www.compassion.com/>). Last night, we heard Andrew Peterson in concert. A ministry he’s supporting and promoting is International Justice Mission (<https://www.ijm.org/>). Lawyers, counselors, activists and others work with local law enforcement around the globe to rescue victims of human trafficking and slavery. They also work to arrest and prosecute the traffickers.

Then in chapter 13 of Acts we see the church at Antioch in worship, prayer, and fasting. In that setting they sensed the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So Barnabas and Saul were called, set apart, and sent out from the church. That began the missionary career of the Apostle Paul, which truly transformed the world.

God still calls us, sets us apart for some kind of service, and sends us into all the world. That can also mean that God sends us into every person’s

world—the world of business or finance or education or medicine or law or whatever. A missional church sets people free to discover the ministry God has for them and empowers them to do it.

Frazer Memorial UMC in Montgomery, AL is an example of a church serving God's mission. I've heard that they tell their people, "You know our mission statement. You're called to mission. If there's something you want to do to fulfill the mission, do it. If you need money or a facility, we'll need to talk about that. If not, sic 'em!"

Some years ago, a woman from Frazer was visiting her mother in a nursing home. She had just picked up her dog from the groomer's, so she took the dog to the nursing home. She said it took her an hour to get down the hall to her mother's room because all the residents wanted to pet the dog. This woman started a ministry of taking pets to the nursing home. They called it PAWS (Pets Are Working Saints).

Some time later the warden at a prison called the pastor asking for help with a prisoner who was depressed and suicidal. The pastor called one of the men in PAWS and asked him to visit this prisoner. The man went to the prison and took a parrot and a goat. He sat down with the depressed man, who said nothing for a long time. Finally, he looked at the parrot and said, "Polly want a cracker?" He talked to the parrot. As the man from church left, the man in prison said, "You can come back anytime and bring the parrot but not the goat."

He went back every week. The man talked to the parrot, then they began talking through the parrot, then they started talking to each other. Within a few months, the man gave his life to Christ. The pastor said, "I couldn't have thought that up in a million years."

How are you serving God's mission? How do you imagine you could share God's mission?