

I

A few months ago, I came across an old church photo directory from the early 1990s. A church photo directory is kind of like a school yearbook – it's a book with the names and photographs of most of the people who were members and employees of the church at that time. As I flipped through that old directory, I smiled, because some of you who were here then haven't really changed that much, and others of you, let's just say you have drastically reduced your annual hairspray usage.

II

This morning, we're going to look at something like an old church directory. This one, however, is about 2,000 years older, and it comes to us from one of the first congregations to be developed beyond the Land of Promise, in the city of Antioch, which lies on the northeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea in what is now modern-day Syria.

Our directory, such as it is, is found in the Book of Acts, and as we said last week, the Book of Acts can rightfully be read as the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and then the Book of Acts picks up with Jesus' ascension and then tells the story of the giving of the Holy Spirit and the birth and growth of the church, beginning in Jerusalem and then spreading to the ends of the earth.

And as we said last week, as students of the Bible, we can never lose sight of the fact that Jesus and all of his first disciples were born and raised as first-century Jews. They grew up observing the laws in the Hebrew Scriptures about what was considered clean and unclean, the regulations about Sabbath keeping, and admonitions against worshiping anything or anyone other than the God of Israel.

But as the Holy Spirit continued to blow through the early church, these first disciples began to make a startling discovery. Gentiles, that is, people who were not born and raised as first century Jews, were nevertheless coming to faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the one in whom somehow all of human history and all of human destiny are tied together. Last week, about one such Gentile, a Roman army officer by the name of Cornelius who invited Peter to come to his home in Caesarea Maritima.

And that theme continues in our reading for today. The Spirit keeps moving from Jerusalem further and further into the world, gathering people together and sending them to go and do things which they never imagined possible.

So listen now for a Word from God, first from Acts 13:1-3 and 14:8-18.

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord

and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

In Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet and had never walked, for he had been crippled from birth. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. And Paul, looking at him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet.’ And the man sprang up and began to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates; he and the crowds wanted to offer sacrifice. When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, ‘Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.’ Even with these words, they scarcely

restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

III

So let’s take a closer look at the directory of prophets and teachers in church in Antioch. There’s Barnabas, to whom we will return our attention momentarily. And next to Barnabas is Simeon, who was called Niger.

In the Greek in which Luke wrote his account, the word Niger is literally translated as Black. Even though we don’t have a literal photo directory from the Antioch church, scholars have concluded that Simeon "who was called Niger" was so-called because his skin and features identified him as a Black man. Scholars presume he was Gentile originally from Africa who had emigrated to Antioch, who then became one of the founders of the first church there.

Next to Simeon is Lucius of Cyrene, on the coast of North Africa, in modern-day Libya. Next to him is Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the ruler. It’s easy to skip over this little detail, but let’s remember, the Herodian kings who ruled over Judea before, during, and after Jesus’ lifetime were not kind and gentle rulers. It was a Herodian king who ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem when he learned that the King of the Jews had been born. It was a Herodian king who ordered the beheading of John

the Baptist. The Herods were not viewed as the good guys, and yet, right here in the church directory in Antioch is Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the ruler.

And next to Manaen is Saul. Saul, who not so very long ago was breathing threats and murder against the first followers of Jesus. Saul, who when a mob decided they were going to stone Stephen to death, offered to hold their coats so they could have freer use of their arms and fists. Saul, the one who not so very long ago was struck blind and knocked flat on his back by the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus.

It's quite a photo directory that Luke paints for us of this little church in Antioch. People from different parts of the world, people of different races, people of different languages. Some born as Jews, some born as Gentiles. Some who have done some downright sinful things, and some who have actively tried to hurt the church in the not-so-distant past.

And yet here they are, fasting and praying and worshiping together.

Ultimately, though, the Book of Acts isn't about Peter, or Paul, or Barnabas. Ultimately, the Book of Acts is about the surprising, even scandalous news, that the resurrection of Jesus isn't just good news for a select few, just for those who know all the right stories and songs and prayers, just for those who come from the right stock, but rather the resurrection of Jesus is good news for the whole world. According to custom

and tradition, Jews like Paul and Barnabas have no business being in a city like Lystra. And yet the Spirit sends them right into town, healing and teaching and proclaiming the name of the living God.

IV

My friend, I said it last week, and I'll say it again. God is crazy about you. There's nothing that God wouldn't give for you, including God's own self in Jesus Christ. There's nowhere God wouldn't go for you, even to the gates of hell itself. God's love for you is so far beyond your imagining, and God's grace for you is so far beyond your comprehension.

And it's not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done. It's not because of where you grew up or where you went to school or who your people are. It's because of the grace and mercy of God given to you in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, full stop.

God is in the business of blessing. In the first book of the bible, God says to this couple named Abraham and Sarah, I am going to make of you a great nation, and I am going to bless you, so that in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

God's mission, then, God's purpose in life, is blessing, not just some people, not just our people, but all the families of the earth.

And the crazy thing is, God could have just said, “Be blessed,” and it would be so. After all, God can create stars and galaxies and planets and you and me with just a word, so God could have just uttered a word, and all the families of the earth will be blessed.

But for reasons passing my comprehension, God has chosen a particular people to be the delivery vehicles for God’s blessing. God chose Abraham and Sarah. God chose Saul and Barnabas, and when the people of Lystra tried to worship them, they were quick to point out that they were just the messengers, just the delivery people, but it is the living God who brings healing and blessing to all the families of the earth.

And here’s the thing, my friend. God has chosen you. God is crazy about you. God loves you. And God wants to use you as an instrument of God’s blessing for the families of the earth.

But maybe you’re thinking to yourself, “You don’t know what I’ve done. God couldn’t possibly use me.” And you’re right. I don’t know what you’ve done. But God does. And God knew what Saul had done. And God knew what Manaen had done. And God knew that when the chips were down and Jesus was facing trial, even Peter said, “I never knew him.” God knows what you’ve done, my friend, but having a past, even a not-so-distant past, is never a disqualifier from being a vessel for the carrying of God’s blessing.”

Maybe you’re thinking to yourself, “I’m too old.” To which I respectfully point out that Abraham and Sarah were 75 years old when God came calling.

Maybe you’re thinking to yourself, “I’m an outsider. I didn’t grow up in the church. I’m not from here. I’m different than everyone else.” To which I simply say, go back and look again at that pictorial directory of the church in Antioch. Difference is not a disqualifier for leadership in the kingdom of God.

My friend, God is crazy about you. God is in the business of blessing, not just some families, not just the ones nearby, but all the families of the earth. And God has a part for you to play in God’s mission to the world.

V

And God has a role for us to play together, in our life together as First Presbyterian Church.

Once upon a time I served the Conyers Presbyterian Church in Rockdale County. The Conyers Presbyterian Church was chartered in 1860, as our nation was on the verge of being cleaved in two in the runup to the Civil War.

In a display case in the church are the session minutes, the official record of the church governing council, from 1860. And reading those minutes, there’s a sense that the world is in great peril. But there’s also a notation that the women of the church gathered together

to sew and to support one another, and the pastor had gone to visit the shut-in and the sick, and of course, there's some discussion of finances and such.

And what strikes me is that as much as the world has changed since the days of Antioch, and since the days of the Civil War, and even since the days of a world without COVID, some things remain the same.

In the church, the Spirit gathers people of different backgrounds, with different histories, together. And together, the church prays. And together, the church feasts and fasts. And together, the church worships. And together, the church listens for the voice of the Spirit, the Spirit who keeps leading us past the boundaries and borders, past our comfort zones, past barriers of language and culture, the Spirit who keeps calling and equipping us to be instruments of God's blessing for all the families of the earth.

So may we listen deeply to each other, even across lines of difference. May we listen to the Spirit. May we pray. And then, may we go to be instruments of God's blessing in and for the world.

Amen.