

Acts 13:1-5. In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. ² 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." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

Jesus unites his people

1. To encourage one another

2. To share the good news

I want you to think about the people sitting in worship, in the pews around you. What do you have in common with them? Some of you might share a few relatives? You might share a last name? Some of you might share an occupation? You might have more than few things in common with a few of the people around you. But even in this relatively cozy gathering of people there are quite of few differences too.

You have different personalities, and different abilities, different hobbies, different interests. Many of you may have grown up and lived in this area all of your life, some of us have only recently came to this area. Some of you might be very excited for the football games that have been on television lately, while others may have not even known football was still going on, or that these games had any particular significance. Some of you might love to talk about farming and the land, or old tractors or cars, while some of us don't know too much about those kinds of things. Some of you might be 200 pages into your 4th novel this month, while others haven't read a book from cover to cover since a time that you were required to do so back in school. Some of you came from a family that had plenty, some of you did not.

Despite these differences what truly brings us all together? It is the good news of Jesus Christ. It is faith in our Savior. God has called fishermen and farmers to follow him. He has called young mothers and single men, retirees and toddlers, called workers and those called by his grace, he wants us all to hear the good news and to put our trust in him and to follow him. We have been called and gathered by God to be his church here on earth and forever in heaven. The word "church" has behind it the concept of those who have been called out. We were all sinners

lost in the ignorance and darkness and death of unbelief Jesus has called us out the darkness of unbelief and has brought us into his wonderful light. He has saved us and changed our lives. He has gathered us to himself and in his love has brought us together. Jesus unites his people through his gospel; and he does this so that we might encourage one another in the faith. He also does this - he unites his people - so that we may also share the good news of forgiveness.

I want you to think about this group of men who were sitting in worship in Antioch. What could these men possibly have in common? While all of them were born of Jewish descent they were from different places. They had different life experiences.

Barnabas was a Levite who was once known as Joseph and had come from the island of Cyprus off the coast. Lucius, was from Cyrene which was much farther away in northern Africa. His name meant white or light and Simeon was known as Niger (which meant black). Manean had a different kind of childhood as he was brought up with royalty. He probably hailed from Jerusalem as we are told that he was brought up with Herod – the same Herod who would kill John the Baptist. And Saul, Saul had taken a unique route to this church. He had taken a unique path to Christianity. Just a few years before this Saul of Tarsus had been rounding up Christians to throw them into jail and kill them, but the LORD Jesus had very different plans for him, and all that would change.

These men were all very different. They had come from different places. They had lived different kinds of lives; and yet one thing united them: it was Christ. Hearts, and minds, and lives formed by different cultures and formative years were now transformed into one faith. They had all heard the message of Jesus, they had been called out of darkness by the grace and Spirit of God, and they had been gathered together in the one true faith. Forgiven by Christ, called to faith, blessed by the Spirit of God; Jesus had united these men in his church. Jesus unites his people.

And as they are gathered together in Antioch we can see the benefit that Jesus had in mind in bringing them together. The LORD had called them out so that he could bring them together so that they might encourage one another. ***Now there was in Antioch among those were called out who were prophets and teachers... and while they were they were worshipping the Lord and fasting...*** They came together to serve and worship the Lord. They found strength and encouragement in the church. They praised the Lord for his goodness and grace and together they were fasting. These men who had left behind their previous lives to follow Jesus and trusted the LORD to take care of them, were now giving up eating for a time as they trusted in the LORD to take care of them. These men were able to encourage one another in worship and in the way they lived their lives. Their habits reflected an attitude of sacrifice and trust in the LORD. The LORD who had called them to

faith and had gathered them together would take care of them.

We too can encourage one another to trust in the LORD. Within this church we certainly encourage one another in worship. We come together regularly to praise and pray to our Lord and we are reminded of our unity of faith and we are strengthened. And we can encourage one another in the way that we live our lives. The practice of fasting may not be that common among us, but there is still very much an attitude of sacrifice that is demonstrated by those who are willing to give up their time to serve on different committees and on the council, and such an attitude can have a positive effect on others within this church. Around this time of year especially as we nominate and elect men to serve, I am reminded of the wonderful example of willing and humble service demonstrated by these men. I know that I have been encouraged in my faith and in my service to God by the wonderful servants found within this church. Throughout this congregation there is an attitude of sacrifice and trust in the LORD that is put on display by those who are willing to give to support the work of this church and its different mission projects and endeavors, and through such habits of giving the body as a whole is blessed and encouraged. There are those among us who have a heart for missions and are very willing to support the mission of the WELS in their offering. Some may even give of their time to learn about news concerning far off missions and to share that news with the congregation. This too can serve as a beneficial reminder of how each of us can give of our time or our talents or our treasures to serve the LORD and he will take care of us and supply us with all that we need.

What wonderful grace God has shown to us. Sinners, all of us, we have been cleansed and forgiven. By God's grace and direction we have gathered together into this church, into this congregation, and we have been blessed with this opportunity to encourage one another in the faith as we worship our LORD and follow Jesus together. These days our local churches are even discussing ways that we could further encourage one another in the faith as we all follow Jesus together and trust in him.

Consider how God has called billions of people to faith in him and you are connected to all of them. Consider how God in his wisdom and in his kindness and care has placed you within this specific group of Christians so that you might encourage one another *and* reach out to others. That was certainly the case when the LORD brought this group together in Antioch. They had heard the message of Jesus, they had been called to faith, they had encouraged one another in the faith, and now God would send them out into the world to share the good news. God would use their different gifts to grow his church. And God was just getting started. This would be the beginning of the first missionary journey of Saul – who would later be known as Paul. God was sending his Word out into the world so that he might call out to more lost sinners, so that all people of all nations might

hear the good news of Jesus and be saved.

God can use our different talents and gifts to serve the Lord. We are not all the same, however we all have the same Lord. We may not look the same, or share all the same interests and backgrounds and life stories, but we all share eternal life in Christ Jesus. Our hearts have been changed by the same good news of a perfect Savior from sin. And now the LORD calls us to work together as his body to share that good news of Jesus and to support and grow his church.

We must admit that at times we may be hesitant to share the gospel with someone and maybe it is because they may look a little different, or dress a little different, than we do. In this small town atmosphere we might know about someone's past mistakes and hold that against them. We might be too quick to judge a person by the color of their skin, or the company that they used to keep. When those sinful tendencies bubble up, when those sinful thoughts rush into your mind, let the love of Jesus push those things out of your heart, cut those things out of your thinking. May his love purge any thoughts of selfish hatred and fear from your lives. Jesus came to forgive all sinners. He came to save and to gather all people and his love does not discriminate. His love covers over all of our sins. His love covers over all our past mistakes. His love blots away all our guilt and shame and he gathers us to himself as his dearly loved child. He enables us to serve him in love and thankfulness. He unites us together to encourage and support one another. His love alone could make this possible.

After all think about that little group of Christians at Antioch. They were people from all over, with all sorts of different backgrounds. They had differences in their appearance and in their past. And sitting across from them, standing in their presence, was the very man who had rounded up Christians to imprison them. The one, who had reached out in anger and hatred, was now being commissioned and sent to reach out in love. Their hands were no longer clenched in hatred as they plotted to exact their revenge against Saul; instead those who trusted in Jesus extended their hands in love and placed their hands on Saul and sent him out to share the forgiveness and love of God that only comes through Jesus. They sent him out to share the forgiveness and love that wipes away sin and grants eternal life and then they prayed for him. All of these believers were united in faith, gathered together by Jesus to encourage one another and to share the good news of Jesus Christ. May God bless us as we strive to do the same!