

**Acting Out: To Infinity and Beyond (Together) Sunday, 8/5/18**

**1** We're continuing our journey through the book of Acts today. Just as Acts famously recounts the missionary journeys of the very first Christians, we too are on a journey, a journey of letting the Holy Spirit rekindle the passion, power, and purpose of our church as we grow in acting out the Good News in this world. Acts is all about God's forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and the mission of sharing both with the world. Remember, we're not secret agents for Jesus, we're sacred agents! And then means that we share the Good News of Jesus in deed and word, out loud for the world to see and hear.

**2** Can you believe it's been 23 years since the original Toy Story movie was released? I haven't seen the sequels, but I'd be very surprised if they didn't all share some of the same basic messages that permeated the first film: Change is inevitable; Going new places can be dangerous; And when we try to do something important, it almost always works better when we do it together. Those same lessons play out in today's Scripture lessons as the early church formally commissions Saul and Barnabas to go out and carry the Good News of Jesus to the Gentile outsiders. Just like the Buzz Lightyear character from Toy Story, Saul and Barnabas confidently proclaimed, "To infinity and beyond!," launching the first missionary movement of the Gospel since Pentecost that didn't require the fire of persecution to get it going! It's a good thing they went together, because plenty of challenges were waiting along their way. Let's rejoin Saul and Barnabas, as they experience a decidedly mixed response to their preaching. I'm picking up the story now in verse 44 of Acts 13.

**{Read Acts 13:44-52 (NLT)}.**

**3** Previously in the story of Acts, all the action centered around Jerusalem, the location of the one Jewish Temple, way down here at the bottom of the map. The northern edge of modern day Egypt would be in the lower center of the map, and modern-day Israel would be where Jerusalem was and still is. Saudi Arabia would be to the lower right, then Syria and Iraq just north and northeast of Israel. Almost all of the remaining land that you see in the top of the map is modern-day Turkey, with just a scattering of the Greek islands visible to the far west. If we kept moving west, we'd run into Italy and the capital city of Rome. It was to Rome that the Holy Spirit was taking Paul and the Gospel, to the very seat of the Roman Empire, the center of power and culture for the known world.

By the way, people at that time had many names, and so as Saul moves away from Jerusalem on his way toward Rome, the story drops his Jewish name, Saul, and gives him his Roman name, Paul. They aren't two different people, and Saul didn't change his name. Luke just started using his Roman name.

How did Paul and the Gospel get to all the way Rome? It all started back in Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, the church was born, and the church was commissioned to carry the forgiving love of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the rest of the world. Remember that it took the persecution of the jealous Jewish leaders to drive the disciples out of Jerusalem in Acts 9. Where did they go? We know from his letters in the Bible that Paul, the former chief persecutor of the Christian church now turned chief evangelist, preached for a while in Damascus, Syria- probably for about three years. After his years in Syria, Saul made a short trip to Jerusalem and then escaped home, where he'd be safe from the Jerusalem Jews seeking to kill him. That would be Tarsus, right here on the southern edge of Turkey, what was then the province of Cilicia. It was probably around five years that Saul stayed in Tarsus before meeting up with Barnabas in Antioch, just to the south east of Tarsus, and several more years in Antioch before beginning his missionary journeys, somewhere between 11 and 14 years after his dramatic vision of Jesus as he travelled to Damascus to arrest Christians.

It's easy to read narratives like this in the Bible and assume that one thing happened immediately after the other. The reality is that travel in those days could take months or even years, and often times years passed between accounts that are given in the Bible. We can get an unrealistic expectation from thinking that every day in the life of the Apostles involved mass conversions and divine miracles. It didn't. The Bible records the highpoints for us, but we have to remember that they also lived the ordinary things of daily life as well, both the joys and the challenges.

**4** If I asked you what religious group these two belong to, what would you say? Right, they're Mormon missionaries, sent out in twos for two-year intensive missionary work in sharing their message. While I can't commend their message to you, there is something admirable about their dedication to share it with others, as well as the way they follow the many Biblical examples of pairs of witnesses being sent into the world.

Why might you suppose that God gave us that pattern of acting out the Gospel in pairs? There are so many good reasons. We don't all have the same gifts: One of us might be a better speaker, while the other might be a better listener. We don't all have the same maturity: Going together gives the more mature person a chance to mentor the other. We don't all have the same temptations: Going with someone else strengthens our accountability and resolve to seek the things of God and turn away from that which is not. We don't all have the same story: Each one of us has a unique way of acting out the Gospel.

A peculiar thing began to happen in the Christian church when it came to America. That spirit of independence, rugged individualism, and even freedom that characterized this country began to transform our understanding of what it means to be Christians. The rise of nondenominational churches and people who say they are "spiritual" but not religious, are natural extensions of a movement that began back then. In the church today, it's common to hear people talk about "my" ministry, instead of "our" ministry. That was never the way God intended it to be. Even Paul's mission of starting Gentile churches really wasn't his at all. None of it would have happened if the Holy Spirit hadn't brought together like-minded believers who could see that they could be stronger, more effective, and more godly disciples of Christ if they gathered and worked together as one body, the Church.

**5** Our second reading today gives us a sobering reason for working together in our mission of acting out the forgiving love of Jesus: There are people in this world who respond to the Gospel in shocking and hurtful ways. Have you heard the phrase, "No good deed goes unpunished?" It's a little cynical, but in some ways true. Although we all bear the image of God, that image has been fractured by sin, so no matter how it is that you chose to act out the Gospel, you have to be prepared for the real possibility that you'll offend someone.

Have you ever walked into the sanctuary to find someone sitting in "your" seat and been angry? Be honest now! The Jewish leaders at Antioch in Pisidia might have been upset in a similar way. Paul and Barnabas were drawing large Gentile crowds to the Synagogue that most certainly would have disrupted the status quo. Not only that, Paul and Barnabas were poaching God-Fearing Gentiles who normally worshipped at the Synagogue, luring them away with what the Jews felt was an unfair offer: A life of freedom and forgiveness rather than slavery to the law. Paul and Barnabas were drummed out of town by the jealous

Jewish Leaders, but not before many Gentiles received the Good News of Jesus with glad hearts, and the seeds of a new church were planted.

When you share the message of God's forgiving love with someone- whether it's with your words or your actions- you have to be prepared for the possibility that you'll be misunderstood and or rejected. Even Jesus had people- many people- turn away from him. In this day of increasing marginalization of the Christian Church, we have to have faith that the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the Church of Jesus Christ will still prevail, even as it transforms into something that looks different than what our generation has been used to. When we understand that we're in mission together, and that our mission is under the care of God, we can better interpret and weather with hope the difficult times in the mission fields of our lives.

**6** Our church is in a season of transformation for the sake of acting out the Good News. Like the apostles in the Upper Room, we started this season with a one-year breakthrough prayer initiative that led to our Missional Church Consultation Initiative (or MCCI) weekend and the approval of five new breakthrough initiatives and ten new ministry teams. The most recent team to launch is the Worship Excellence Team, with the team receiving their coach just this week. Like Paul and Barnabas, it's taking some time for our teams to assemble and prepare before we're fully ready to go, shouting, "To Infinity and Beyond!" The Rebranding Team is so close to revealing the new church logos, including more newcomer-friendly formats for our newsletter and bulletin. The Confirmation Design Team is on the brink of launching the new Confirmation program next month. The Sunday Morning Schedule Team is carefully examining our Sunday morning schedule to make sure we're maximizing our discipleship and making our worship and Sunday School as available as possible to the communities around us. The Guest Connections Team is working on new ways to reach out to new people through programs like the summer reading program in the park. The Adult Discipleship Team has been programing new venues for adults to grow int heir faith, like the new parenting class launching this August.

Our work with the MCCI initiatives aren't almost over, they've barely begun! There's still room for you to get involved, either on one of the new ministry teams, like the Social Media Team and the Website Team, or on one of our many other ministry teams or outreach

missions. As we prepare to launch into a new season of breakthrough ministry this fall, let's do it together, confident that God has commissioned and empowered us to carry the forgiving love of Jesus into the world around us.



## ***Buffalo United Methodist Church***

*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*

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