

## **To the End of the Earth** **Acts 13:1-3, 42-52**

There was a Jew from Cyrene, an African and a Roman. There was someone with aristocratic connections and a Rabbi within this group of “prophets and teachers” that Luke introduces in the opening verses of Acts 13. And in many ways it is a microcosm of the society that those in the first century lived.

There were Jews – those, who by birth, were members of God’s chosen people beginning with Abraham. They were once a powerful nation but now they were a scattered people throughout the modern world. Some remembered “where they had come from,” others had no idea of their lineage, their heritage or their God and still others followed their religion religiously that is - having more than enough head knowledge but very little heart knowledge, if you know what I mean. It was the latter that Luke was referring, when he speaks of “Jews” in verse 45. (13:45) We know this by what “filled” them” (also verse 45). (13:45) That image is telling, isn’t it. We typically use those kinds of words when speaking of food – as in the “filling” that fills a pastry. For me, it doesn’t matter how soft and delicate the pastry if it is filled with “cherries,” for example because I’m not a big “cherry” fan (And I’m not speaking of the hockey broadcaster) But fill that tart with buttery pecans and I fear that I might be back to the weight I was before the summer. So “fillings” are not hard to understand, even when Luke mentions them in our lesson, like how he describes the Jews as being “jealous” and “blasphemous”. Did you notice that? Those are the two descriptors, the two “fillings,” as it were, to those Luke refers to as Jews in Acts 13. And Luke even tells us “why” they had such “fillings”. It was because “they saw the crowds.” (13:45) In other words, these Jews who were part of a “worshipping community” saw a “new” worshipping community that we learned, just a few verses earlier had new followers, in fact some followers who used to follow them. So what these Jews were “seeing” was something that they didn’t have and therefore they were “jealous.” Now I need not tell you jealousy is a terrible thing to “fill” your life with. It’s true of looking at “other” churches and wanting what they have or noticing your neighbor has more than you have, or a co-worker who seem to do more “fun” things than you do (at least that’s what she tells you around the water cooler). But what makes this matter worse is that “these” people should have known better. They “knew” God or at least they thought they knew God but still they were so jealous, especially of those, also with faith, but what they considered misdirected. Luke calls those the Jews were jealous of as “disciples.” (13:52)

“Disciple” is a term that did not necessarily originate in the early church but certainly took on a deeper meaning following Jesus resurrection. “Disciple” became not just a descriptor for “followers of Jesus” but rather those involved in a “lifelong quest of learning”. Barnabas and Saul were just two of

these disciples who were seen as having gifts and were therefore “set apart” (13:2) and “sent out.” (13:3) Even then, early in the life of early church, these disciples took Jesus’ final instructions to “Go and make disciples” seriously. (Matt 28:19) These disciples knew that Jesus message was not just for them – something to be hoarded and kept but rather something to be shared and given away. Barnabas and Saul were but two of the many who risked everything for Jesus. As an aside, in verse 42 something happens that one can easily skim over but is worth taking note of. In verse 42 a change happens from verse 2 of that same chapter. Barnabas is there still set apart and sent out as in Saul but now Saul is called Paul. And if you look even closer you will notice the order changes – from Barnabas and Saul to Paul and Barnabas. Saul, or I should say “Paul” is a changed man – both in name and leadership. He is no longer Saul, the persecutor of Christians but Paul the persecuted of Christians. Paul, as a former Rabbi trained under the most well known Rabbi of the day knew the stories, memorized the words and knew the character of God (in other words had all the “book smarts”) but was only now a true disciple because his life now belonged to God. This is what it really means to be a disciple. To be a disciple means you follow Jesus “no matter what.” And for the early church, “no matter what” cost them dearly. The Romans were not impressed with anyone who threatened the status quo, not happy with those who stood up to authorities or listened more to Someone other than them. This period was not an easy time in the life of the early church, nor a walk in the park for those who chose to be Christ’s disciples. So with all this in mind you might be left surprised to know what “filled” these disciples, or maybe not. And Luke uses that exact same word “filled” that he used with the Jews but the “filling” of the disciples was nothing like the filling of the Jews. And once you hear the filling again you might just understand how this persecuted church and abused disciples continued to move forward the cause of Christ. We see the disciples filling in the last verse of our passage this morning when Luke tells us the “disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.” (13:52) Quite a difference from “jealousy and blasphemy”, don’t you think? Now there are countless “marks” of a true disciple in Scripture but in many ways the above encapsulates discipleship very well. There is firstly “joy.” But understand this no fake smile, sort of thing. Joy is not even about being “happy.” No, “Christian joy” is something not based on circumstance. Joy is present even in the midst of deep sadness. And yes, Christians can feel deep sadness. We are not immunized from the “troubles of this life” but in the Christian faith there is a depth of knowledge in knowing that God is in control and present with us no matter how things end. Whether there is healing, the job comes through or life continues and so on, there is still joy. How do we know this? Well, that has to do with the second “filling” which is the “Holy Spirit”. I don’t want to spend too much time on the Holy Spirit this morning because that’s our theme next Sunday but I will say it is the Spirit

of God who lives in the life of the disciple to empower, convict, challenge but even more remind us we are not alone. It was the Spirit of God therefore who inspired the church and “poised the church to take the greatest of all steps” – take the message “to the ends of the earth”. (Source: William Barclay, “Daily Study Bible”)

And it is here we find the third group of people described in our passage. I wish I could say that Luke uses the same word, “filling,” that he used twice before because it would be such a great sermon tool. But I can’t say that, even though Luke does mention two words to describe them as well. The third group in our passage Luke calls, “Gentiles.” (13:48) They are not Jews, by heritage or even by practice. But like Jews they cannot easily be put into a box as if they are all the same. Gentiles were simply a category of those who were “not Jews” nor were these Gentiles disciples, those who were followers of Jesus, just yet. I suppose you could say they are like many who live in our community – friends of yours or those you do not know. You see them when you are out walking on your street or in a grocery store line. You open a door for them as you both go into Tim Horton’s or wave them through at the stoplight. Your kids play hockey with them or you throw darts with them at Club 55. There is very little different between you and this third group. Like you they are hurting, broken people who hide their hurts, just as you do. Maybe the only difference is that they do not know how much God loves them. Some go through their entire lives not knowing this reality that could change everything, I mean absolutely everything for them. If they only knew it would be like shining a light into a pitch, black room. And that is what life is like for them and what life was like for us before we met Jesus. Sure, we think our eyes adjust to the darkness and they may a little but it’s still dark in the darkness and there are things you simply cannot see, no matter how hard you try in the dark. But there is another danger in the dark. Things are hidden in the dark. You can’t be seen well in the dark. No one can see your real facial expressions in the dark. They might hear your voice quiver but they cannot see your tears. Or in the darkness things happen under the cover of night that never would happen in the light of day. And I’m not just referring to things that would embarrass us or others, but things that are simply dangerous or destructive. This is the life of the “Gentile”. It’s the story of my life prior to my encounter with Jesus over 30 years ago now. And it’s what I have been called to do since that time – not simply as a Pastor but as a disciple of Christ. Luke writes that Jesus told his disciples, “I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles.” (13:47) “What kind of light,” you might ask - because there are all kinds of lights. There are those who like to shine spotlights on other people, pointing out their shortcomings, failures and sins but that’s not the kind of light I am talking about. No instead there are others shining lights into darkness places to lead others out of those dark places. That’s the kind of light we are called to be. It is those kinds of lights that describe the Gentiles experience upon

meeting Christ. Prior to their life changing encounter we are not told what they were “filled” with but following their meeting Jesus in Paul and Barnabas Luke tells us. Because of men like Paul and Barnabas taking the message “to the ends of the earth” (One article I read said it was possible Paul travelled up to 10,000 miles during his ministry – which is something when you consider the time. Source: William Willimon, “Interpretation: Acts) these Gentiles were never the same people again.

Not all of us are “sent away” but we are all “set apart,” set apart to be a lights to the Gentiles, illumining the way to God for those living in darkness, even in our own community. The story of our community is not always a great narrative. Just look at the facial of expression of someone who lives outside of Georgina when you tell them you live in “Keswick” for example. But what if we began to “re-write the story of our community?” What if we became small and large lights in our community? Imagine the change that could happen, not only in our community but in the lives of those who live in our community. What if our joy and the Holy Spirit exuded from us? What would it do in the lives of others? Well Luke tells us what it did in the lives of the first century “pre-Christian.” Upon encountering Jesus through these disciples Luke tells us the Gentiles were “glad” and “praised the word of the Lord.” (13:48)

Can that happen again – I mean here in our community? It can and it is when we enter into our community and illumine Christ. Who would not be “glad” to leave the darkness? Who would not “praise” such a message if it led to them the God who loves them? Yes, the goal of that message is to get to the ends of the earth. But to get from here to there it begins with us, here in this place, here in this community that God has placed us in to love and to serve. Thanks be to God.