

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, on the GO!
(Studies of the book of Acts)

Crashing Through Quitting Points

(Acts 13:1-13)

Study #16

Introduction: Finishing before the finish line...

A bunch of years ago, even when nobody was chasing me, I ran. Yes, I got caught up in the long-distance running scene and I ran in marathons in 1994, 1995, and 1996.

You may be thinking that I misspoke when I said, *"I ran 'in' three marathons"* rather than *"I ran three marathons."* But there's a method to my misspeaking. In two of the three marathons I entered, I finished before reaching the finish line.

There are stories associated with both of my DNF (Did Not Finish), but they're not that interesting.

I mean, you don't want to hear about my quitting the Dallas White Rock Marathon at mile 24.5 on Swiss Avenue, right across from my alma mater, Dallas Seminary, due to leg cramps (I have never liked the "optics" of quitting in front of my seminary...).

And you really don't want to hear all about my seeing visions (hallucinations not from God) under the bridge on Guilbeau Road a mile away from the finish line here at the church?

So, yes. I quit. And honestly, to this day I regret quitting. I wish I had finished both of those runs, even though it wouldn't have been very smart.

Quitting before a finish often leads to regret.

If you've ever faced the temptation to call it quits in something you started, and, like me, you didn't finish what you set out to finish, you may wonder what you missed out on by quitting.

What character strengths might have been built by continuing in a hard thing? What delightful - or difficult - experiences might you have had along the way?

And we wonder - we who have quit - what would it have felt like to have been welcomed at the run's actual finish line? Or, how rewarding would it have been to have heard your boss applaud you for sticking with a tough assignment? Or, what a treat to have heard your teacher affirm you for diligence on a challenging school project.

We start something challenging with hope for an adventure, to accomplish something great.

We wouldn't start something if we didn't think that the rewards outweighed the risks and that the gain was worth the pain.

But, every great adventure comes with a cost, and the temptation to quit is common to most of us.

This morning we come to the beginning of a great adventure for some of Jesus' followers. As we learn about this great adventure, we'll see someone who called it "quits" while on mission for Jesus.

The story offers both a warning to anyone who might be tempted to go "off mission" - and a redemptive offer of hope to anyone who wants to get back "on mission."

Review...

Last Sunday, we listened to John Dyer give a very helpful talk about using today's technology to honor the Lord.

Before that, we had been exploring the book of Acts.

Jeff brought a message from Acts 12 that told of the first death of one of Jesus' apostles, James, the miraculous release of Peter from prison, and the death of Herod. And before that, Jeff spoke from Acts 11 and acquainted you with the ethnically diverse, generous church at Antioch.¹

This morning we turn our attention back to that beautiful church at Antioch, a church that is engaged in a season of prayer.²

Those we find praying were the "Who's Who" of Antioch's leadership. And the names of the leaders are intriguing, especially for the ethnic and political diversity the list reveals.

A Commissioning in Antioch (vv. 1-3)

Meet the Leaders of the Antioch Church (v. 1)

[1] Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets³ and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

The first leader mentioned is **Barnabas**, whom we already know as a hero of the early church.⁴

Then, there is **Simeon**, an African whose nickname is taken from the same root as the name of present-day Nigeria.⁵

¹ The last message I gave was from Acts 10 and 11, where we saw the Roman centurion, Cornelius, along with his whole household come to faith in Jesus. That was the watershed event of the first non-Jews to become Christians and to be welcomed into the church.

² Unlike the scene in Acts 12 where the believers in Jerusalem were praying in response to a calamity, the Christians at Antioch are praying for direction.

³ Agabus (Acts 11:28) and the daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:9) are referred to as prophets/prophetesses. Judas and Silas, who delivered the letter to the Jerusalem Council with Barnabas and Paul (15:32) are also called prophets.

⁴ I suspect he is listed first because he was pre-eminent among the other leaders. See Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27.

⁵ The Latin word "niger" means "black."

Next is **Lucius** of Cyrene, a city in North Africa. Lucius' name is Latin, indicating Roman roots.

Then comes **Manaen**. He hung with royalty, as is seen by the fact that he was "**brought up with**" (raised with) Herod the Tetrarch (Herod Antipas).⁶

And finally, Luke mentions **Saul** (we know him better as Paul), a violent persecutor of the church who was saved in a blinding encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.⁷

These five were the spiritual leaders in Antioch. And what a picture of diversity - a Hellenistic Jew, an African, a Romanized Jew, an aristocrat, and a trained rabbi.

The Gospel does, indeed, unify. Jesus does break down barriers.

In the church at Antioch, the unified but diverse prophets and teachers were also fervent, passionate worshippers.

Listen as God Gives Direction (v. 2)

[2a] While they were ministering⁸ to the Lord and fasting...

The leaders of the church lead in worship (v. 2a)

Five men are listed, but I strongly suspect that there was a larger group that was "**ministering to the Lord and fasting...**"

Luke tells us what the Holy Spirit did in response to this church's fervent prayer.

⁶ This Herod was the one who ruled over Galilee and Perea between 4 B.C. and A.D. 39 - that is, during Jesus' ministry. He was the one who had consented to the death of John the Baptist. He was also the one who treated Jesus so shamefully at His trial. (Luke 23:7-12). Having a childhood pal in the Herod family probably indicates that Manaen came from society's upper crust.

⁷ He was in Antioch because Barnabas brought him from Tarsus to help with the teaching ministry in the church. See Acts 11:25-26.

⁸ The word we translate "ministering" is not the same word as is usually translated "serving" although it does relate to serving God. I call it a "stained glass" word, as it is the word from which we derive our English word "liturgy."

The LEADER of the church leads (v. 2b)

How

[2b]...the Holy Spirit said...

The Spirit of God gave direction. And I, who am curious about these things, wonder HOW He might have **“said”** what He said. What was His mode of communication? Well, He might have...

- ...spoken audibly, like Jesus did to Paul on the Damascus road.
- ...given an identical impression to each of those praying.
- ...spoken through one of the prophets in the church.
- ...spoken through the mutually agreed-upon decision of the church.

The Bible says **“the Holy Spirit said”** and we still don’t know exactly how He said. But in some way, the explicit will of the Holy Spirit was made very clear.

What

[2b]...the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart⁹ for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

He wanted Barnabas and Saul, two of Antioch’s greatest people resources, to leave the church for a season for a special work. That work is not clarified, but it will definitely travel to spread the good news about Jesus.

You and I can read Acts 13:1-2 pretty quickly. (I did it in 23 seconds.) and we might conclude, then, that what the two verses describe happened quickly. But it probably didn’t happen quickly.

In fact, I suspect that the season of fasting and praying and discussing and listening for and receiving and processing the Spirit’s guidance might have taken weeks or even months.

Seeking God’s wisdom and direction is something that churches do. And it can’t be rushed. Here at Northwest, we’re praying and discussing and seeking the Lord’s wisdom and guidance about several items in these days. Here are a couple of them.

One, after a wonderful trip to Chile, South America, we are seeking His wisdom about next steps. Should we pursue an on-going partnership with some churches in central Chile? If so, what might that partnership look like? Of what might it consist? Would you please join me and the Elders and the Missions Committee as we pray for God’s mind in this?

Two, we are praying for God’s wisdom and direction about how to best steward the proceeds of the recent land sale. For the past year and a half, the Elders have been praying and inviting you to join us in prayer, but the deal has been tentative. Now the deal - in the words of our realtor - is a **“done, done deal”**, set to close by early 2018. And we all now see the need to ask God to help us see how we might be the best possible stewards of this treasure, so that we, as a church, might hear Jesus say to us, **[Luke 19:17] “Well done, good slaves...”**

When we pray and seek and ask - and fast! - and discuss and listen and process, the Lord will guide. Then, and only then, will we act. And that’s just what happened in Antioch.

When that church discerned what the Spirit was directing them to do, they moved - and I want us all to listen carefully to how Luke tells the story.

Watch as the Team is Sent Out (vv. 3-4a)

[3] Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. [4a] So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit...

To which we say, **“OK, Luke, which is it? Were they sent out by the church or were they sent out by the Holy Spirit?”**

Here’s what I think the Lord is telling us here.

⁹ In his writings, Paul mentions being “set apart” three times: At his birth (Galatians 1:15); at his conversion (Romans 1:1); here, to specific service.

When a church, after a time of prayer and seeking the Lord, discerns by some means (agreement of what is ministry smart, direct revelation) that the God-honoring thing to do is “X”, and that church then commissions people and allocates resources for that “X”, then you can just as easily say that the church did it or the Holy Spirit did it.

It was a dual sending out of Barnabas and Saul by the Spirit and the church. And by this commissioning, the church at Antioch “got it.”

That church was a wonderful worshipping, connecting fellowship. But, as important as worship and community both are, they knew that they weren’t there only to worship and to build community.

Churches are to be set up for mission. Churches are to be on mission for the Great Commission even if it means the loan or the loss of some of that church’s most treasured resources.

So, I miss Ken and Denise Case and their kids, Benjamin, Bryce, and Brooke. If you’ve been here for a while, I’ll bet you miss them, too.

The Case family isn’t here now because they are serving Jesus in Thailand. They served Jesus tremendously while they were here at Northwest, but they believed that God wanted them to serve Him in a place where lots and lots of people don’t even know Jesus’ Name.

When they told us of their vision to move to Thailand, nobody told them, *“You need to stay here. Denise is serving in the Children’s Ministry. Ken is great with announcements and as a Sunday School teacher.”*

No!

We knew that we were going to miss them - a lot! - but we knew, too, that there was a bigger game going on than what was going on here.

As a church, we submitted to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in their lives, released them to the ministry to which God was calling them, commissioned them, and now actively support them and pray for them.

We and the Holy Spirit sent them out. And what was a temporary setback for our church was a win for the larger work of God, as now, in Thailand, people who would have never heard about Jesus, are hearing through our friends.

That’s what Antioch did when they commissioned and sent out Barnabas and Saul - and we gladly walk in the footsteps of the church at Antioch. The missionaries were off on their great gospel adventure.

A Journey Launched from Antioch (vv. 4-13)

Phase One: Travel (vv. 4-6a)

Resources

As they left Antioch, they had great resources. They had the resources of the Holy Spirit’s presence and gifting. Plus, both Barnabas and Saul were powerful teachers, and Barnabas had a gift that is VERY helpful on a long trip - the gift of encouragement.

And in addition, they had the resource of John Mark.¹⁰

John Mark was the son of Mary, the woman who owned the home in Jerusalem where the prayer meeting was held for Peter’s release from jail. (Acts 12) John Mark’s role in this adventure was to be a helper, a go-fer, for Barnabas and Saul.¹¹

Luke also gives us the team’s itinerary.

Itinerary

[4b]...they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. [5] When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. [6] When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos...

¹⁰ John is his Jewish name. Mark, the Roman name.

¹¹ Some have wondered if John Mark was an eyewitness to Jesus’ ministry (see Mark 14:51-52), something that neither Barnabas nor Saul could claim.

Leaving Antioch, these three headed for the coastal city closest to Antioch, which was Seleucia.

From Seleucia, they took a ship west and south on the Mediterranean, to the island of Cyprus.¹²

They landed at the eastern port city of Salamis, sharing Jesus with the Jews there.

They traveled the length of the island, finally making it to the westernmost end where their travels brought them to the city of Paphos, the capitol city of Cyprus.

And it was while they were in Paphos that they met two men, the two central characters in the first major challenge of this journey.

Phase Two: Spiritual Warfare! (vv. 6b-12)

Two who hear the Gospel (vv. 6-7)

Bar-Jesus (Elymas) (v. 6)

[6] When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician,¹³ a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus...¹⁴

The guy's stage name meant "Son of Salvation." Luke calls him a *false prophet*. Bar-Jesus was just someone willing to tell a powerful ruler what he wanted to hear.

The other player in this story is Bar-Jesus' boss, the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus.¹⁵

¹² Cyprus was famous for its copper mines and its shipbuilding industry. Known in the Old Testament as Kittim. Cyprus was Barnabas' home. (Acts 4:36)

¹³ In the Bible, the term used here for "magician" doesn't necessarily assume someone evil or sinister. The word can refer to someone who is a counselor to royalty. But, the word *can* refer to someone who walks on the dark side and stands against God, which certainly describes Bar-Jesus.

¹⁴ The first opponent of the missionaries is named "son of Jesus." How ironic.

¹⁵ It was common for pagan rulers to have magicians and astrologers in their court, as personal fortune-tellers. This was likely Bar-Jesu's role in Sergius Paulus' court.

Sergius Paulus (v. 7)

[7] who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

Sergius Paulus had a deep spiritual hunger. And when he heard that Barnabas and Saul were preaching a life-giving message, he sent for them - something Elymas tried to prevent.

When powers collide (vv. 8-11)

Elymas opposes the faith (v. 8)

[8] But Elymas¹⁶ the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

Elymas feared for his position. He knew that he'd be out on the street if Sergius Paulus discovered real spiritual power. So, he did everything he could to convince his boss to not turn to Jesus. And it is at this point that Saul/Paul took over.

We know Barnabas as an encourager. Paul had an encouraging side, too. But Paul didn't mind getting in people's faces. He wasn't timid and he could be bold and aggressive - as here.

Paul opposes Elymas (vv. 9-11)

[9] But Saul, who was also known as Paul,¹⁷ filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, [10] and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? [11] Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time."

¹⁶ Elymas, another name for Bar-Jesus. A Semitic word bearing a meaning similar to the Greek "magus" or magician.

¹⁷ Saul is the Semitic form of his name; Paul, the Greek. The Greek form was more appropriate to the Gentile mission. It was not unusual for a Jew to have an Aramaic/Hebrew name and a Hellenized form of that name.

Paul knew from personal experience that God could use a period of temporary blindness to great effect. (See Acts 9)

So, by the Spirit's power he administered the same to Elymas, no doubt hoping that Elymas' spiritual eyes would be opened, as his had been.

We don't ever find out if Elymas came to faith in Jesus, but Luke does tell us of at least one great response to the miraculous blindness.

The response of Sergius Paulus (v. 12)

[12] Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

So, the Roman-appointed ruler of Paphos - the proconsul of Cyprus! - became a Christian - despite opposition from a Jewish false prophet.¹⁸ Paul and Barnabas and John Mark are blessed with the first evangelistic fruit on the First Missionary Journey.

And we can only imagine all of the conversions, the changed lives, the miracles - and the opposition, the persecution, the spiritual warfare - ahead of them as their journey continued.

And the journey did continue. The missionaries left the island of Cypress, and began the more serious and the more difficult part of their mission for Jesus.

Phase Three: Pressing On! (v. 13)

AGGRESSIVE Itinerary

[13a] Now Paul and his companions¹⁹ put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia...

¹⁸ A Roman Gentile responds positively while a Jewish false prophet rejects the message. The obvious contrast is intentional, as the first of Paul's miracles punishes a Jew who objected to Paul giving the Gospel to a Gentile.

¹⁹ Notice the shift in leadership. At the start, it was **[13:2] Barnabas and Saul**. Now, it's **[13:12] Paul and his companions...**

Perga was a city on the Asian mainland. From Perga, their travels are taking them toward a region called *Galatia*.²⁰ Galatia was known to be a very dangerous territory.

The missionaries would travel the road leading from Perga to Pisidian Antioch. That road took them through treacherous terrain, famously bad weather in the Taurus Mountains, and through stretches where there was always the threat of roadside bandits.

The people they would find in Galatia were, for the most part, somewhat civilized. But, while there were pockets of Jews in Galatia, most worshipped the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome.

They have hundreds of miles of travel and ministry in front of them, and they will do what they had done on the island of Cyprus.

LIFE-CHANGING activities

They will preach and evangelize and make disciples. Congregations - churches, Gospel-outposts - will be established.

There will be miracles and healings - yes, and sufferings and hardships, too. But souls will be saved and lives will be changed. They'll fulfill the mission for which the church at Antioch had sent them out.

And just at this juncture, as they start to head inland, the "helper" - John Mark - did something very unhelpful. He left.

DEPLETED Resources

[13b...but John left²¹ them and returned to Jerusalem.²²

²⁰ It's also taking them to the general region in which his hometown of Tarsus is located. But they won't come anywhere near Tarsus on this journey.

²¹ *Αποχωρίζω*. The word can mean simply "leave." But it very often has the sense of "abandon."

²² Paul's assessment of John Mark's departure was correct. John Mark was wrong to have left. The manner in which Paul and Barnabas dealt with him (Paul shunned him; Barnabas sought to restore him) reflects their differing gifts and personalities. But there was no justification for John Mark leaving Paul and Barnabas.

He left at some point after they landed at Perga. And he didn't return to the sending church, Antioch. He went to his home city, Jerusalem.²³

And let's not sugarcoat this. John Mark defected. He abandoned the mission. He abandoned Paul and Barnabas.

So why did John Mark leave? There are suggestions made in some of my commentaries.

- He resented his Uncle Barnabas taking a backseat to the leadership of this new guy, Saul/Paul.
- He was having second thoughts about taking the Gospel to Gentiles.
- Paul and/or Barnabas were using a ministry strategy with which he disagreed, and he couldn't abide by what they were proposing.
- Paul contracted a disease (malaria was common in Galatia) and John Mark didn't want to fall victim to the same.²⁴
- After noting that the road they were taking led to some of the most inhospitable areas in Asia Minor and that danger lay around every bend and travel was very disagreeable, he decided that Jerusalem - not Galatia - was the place to be.

We don't know why he left, only that he left. We do discover in Acts 15 that Paul considered his departure to be an inexcusable desertion and refused to take him on Missionary Journey #2.

Everything we read about the First Missionary Journey from this point on forward is about what Paul and Barnabas did. And everything they did, they did without the help of their helper. Now the work of three will be done by two.

Conclusion:

There are so many threads running through what we have seen here in Acts 13 that instruct and inspire us.

We have seen beautiful unity in the church in Antioch in a setting of great ethnic and political diversity. (Imagine what a witness to the power of Jesus it would be if we were marked by this same kind of diverse unity here.)

The praying heart of the church at Antioch is hard to miss. (What if we each separately and we together prayed with the intensity of Antioch?)

Antioch's generous heart to share precious resources that will benefit the larger purposes of God is inspiring. (It motivates us to do the same!)

All of this is great stuff - but as we close, I want to zero in on the thread of John Mark's story.

He quit. He went "off mission." And I want to talk about the temptation to quit Jesus' mission and the effects that follow when anyone quits and is not "on mission" for Jesus. I also want to point to the way back if John Mark's story is your story.

First, think with me about what it might mean to "quit" the mission of Jesus, to go "off mission" for Jesus.

Off mission...

The word used by Luke to describe John Mark's departure is also used in Luke 9:39 to tell about a demon who *withdrew* from a tormented young boy. This word (*αποχορίζω*) describes a demon who stopped doing what was under orders to do: steal, kill, destroy.

For a disciple of Jesus to *withdraw* (go "off mission") is to cease doing what he or she is under orders from Jesus to do: love, serve, trust, pray, evangelize, give, make disciples.

And, to be clear, this doesn't have anything to do with going on a missions trip. We certainly don't think any the less of Manaen, Lucius, or Simeon for staying in Antioch. The Spirit didn't call them to leave.

²³ At least one has commented that he returned to his mother...

²⁴ In Galatians 4:13, Paul says that he preached there because of an illness.

It has to do with the submissive posture of your heart toward God and with the generous investment of your treasure, time and energy for Him.

You've been saved by God's amazing grace through faith alone in Christ alone. He's forgiven your sin and given you eternal life. You are now His daughter, His son.

And you are commissioned to be a disciple and to make disciples. You are under orders to take next steps of faith and obedience and to help others take next steps of faith and obedience.

Are you in? If so, great. Lots of you here are increasingly in, on mission, obeying.

If you're not, think with me about the effects of a disciple being off mission.

The effects of being off mission...

In the story we find in Acts 13, there is no doubt that John Mark's absence for the rest of the journey made the trip more difficult for Paul and Barnabas. I suspect that more would have been accomplished had John Mark stuck around.

When any disciple is not fully engaged in following Jesus, it means that less is done in His Name than would have been done had he/she been on mission. And it also means that more is required from those who are on mission.

God designed His work to go forward as all of us serve, give, pray together. It didn't work that way on the mission to Galatia, and Paul and Barnabas suffered. The work suffered.

Your contribution to God's work in your home, at church, in San Antonio is vital. It's vital for the cause of Jesus, and it's vital for you, too.

John Mark sidestepped hardships when he sailed back home to Jerusalem. He missed out on persecution and deprivation, opposition and rejection.

But he also missed out on the rich joy of seeing God at work. Had he continued, he would have seen conversions and miracles. But he didn't see them. He left.

He would have had opportunities to baptize and to teach new converts. He didn't get those opportunities because he left.

Following Jesus will sometimes bring you to the point of exhaustion. But you'll taste spiritual feasts.

Follow Jesus and you'll know the highest highs and the lowest lows. You'll know disappointment, and unspeakable joy. You will get involved in the messiness of human suffering and sin AND you will get a glimpse of God's powerful redemption.

All of that is what Jesus had in mind when He promised "**abundant life**" (John 10). But that abundance is available only when we are following Him into the great adventure.

So. Are you following Jesus? Not fully "in"? Not as "in" as you used to be? Not as "on mission" as you'd like to be?

What then?

I'll close this morning with a story. It's a redemptive story, taken straight from Acts 13. It's a great story of hope. It's the story of John Mark.

Getting back on mission...

We don't hear much about John Mark after he abandoned Paul and Barnabas. That is, until we come to Paul's final letter. In 2 Timothy 4, Paul writes from a Roman jail cell where's he awaiting execution.

He told Timothy, **[2 Timothy 4:11] Pick up [John] Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.**

Despite John Mark's earlier defection, he wasn't a lost cause. God restored him. His failure wasn't fatal.

And the message to anyone today who is off mission and wants to get back on mission for Jesus is that the way back is wide open.

God has been restoring people who have withdrawn from the battle for thousands of years. He did it with Samson (***“the hair began to grow again...”***) and with Simon Peter and John Mark - and He'll do it with you.