

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Time-Tested Truths for Our Times

A Tale of Two Churches

(Acts 2; Acts 13)

Study #2

Introduction: Relational impact...

Last Sunday we began a new series of studies together. In this series, we're looking at several time-tested truths that are perfectly fit for the times in which we now live.

We first considered the Bible, the living and active word of God. It is as much a relevant guide now as it has been for thousands of years.

The Bible is reliable, true, influential, and inspired. It's truths change lives. They promote human flourishing. So, we'll continue to love it, learn it, learn it, and let it loose.

Today, our time will be more relationally focused.

We're going to think about the way we relate to each other and about how our relational style affects the impact we'll each have for Jesus in our circle of friends and family and the impact our church will have for Jesus' Great Commission.

A big part of what we'll see this morning is that God calls you and me to have hearts that are loving toward EVERYONE, just like His heart is. Our look at two first century churches will help us out there.

But I'll mention something else here at the beginning that should mark our relational styles. I'm urging that we all keep this "something else" in mind for our time together: Masks-off relating.

Masks-off relating...

The idea of "masks-off" relating comes from Paul's comments about Moses (2 Corinthians 3) who used to put on a veil to hide the glory on his face that faded after he had spent time with God.

Paul says that "*we* [Christians] *are not like Moses.*" (3:13)

In Jesus, we can...

...be open about whether we are doing really well, or not.

...be genuine about problems we are facing.

...be open about sins we struggle with.

...be transparent about progress we need to make because in Jesus we are secure.

We can live boldly and authentically - no mask required. Who you see is who we are. The point is not us. The point is Jesus.

I have long loved our church's emphasis on masks-off relating.

We sure don't always do it perfectly, but we aim at it. We want our relating styles to be loving and honest, true and kind.¹

God has used this two-thousand-year-old theme repeatedly at our church to promote life change in people like me and lots of others.

So, keep masks-off relating on the back burner throughout the morning. Be thinking about how you can take off the mask of pretending when you're with family and friends.

And while you're doing that, I'll tell a couple of stories to point the way forward for great impact for Jesus in these days. The stories are the tales of two great churches, both described in the book of Acts. **One Beautiful Church (Jerusalem: Acts 2)**

Complex Organizations

¹ A few of the many "one another" passages that call us to loving, authentic community: John 13:34-35; Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:32; Hebrews 10:24.

The 15th century Italian artist (also inventor, scientist, musician, sculptor, engineer, cartographer, botanist, and geologist) Leonardo da Vinci once wrote, *“Simplicity is the ultimate elegance.”*

Today, da Vinci is joined by architects, mathematicians, and computer programmers (*“Elegant code is simple code.”*) who value simplicity.

Simplicity is beautiful. However, in many places in 2023, we find dizzying complexity.

Lots of organizations are so complex that it’s tough to navigate their phone trees and websites of some organizations, much less the systems of how they actually work (or don’t).

Complexity is the name of the game for lots of organizations, including civilian businesses, governmental agencies - and churches.

As you may have noted, churches can be organized in such complex ways that they are profoundly NOT “user friendly.”

Large and small churches will have committees and sub-committees, staff and non-staff, Elders and Deacons, members and non-members, financial systems and decision-making protocols that can be baffling to all.

Sadly, many churches are often anything but simple.

Lines of responsibility and authority may not be clear. Communications get garbled. The church’s mission may be unfocused. Services may get duplicated.

But not the first church. The first church ever was a model of elegant simplicity.

Simple Church

Established, ~AD 33

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, described how the first church worked in six, short verses found in Acts, chapter 2.

Briefly, here’s how it all got started.

Fifty days after Jesus’ death on the cross and after He had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, His disciples were all together in Jerusalem on the Jewish holy day called Pentecost.

All His followers heard the sound of a great, rushing wind. Something like tongues of fire rested on their heads, and they all started speaking in languages they’d never studied.

On that day, the Apostle Peter preached a message about Jesus.

The Jews who were present in Jerusalem for that message on Pentecost understood from Peter’s words that they had made the biggest mistake of all time: They had brought about the crucifixion of Jesus whom they now understood was the Messiah.

On that day, three thousand of those devout Jews believed in Jesus - and THAT was the beginning of Jesus’ church.

The activities around which the first church was organized were simple.

Organized around...

...Apostolic teaching

[Acts 2:42a] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching...

All the new believers in Jesus wanted to know more about Jesus. They all already had a great base of Bible knowledge. No problem there.

But even though they believed in Him, they knew precious little about Him.

They knew that He had been welcomed as Messiah on Palm Sunday, that He had been opposed late on Passover week, and that He had been crucified, buried - and resurrected. But that was it.

They didn't know Jesus' birth stories or His teachings. They didn't know much about His miracles or His commands.

Now, though, He is their Savior, and they are starving for Jesus stories. The apostles were more than willing to tell the stories to these new believers.

I imagine Andrew saying, *"I was there when Jesus told the parable of the sower. Here's how it goes..."*

We can picture Nathanael speaking to the crowds, *"Let me tell you how Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee..."*

The apostles didn't just know the stories. They knew Jesus! And there is more.

...Shared life

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to...fellowship.

The word we translate *fellowship* is the Greek word, *koinonia*.

The most basic meaning of *koinonia* is not *"having a good time together."* It is more like *"shared life."*

Koinonia was flowing among the three thousand believers in Jesus there in Jerusalem - and that is remarkable because prior to the Day of Pentecost most of these people didn't even know each other.

They were all Jews, but they had come from all over the Roman world to Jerusalem.

And now, post-Pentecost, these former strangers were relating at the deepest levels because their fellowship wasn't based on their country of origin or even on their Jewishness. It was based on Jesus. He was the hub around Whom their lives revolved.

This *"shared life"* played itself out in very practical ways.

Many of the Jews who had become a part of the church had come to Jerusalem from far-away lands to celebrate both Passover and Pentecost.

So, of course, they brought money with them to take care of living expenses. But, because of all the excitement of becoming Christians and getting established in Christ - they stayed there in Jerusalem much longer than they had planned and ran out of money.

With no money, they needed to be supported by others who had money. So, those followers of Jesus who had goods would sell things to get money to meet the needs of those in need. (Acts 2:44-45)

That's *koinonia*.

And the next ingredient tossed into the mix of life in the first church was (ready for this?): FOOD.

...Food

[42] They were continually devoting themselves to...the breaking of bread...[46] Day by day continuing with one mind...they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.

The church gathered and grew around food because, as we all know, food feeds friendship. Good things, personal things, happen when we share meals with each other.

In Jerusalem, they got together, ate meals, and became friends over food.

Today, if you are looking for one intensely spiritual application from Acts 2 to take home with you, here it is: **EAT TOGETHER.**

Invite someone over for dinner. Meet up at a restaurant. Host a dessert fellowship. Do it because **FOOD FEEDS FRIENDSHIP.**

In the first church ever, there was apostolic teaching, shared life and shared meals - and prayer.

...Prayer

***[42] They were continually devoting themselves to prayer...
[46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple...they
were...[47] praising God...!***

They prayed as they walked through their days. They prayed as needs arose. They prayed at the drop of a hat. They prayed together, in large and in small groups.

And as they prayed, they were of ***“one mind.”***

And the one thing about which the Jerusalem church was of ***“one mind”*** was Jesus. So, they talked to Jesus, in prayer, together.

As they did what they could do - serve and pray - God did the things that only He can do.

[43] Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles...[47] And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

So, these Jews who had only recently placed their faith in Jesus shared the Good News with their friends and family, who also believed in Jesus.

Everything we've just seen gives us a picture of a very healthy church. Great teaching and service and friendship and prayer and evangelism - and food.

This is the experience of the insiders who were a part of this movement. And what was happening on the inside was having a profound impact on those who weren't involved.

[47]...having favor with all the people.

The residents of Jerusalem were impressed by what they saw of the church (i.e. - Jesus' followers).

Sure, that will soon change. Persecution's coming. But at the beginning, there was a broad appeal to outsiders who were looking in from the outside.

Jerusalem's first-ever church was one loving, united church. And to this day, every church aspires to be like that church.

That's beautiful church #1. Now, we are going to take a look at beautiful church #2.

On the way to Antioch...

We find this church hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem, outside of Israel in present-day Turkey. It began roughly ten years after the start of the Jesus movement and was located in the city of Antioch.

Before we look at that church, let's retrace some of the early history of the Jesus movement, which will lead to that church.

After a few short years of peace, persecution broke out against the early Christians.

This persecution (recorded in Acts 7ff...) led to the flight of large numbers of the believers from Jerusalem. (***)Remember that Jesus told His followers to spread the Gospel message from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the remotest part of the world. So, at least in part, God allowed the church to face persecution, which forced them to leave Jerusalem so that they would obey the Great Commission and spread the Good News! Acts 1:8)

We read about the migration of believers away from Jerusalem and Judea in Acts, chapter 11. Luke informs us that these refugees were evangelizing as they went.

But listen to this. They were ***[Acts 11:19] speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone*** as they traveled to Phoenicia, through Cyprus, and on to Antioch.

That is odd.

They adopted a *“Jews-only”* focus despite the fact that the good news had already spread to non-Jews.

Philip had taken the message to the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), and Peter gave the message to God-fearing Cornelius and his household (Acts 10-11). Plus, Jesus had commanded them to take the message to the non-Jewish world.

But some of those who had left Jerusalem due to a wave of persecution associated with Stephen’s death still didn’t “get it.” They still didn’t embrace the value of sharing the Gospel with non-Jews.

But there were exceptions.

The exceptions were some Jews who were from the island of Cyprus and the city of Cyrene in northern Africa. They left Jerusalem and made their way through Phoenicia, all the way to Antioch.

These Jewish Christians ***[Acts 11:20] were speaking to the Greeks as well, preaching the good news of the Lord Jesus.***

Well, their Gospel-sharing work was VERY fruitful.

And when news of lots of converts in Antioch reached the ears of the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas (who hailed from Cyprus) to Antioch.

The rest of Acts 11 shows us the church at Antioch growing numerically and spiritually under the leadership of Barnabas and Saul.

The next peek we get at this church is in Acts 13, where Luke lists some of the leaders of the church at Antioch.

Another Beautiful Church (Antioch; Acts 13)

The Leaders of the Church at Antioch (v. 1)

[1] Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets 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.

Diverse leadership

What an intriguing bunch of names.

The first leader listed is Barnabas, a hero of the early church.

We know that he was generous, bold, and full of faith. And we know that he was key to the early establishment of the Antioch church.

Barnabas was a Jew of the priestly line with roots in the non-Jewish world. He was wealthy enough to own property on Cyprus.

Then, there is Simeon. We don’t know anything about Simeon except that he was an African.

Next is Lucius of Cyrene. Cyrene was a city in North Africa (in present-day Libya). His name is Latin, indicating Roman roots. He was not Jewish.

Luke includes Manaen in the list. Manaen was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He hob-nobbed with royalty and was raised with the Roman ruler, Herod Antipas. We don’t know if Manaen was a Gentile or a Jew.

Finally, Luke mentions Saul, who will soon become known as Paul. Saul was a trained Jewish Pharisee who studied Torah at the feet of a brilliant rabbi named Gamaliel.

Saul had been a violent persecutor of the church. But he was saved in a blinding encounter with Jesus just outside the city of Damascus.² Now, he is a leader in the church at Antioch.

This list gives us a stunning display of ethnic, racial, economic, and social diversity.

There is a Jew from a Greek background, an African, a Romanized Jew, an aristocrat, and a trained Jewish rabbi.

These diverse leaders were in place because the Gospel reached them by the normal means of a Christian telling someone far from God the Good News of Jesus.

Thank God that those Jewish Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene told EVERYONE about Jesus - not just Jews!

The point of their ministry was NOT to increase diversity. The point was to spread the Gospel to all people. The outcome was inevitably going to be ethnic and cultural diversity.

Let's keep this in mind. Diversity in the church is not the object. Disciple-making and evangelism, these are the objectives. And diversity will be the natural result if we do ministry like Jesus and Paul did.

Then, despite their diverse backgrounds, these men served Jesus together, in one church.

A healthy church

I assume that the marks of a healthy church that we saw in Jerusalem were in place in the church at Antioch. There was apostolic teaching, rich fellowship, and shared meals, lots of praying.

² He was then welcomed by a Christian named Ananias in Damascus, sponsored by Barnabas in Jerusalem, rescued by the church from a death threat, and then sent back home to Tarsus. He was in Antioch (Acts 13) because Barnabas brought him there from Tarsus to help with the teaching ministry in the church.

All of that is basic to every healthy church.

But Antioch added another element. In Antioch there was diversity. And when a healthy church adds diversity, new wrinkles appear.

Some of those wrinkles take the form of challenges.

With Diversity Comes...

...Challenges

In Antioch, those in the church from a Roman culture would have had to learn to accept the ways of the Greeks. Greeks would have to learn how to get along with Romans.

The believing Greeks and Romans would need to learn to accept the way Jews did things. Likewise, the Jewish Christians would have to get used to Gentile ways.

These differences would have involved music tastes, the subtleties of languages and dialects, preferences in artistic expression, food and drink likes and dislikes, hair styles, clothing, and all the other things that make culture, culture.

These real-world differences are real, and they can require real work to work through them.

We have learned something about these real-world differences between cultures with the addition of Encuentro to Northwest six years ago.

I am a grateful pastor that Encuentro is here! And, yes, there have been challenges.

There have been communication challenges, scheduling challenges, cultural values challenges - and more.

Both Northwest and Encuentro have worked and are still working hard to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And God is at work in this delightful process.

Like most marriages I'm familiar with, the Northwest / Encuentro relationship isn't always easy. But every challenge has been completely worth it.

I've got to believe that the first-century church at Antioch had struggles, too, because of culture and ethnicity and families of origin.

But that church managed to keep Jesus central. They worked through the differences. They celebrated diversity and didn't allow it to divide them.

And they discovered, as we have discovered, that wrinkles that add new challenges also add new possibilities.

...Possibilities

When a church consists mainly of *US* (like the Jerusalem church was made up of only Jews), that *US* is less likely to think much about *THEM* (those not like *US*).

But when a church is made up of *US + THEM*, other *THEMS* will be on that church's radar, because *THEM* are always right there in front of *US / THEM*.

The church at Antioch has been famous for the last two thousand years because it was a church that was all about *THEM*.

Here's what I mean.

Diversity's Beauty

The church at Antioch was the first church we know of that sent its own members away so that a bunch of *THEM* would hear about Jesus.

In the church at Antioch, the leaders were unified worshippers. During one season of worship, this happened.

[2] While they were ministering to 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

We could debate the Spirit's means of communication till the cows come home - but clearly, in some way, the explicit will of the Holy Spirit was made very clear.

He wanted them to move out. To reach out. So, He led them out.

God also led the exclusively Jewish church in Jerusalem out, too. But, since THAT church was content to reach out only to Jerusalem, God was willing to use the tool of persecution to compel them to go outside the city limits with the Gospel.

In Antioch, the church didn't need persecution to lead them out.

Having a church made up of EVERYONE, they were already thinking about how to reach all the *THEMS* out there.

So, God made it clear that He wanted Barnabas and Saul - two of the church's greatest resources - to leave the church for a season to spread the Gospel among people who had never heard of Jesus.

And the church willingly, voluntarily, eagerly sent them out.

[3] Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

It appears to me, from Acts 13, that cultural and ethnic and economic diversity are Force Multipliers when it comes to a church being on mission for Jesus' Great Commission.

So, what can we here at Northwest learn from Jerusalem and from Antioch?

³ How did the Holy Spirit speak? He might have given strong, clear impressions to each of those praying. He could have spoken audibly, as when Jesus spoke to Paul on the road to Damascus. He may have spoken through one of the prophets in the church. He may have "spoken" through the corporate decision of the church to act.

Ignoring non-Jews was an astounding act of disobedience.

But there were others who passed through non-Jewish lands and shared Jesus with Greeks as well as Jews.

No partiality. Simply share Jesus with EVERYONE. EVERYONE needs Jesus, so let EVERYONE know. That's a Great Commission mindset, start to finish.

Those disciples made their way to Antioch where they kept on sharing Jesus with EVERYONE. That resulted in lots of EVERYONES coming to faith in Jesus. That resulted in a diverse community of faith. And that resulted in a church committed to an ever-expanding mission.

Friends, the world has come to San Antonio.

If we would be Antioch-ish, we will be as EVERYONE-focused as they were.

- We will share Jesus with EVERYONE, without partiality.
- We will meet needs in Jesus' Name, without discrimination.
- We will be hospitable to EVERYONE in the neighborhood and at work and at school and at the store.
- We will be welcoming to EVERYONE who walks through our doors here at church.

God was so kind as to be welcoming to us when we were still far away. We will gladly welcome EVERYONE as warmly as He welcomed us.

Conclusion:

United and loving - just like Jerusalem

No church ever wants to lose the distinctives that were present at the church in Jerusalem. We want those distinctives to all be present and increasing here.

- Our commitment to Scripture will always stay in place here.
- Our pursuit of koinonia / shared life will continue.
- Prayer is a vital part of our life together and we'll continue to keep pressing prayer into the fabric of who we are.
- We'll certainly keep on seeking to meet pressing material needs.
- And maybe we can do more eating together, as a part of an expanding [waistline and] ministry initiative.

For sure, there is lots of progress to be made. But the vision of being a church like the first church in Jerusalem is clear and compelling. We aspire to be a church that is Jerusalem-ish.

But we also want to be like Antioch. And it is the stories of the Bible that tell us how we can become distinctively Antioch-ish.

Diverse and "on mission" - Just like Antioch

Remember that there were Jewish Christians who had been thrust out of Jerusalem due to persecution, passing through lands occupied by Jews and non-Jews. They shared the good news of Jesus ONLY with fellow Jews. (Acts 11:19)

Yes, it was good that they shared Jesus with fellow Jews.

But not sharing Jesus with non-Jews reflects a great NOT-Great Commission mindset.

Jesus said to make disciples of ALL nations. (Matthew 28:18-20) He sent His followers to be His witnesses to the REMOTEST PART of the EARTH. (Acts 1:8).