

**19** Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. **20** Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. **21** The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

**22** News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. **23** When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. **24** He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

**25** Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, **26** and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

### **The Ordinary Unleashed**

Unleashing the children in the garden isn't generally a good idea. Our youngest loves flowers and will pull every pretty flower and bring it to you. The rest love to help plant trees. But seeds are probably the most interesting. After selecting a location, furrowing the ground, and then carefully placing seeds in little hands - the location watered is not always where the seeds sprout. Instead of a nice neat line seeds are dumped over heads and spread throughout the yard. Which is why onions are found at random locations in the middle of the yard. It's not bad, but growth is often found in unexpected locations, in ordinary soil, without cultivation.

That's a lot like the early Christian church. The Christian religious leaders in Jerusalem are carefully watching, watering, and looking for growth when Word arrives from Antioch that another church is already underway. Growth appears where they least expect it, among an unlikely people (much like the Ethiopian Eunuch), by people who weren't even professionals. The ordinary carry their beliefs with them and Christianity takes root far from the churches center before missionaries are even thought of or sent out. This isn't a story about the leaders. This is the ordinary unleashed as Christians take off into the garden, seeds in hand, start another church with the hand of God.

So many think of evangelism as a specific organized outreach program. We let the professionals do the work. But that's not the case. Evangelism is simply sharing the hope we have and yet so often we don't. It's taking advantage of those moments when you can share your faith and then realizing, it's not me and my work or my church that causes this church to grow, but God, God's Work, and God's church. This week, Easter Fools Unleash the ordinary.

Last week - went to the ends of the earth - Eunuch - the Ethiopian. Just when you didn't think it could get any more awkward it's almost as if we take two steps back. One giant leap for Christianity followed by a bit of back peddling and insecurity. Luke records, "*Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.*" Those last three words, "*only among Jews.*" The Jews don't know what to do with the Greeks. Fleeing Christians took their faith with them. They stayed within their comfort zone. Luke simply records what happened. After persecution, the people went and spoke to those they were able. They were handicapped by a language barrier, as well as cultural, societal boundaries, as well as because many didn't believe the gospel was for the Gentiles - or that they would have any interest in the Messiah. Acts 11:1-18 - Luke just explained how Peter being called to account for entering the house of a Gentile.

No matter the struggle, "*Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.*" Luke takes us from to the area just North of Jerusalem, then to the island of Cyprus just off the coast, and then to a very specific city Antioch. Their faith jumped cultures like children running around seeds in hand, a happy accident, completely unexpected. Someone spoke to the Gentiles. They didn't pontificate. They didn't preach. They didn't have sermon up their sleeve or even gospel tract. They simply spoke. Luke uses the word for normal conversation. It doesn't mean they had all the answers but they spoke to Gentiles about Jesus.

The hand of God was at work among them. Ordinary people who were probably surprised like the religious leaders that Christianity is growing among the Gentiles of Antioch. Antioch was basically the Chicago of the Roman Empire. The third largest city falling behind New York and Los Angeles. Greek culture and language dominated the city. It was a notorious immoral place and yet Antioch is the new epicenter of Christianity and the launching location of the Apostle Paul as he heads off to the Gentile nations. The first place followers of Jesus are called Christians. Just imagine the leaders in Jerusalem hearing how such a city started coming to the church by a bunch of ordinary people sharing God's Word with the pagans. They're meeting together: Jew and Gentile in one church.

Barnabas volunteers and heads off to Antioch to meet with the people. What he discovers is growth in an unlikely place. He finds, "*what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.*" Seeds are sprouting outside the carefully prepared garden.

Thankfully God's Word spread from one culture to the next because Christianity isn't from Anglo origins. That's the great thing about Christianity is that it doesn't idolize any one culture and say, "You need to be more Jewish to join." Rather Christianity condemns all people and says, "No

one has got it right. There is no one good.” But we proclaim there is one who was good for you and in your place: Jesus. It’s a simple message of forgiveness. Just like the first Jews to Antioch it’s easier for us to relate such a message to those who have similar backgrounds and interests. Friendship ministry is one of the best ways to bring people into the church. Often we look to programs and methods to make it work. We look for insights from other churches that are growing. We search for the most cost-effective methods of reaching the lost. But we never see any examples of the church doing such things in Acts.

Instead what we find is growth in the church through persecution and ordinary people, unnamed individuals, like you and me. Maybe we don’t speak up, I know there are times when I haven’t. Maybe it’s because of the religious leaders - who clamp down and want to control every aspect of outreach. Maybe we just don’t want to step out of our comfort zone because that requires work determining what’s culture, what’s not; what can change, what can’t. The truth is we aren’t who we should be.

But the comfort is found in the hand of God at work among us and through us. It’s not up to us. It’s not up to our hard work, careful planning, or dedicated service. It’s God’s Work and there is tremendous comfort in knowing that he grows his church. That makes us realize that we are not worthy of God’s love any more than criminals and those thought unfit to hear the Good News.

Jesus died for the world even for those about whom we wouldn’t give second thought. And that is where we find growth in unlikely places outside of the orchard as the seeds are scattered wherever we walk. That’s how God grows his church. He uses the simples, the usual, the normal.

Like Barnabas: Who is described simply as “*a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith*.” He was originally known as Joseph but the apostles changed his name as he gained a reputation as being an encourager. From Joseph to Bar/Nabas. Son of a Prophet or Son of Encouragement. Early in the book of Acts he sold his land and brought the proceeds to the apostles. Later after Saul’s conversion - Barnabas was the only one who wanted to introduce Saul to the church. Barnabas was just an ordinary individual. The Holy Spirit was with him and that enabled the ordinary to do extraordinary work.

He encourages them, “*Remain true to the Lord.*” The one who loved them and gave up his life for them to bring them into his church. That’s the love of the Father who sent his Son. That’s the love of the Son who set aside his life and took it up again even for the people of Antioch, uncircumcised pagans. Jesus died for them crossing cultural lines and barriers. God then sent Barnabas. God then sent Paul.

The church in Antioch was growing fast so he made a careful search for someone with the gifts and abilities necessary to determine what is culture and what is scripture. Someone schooled in

doctrine and torah, able to deal with the difficulties of bringing in different cultures and nations. That's where Paul came in. Barnabas traveled 100 miles to Tarsus to search for Saul. Even the church in Antioch can't keep Paul and Barnabas to themselves as they want to share the good news with even more. They gather an offering for the Christians in Jerusalem and send out the first missionaries into the Roman World.

God uses the ordinary. If God can use me, he can use you. In fact you've already shown your love for others in support of missions. You gave up Pastor Marquardt so he might serve in India. You're reaching out to the community through various programs and opportunities. Street fair is the afternoon, VBS, Mornings with Mommy, Community Garden - multiple opportunities.

We have the ordinary means as well. We call the ordinary means - God's Word and Sacrament. These are the means that God uses to grow his church. Sadly so many churches handicap themselves by calling the sacraments nothing and denying the clear words of Scripture, "*Baptism now saves you,*" or "*This is by body given to you for the forgiveness of sins.*" These sacraments and even Barnabas' words point us back to Jesus' work. That word works. That is where we find the hand of God at work.

Here you can rejoice in God's expanding kingdom even if we have to take a back seat and support others, we can do that as well. Encourage those around us and remain true to the Lord, not by focusing on our work, our church, our growth - but God's church, his work, his growth. His hand is at work in unlikely places even among us.

It's like our garden. Onions are popping up in the middle of the yard. Kale and chard have found their way over by the chicken coop. Even the kid's garden by the cross has some interesting patterns. It's like the church. You never know where you will find growth. The ordinary is at work. Christians carry their faith and God provides the growth when and where he sees fit even among us.