

Where did worship send me this week?; Lk mish moment on Justices, Leveda Law blessing  
Boone UMC; June 29 2014; Jason Byassee

## Where to?

We are in the midst of a series on our measures as a church. Our measures help us tell whether we're achieving our mission or not. Are we loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ? We think so. I mean, we're good people, doing our best, coming to church, going out and trying to live best we can. Everyone I know is trying hard. Are we succeeding?

Our measure for today is this: "Where did worship send me this week?"

I was part of an exercise once where pastors were asked what is our church's *actual* mission statement. Not the one on the wall and the stationary but the one we actually live by. And a pastor braver than I said "Ours is this: 'Y'all all come to church.'" That's the whole goal. People in church. But that shouldn't be the goal, far from it. Friend of mine said once "I know how to get people to church. Just put up a big banner that says 'free beer!' and you won't be able to keep them out." Number of people in the building doesn't mean faithfulness. What does? Let's try this. Every week we have a benediction. A pastor stands up, hands out, and blesses you. I love this. We have so many harsh words said over us in our lives. I love saying kind ones. But here's what that moment actually is. It's a commissioning. I'm giving marching orders. All of us are leaving here to go be different out there. The goal isn't people in church. The goal is a whole new world. God is bringing his kingdom. With the empty tomb and the fiery Holy Spirit God is making this world the one he intended in the first place. Now we can take part in that. The benediction is our sending out in worship. Where do we go from here? Not just to Dos Amigos! But to help bring God's kingdom?

Our text from Acts is brief. Notice especially as I read *how* the Christians in Antioch worship—notice the verbs.

Acts 13:1-4

*Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. 2 While they were worshipping 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 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus.*

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the Pentecost people of God, **thanks be to God.**

I was cycling the Greenway earlier this week minding my own business when I passed two young women running who were entirely too friendly. They both waved and smiled so much I looked twice to see if I knew them. They had nametags on. They were Mormon missionaries. Probably from Utah or Wyoming or Idaho they're here in Boone evangelizing. When I rode back by them I saw them talking to a man who looked like he'd slept under a bridge. What motivated these young women to move half a continent away to evangelize Boone's early morning joggers and homeless?

Just two points for today: one, worship is more interesting than you thought. Two, being sent out is more interesting than you thought.

<sup>1</sup>One, worship is more interesting than you thought. Notice where they are. Antioch. This is still a city in Syria that for millennia has been an important hub in the Christian world. We first used the name “Christians” for ourselves in Antioch. Antioch becomes a second missionary sending location after Jerusalem. St. Paul is from Antioch. So is St. Luke, author of this book of Acts. So are lots of early Christian leaders. There are Christians there today who descend from those first days. When we hear of Syria in the news or pray for it, let’s not just think of it as foreign, far away, not part of our lives. It’s part of our history and our now as church.

And look who is gathered there for worship. Saul and Barnabas. We’ve heard of them. Saul or Paul is the main figure in Acts. Barnabas’ name means Son of Encouragement. Read on in Acts and learn much more about each. But look who else: Simeon called Niger. Lucius of Cyrene. Manaen of Herod the Ruler’s house. We don’t know a thing about these three. We never hear of them again in the bible. Isn’t it good to know you and I can play bit parts in salvation, like these three? We do see some clues here. Luke got his information from people who knew the apostles. Perhaps these three are some from whom Luke got his information to write Luke and Acts. Simeon called Niger is probably dark-skinned and African. Niger is the name of a great river in sub-Saharan Africa and of several countries near it today. Lucius of Cyrene is from North Africa. You’ll remember Simon Cyrene helped Jesus carry his cross. He would look Middle Eastern or Arab to our eyes. And Manaen is part of Herod Antipas’ household, perhaps his foster-brother. Did you catch that? This man is related to Herod, murderer of John the Baptist and Jesus! So church in Antioch included two Africans—one black, one Arab--and a kinsman to the church’s worst enemy.

Look around. Who’s here? Sometimes we have genuine enemies here—folks we’ve been at odds with, divorced from, hurt by. If you’re going to make your life in the church you will be hurt, it’s how we human beings are, no way around it. The Holy Spirit takes enemies and makes us into friends. A friend used to pastor here in Appalachia. Said he found among us mountain folk people remember sleights *forever*. But we are *commanded* to forgive. To drown our hurts in the waters of baptism. Isn’t church more interesting than you thought?

These folks in Antioch are praying and worshiping and fasting. I don’t know how many of you fast. I like to joke I get most of my fasting done between meals. What would it mean if we showed up for church *hungry*? I often don’t eat Sunday mornings because I’m nervous, so I chow at Dos Amigos after. But what if we withheld food not because of a diet or nerves but because we want to hunger for God? In several committee meetings lately one of us has suggested we fast before we make a decision. It’s a time honored way to seek the Lord’s will. Sometimes I sit in three or four restaurants in a day for meetings with y’all. Where did worship send me this week? Maybe not just out for food, but maybe into hunger.

And the Holy Spirit speaks.<sup>2</sup> Acts 13:2, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” How would *we* know if the Spirit spoke? How could we hear the Spirit’s voice?<sup>3</sup> TS Eliot wrote “Where shall the Lord be heard? Not here. There is not enough silence.” How can we get quiet enough to hear a word from God?

Leonard Sweet has written this,<sup>4</sup> “Insects crawl. Birds fly. Fish swim. Humans pray.” I was with one of you recently, worried over something, and you prayed, for a long time, in public! And I felt my worry lessen, my hope increase, my heart beat faster. I said, hey, this prayer thing works. And you said, *good thing for a pastor to say*. But we don’t just pray because it makes us feel better. We pray because it makes the world new.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Worship is more interesting than you thought

<sup>2</sup> On screen plz

<sup>3</sup> Eliot quote on screen plz

<sup>4</sup> On screen

We tend to think of prayer as telling God what to do. But imagine a friendship where we just told the other person what to do for us—not much of a friendship! Here in Antioch the disciples are in God’s presence *because they like God*. They want to *be* with God. To hunger for God. They may not be saying anything at all, it may be silent. So God speaks. And they hear. They set apart Saul and Barnabas and they lay hands on them for blessing. Like we often do in our church for special missions. Like we do in the benediction every week.

George Barna who studies American religion says the only consistent factor in whether something works in church is prayer. Not a charismatic personality at the microphone. Not budget. Not lots of volunteers. But prayer. What if we met first and last and foremost and always for prayer? Hunger for God, listening to God, becoming part of the new world God is making?

Part two (isn’t this simple?!),<sup>5</sup> being dismissed from church is more interesting than you thought. Paul and Barnabas go to Cyprus.<sup>6</sup> They head from its eastern tip to its western and preach the whole way. This is one of three or four missionary journeys of Paul that take him some 10,000 miles in his life, with nothing more to power his trips than a horse or the wind. Barnabas is *from* Cyprus, it’s his home. And as Jesus says, a prophet is only dishonored at home.

This is part of the Holy Spirit’s plan to make the whole world new. Just before he ascends into heaven, Jesus announces,<sup>7</sup> “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>8</sup> We’re not as familiar with those places, so we can miss the point. Jerusalem is the center of God’s world, the Jews speak of it as the navel of the planet. It’s where the temple was, where King David reigned, where Jesus was crucified, where Pentecost happens. Jesus wants his people witnessing to God’s kingdom there.<sup>9</sup> Then Judea, the southern part of Israel, the region Jerusalem is in, the suburbs. Then Samaria, among *outcasts*, those you despise and who despise you. And to the ends of the earth, all the way to Boone here this morning. Acts 1:8 provides a map for the world. We are to be Jesus’ people at home. Nearby. Among outcasts and enemies. And everywhere else. We see the same here in Acts 13. Barnabas is sent to minister where he came from. Cyprus. He is from a church in Antioch that includes former enemies of all races. Samaria. He and Paul are on their way across Greece and Asia Minor and hopefully to Rome, where they will be killed. The ends of the earth.

Where is home for you? Where do you need to be a light for Jesus? With your spouse? Siblings? People who know you well enough to get on your last nerve? That’s hard work, to witness in Jerusalem. Where is Judea for you? Farther afield slightly, your community, neighborhood, workplace, where things are familiar. How can we witness to Jesus there? I’ve told you before when the early church was asked to baptize someone they’d interview their neighbors. Is this person like Jesus? Frightening. Margaret Agle, who died last week, was our longest tenured church member, 86 of her 96 years. And two of the folks in her funeral are her neighbors, *not* from our church. Don’t you hope your neighbors will want to speak well of you at your funeral? Then Samaria. Where is the place you *don’t* want to go? Where they don’t want to see you? Friend of mine is from an hour or two from here, little rural place. He invited an African American friend of his to his hometown. When he went to pick up his friend his friend had a cousin with him, big burly guy. This wasn’t part of the plan. He later asked hey why the muscle? His friend said ‘My brother I say this with love, but your hometown is a place where the Klan has been active for decades, black people don’t go here alone.’ I never

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<sup>5</sup> II. Being dismissed from church is more interesting than you thought

<sup>6</sup> <http://bibleclass.tripod.com/acts13.jpg>

<sup>7</sup> Acts 1:8 on screen plz

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.justinbfung.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Map-Palestine-New-Testament-Times-668x1024.jpeg>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gvlc.net/files/gvlc/Acts%201-8/ConcentricCircles2.jpg>

knew, he said. How do we be a church of *all* people in a sinful place like that? Ends of the earth. As far as you can go there are people Jesus treasures and dies for and wants to save, wants to see them flourish.

Couple of examples of this. Leveda Law for whom the children prayed today spent 41 years as a missionary in the Congo. Leveda's husband David died and didn't get to enjoy retirement with his bride. She returns to Congo to bury his ashes soon. David's father Burleigh was a missionary in the Congo in the 1960s when he was shot and killed, trying to broker a release of prisoners during that country's independence struggle. Can you imagine spending your life for a people who murdered your father? I can't. God bless David's memory and you Leveda as you take him home.

Luke Edwards will speak shortly about Blake and Amy Justice in Germany. The Justices have been part of our congregation for some years, and felt themselves being summoned by God for something riskier than tenure at the university. So they set out for Germany where they teach missionaries' kids from all over the world. And they're flourishing. That's where worship sent them.

There's an article out on espn.com about a minister to *umpires* in baseball.<sup>10</sup> Dean Esskew is his name, and before he came along umpiring was a pretty godless existence. Too much travel and loneliness and drinking and infidelity. Umpires would go home and boss their family around like players or managers. You make a mistake and the whole world mocks you.<sup>11</sup> Pastor Dean has baptized 66 umpires, "calling them safe in the only way that matters." And he's reached them partly by being silly. He went into their locker room once wearing a speedo. He's a 400 pound man. Said he sees them naked all the time it's time to return the favor. When they call in the middle of the night he answers the phone "What's wrong." He's made Christian community among surprisingly neglected people. And here's the thing. He doesn't even like baseball! Hardly knows the rules! But he goes to games and stays nine innings out of respect for those he's trying to reach.

Sounds exotic doesn't it? To live far away in DRC or Germany or among umpires. But Leveda is the first to say we are all missionaries. In our families, with our friends, among our enemies, near or far away, we are sent by the Spirit to be Jesus' people. In a strange way it may be easier to witness to Jesus far away than nearby. Family relationships are hard enough, by try to insert Jesus into them! The workplace is difficult enough, but try witnessing to Jesus there, and see what they'll say. Freak. Religious nut. And I don't just mean secular places. Some of the worst sports I've ever played a game with, are pastors! Some of the meanest offices church offices. Trying to be like Jesus anywhere is hard and should be. And we should do it.

Or think about right here at home. We have poverty aplenty in Watauga County, many of you spend your time and dollars trying to meet that need. Our own JB Beyer is spending his life in Bradford Park trying to be a good neighbor, a person of prayer, a good influence on "his boys" as he calls them. Some of you have joined him, bless you. A woman joined him for prayer this week—doubling his little congregation! My first fall here we had a district mission day in Bradford, told my children we were going to go minister among poor people, they came running up and said "These kids aren't poor, they're our friends." They all knew one another from school. And they all need Jesus together. Our church got involved in Patzibal, Guatemala when one of us asked our denomination's mission agency,<sup>12</sup> "Who are the people no one else wants?" What if we pray that as a church, that God would send us such people? Maybe we *are* such people! Anyway. Luke Edwards, dreaming about King Street Church, was suggesting to me groups of people among whom he might work. Who are those farthest from the church in Boone? Prisoners. Sex offenders. Luke asked, is our church

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<sup>10</sup> <http://i1.wp.com/urbanchristiannews.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/calling-for-christ-dean-esskew-MLB-ministry.jpg?resize=600%2C312>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.mbird.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/medium\\_image-53a5cac641505057ab150000-coalesced.jpg](http://www.mbird.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/medium_image-53a5cac641505057ab150000-coalesced.jpg)

<sup>12</sup> Question on screen plz

ready for folks like this? I answered yes we are. Well are we? Many of you remember to me your pastor Rusty Inman, who in the early 90s pushed us to minister to AIDS victims. That was risky stuff at the time. Who are the off-limits people now?

I've tried to think of the strangest places worship has sent me. Some you have heard me talk about Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, places God is doing amazing things, the church is exploding, it's like Pentecost. I found myself at a mosque in Chicago one time. The imam invited non-Muslims to break the Ramadan fast with them. I went and sat and learned. And here's what was interesting. The Muslims preached to us. Evangelized. Tried to convert us to Islam. And I thought if we invited Muslims to church we probably wouldn't evangelize. Shouldn't we? Jesus is what we have to offer the world after all. I found myself once at a revival midweek, not so unusual, but this at a Metropolitan Community Church, a denomination devoted to gay inclusion. I've not been back—seems to me a mistake to have a church based on sexual orientation. But I was there because they're trying to worship God. I remember the pastor praying and addressing God as "our kind and loving God," and wondered whether our church has been kind to them. Found myself once studying a ministry to gang members in South Central LA. Homeboy Industries it's called, led by a Catholic priest named<sup>13</sup> Greg Boyle or G Dawg.<sup>14</sup> He loves these kids, he's started businesses for them to run,<sup>15</sup> he has doctors donate time to remove tattoos, and lots of these former gang members name their sons Greg, G Dawg, for their stand-in father. His motto: "Nothing stops a bullet like a job."

But once again exotic, weird, mosque in Chicago, south Central LA. Let me try closer to home. When I was in college I was with my closest friends playing video games, it's what we did. And I left to go to a Martin Luther King Jr memorial event. Not exactly risky stuff in 1995. They were teasing me and one called out as I left, "Activist!" Not a compliment. Here's why I was interested: because of the church. Because the Holy Spirit is gathering and making a new people who are Jesus' body in the world. I was too embarrassed at the time but if I had the guts I might have hollered back, not an activist. Just a Christian.

Where did worship send me this week? Not just to church and back. But into a world desperate to hear of a God who loves us enough to die for us, whose empty tomb is a promise he'll save us. Whose fiery Holy Spirit is making all things new. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://cdn.static-economist.com/sites/default/files/Homeboy1.jpg?1329388808>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.architectsofpeace.org/media/architects/greg-boyle.jpg>

<sup>15</sup> <http://tjhoiland.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/MS-13.jpg>