Acts 5:41-6:7 9-12-21
Missional Church

This morning we take a look at the early church under apostolic leadership and flowing in the fresh winds of Pentecostal power. In Acts 5 we read of the arrest of certain apostles who were dragged before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem who seriously considered killing them. But having been convinced by Gamaliel not to do that, these champions of tolerance flogged them and let them go. We pick up the story in Acts 5:41-6:7 *So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. 42And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. 1Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. 7The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*

So, what do we see in this passage? Well, as we compare this snapshot of life in the early days of the church to what we are experiencing these days at North Park Church we may note how the leaders of the Jerusalem church rejoiced when they were flogged. We may have opportunity to imitate the apostles in this way. For that we stand ready – in case. But there is something here that I would have us strive to emulate. It is in verse 42 and in verse 4 and in verse 7. And it is a commitment on the part of these early believers to outreach, to making new disciples. 5:42 *Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.* They were sufficiently committed to doing this that they risked arrest, they risked more floggings and they risked their

very lives. That is a commitment to the great commission. Are we that committed? Then in verse four we see the apostles demonstrating their commitment in a different way. Now, they were ready to endure criticism by church members in order to stay focused on the ministry of the word. And finally, in verse 7, we see the results of their commitment. 7 *The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem.* Fruit! People were being saved and the church was growing.

Now, when I hold up this snapshot of the Jerusalem church next to what I see in our own fellowship and, most every other I know of, I am hit with some immediate discomfort. For me, as pastor and leader among us, it comes as conviction of sin and of failure. The failure is not total. But, we are not seeing this measure of kingdom impact. And I am sure that among our number today we would find dozens of opinions on what the problem is and what the cure might be. But, I invite us to squarely face our understated missional impact in the North Hills of Pittsburgh as a problem we want to address honestly before the Lord.

In the West, for nearly 1,000 years, the relationship of European Christian churches to the broader culture was known as "Christendom." The institutions of society "christianized" people and stigmatized non-Christian belief and behavior. Though people were 'christianized" by culture, they were not necessarily regenerated or converted with the gospel. The church's job was then to challenge such persons, many of whom attended church, into a vital, living relation with Christ. But the concept of a missional church, a church established in order to change a culture and reach an unreached people with the good news of Christ was restricted to other lands. We sent out missionaries to do missions, to reach the great unwashed, to make converts. And we cheered them on as they went. But us? We remain part of the institutional church, with its diminishing, but still present place in western society. There is the school, the government, the family and the church.

That's okay. That really is okay, except that institutions over time, have a way of becoming sort of an end in themselves and lose sight of the purposes for which they are established. And friend, one of, one of the key purposes for our existence is to be agents of reconciliation between men and their God, to be the proclaimers of life in Jesus name, to be the obstetrician facilitating rebirths into the kingdom of Christ Jesus. And, of all the purposes of the church, this is the one which seems to go under as we become more and more institutional. And I have come to contrast in my mind two types of churches – the institutional church and

the missional church. That term "missional" is one that will be defined in various way. Missionaries go someplace with a specific purpose in mind, a goal, and a strategy. They are together to accomplish something to advance the kingdom of Christ. That is their mindset. And it distresses me that we feel we must go to other places on the globe to experience missionary activity. And it happens, in part, because we are insufficiently missional where we are.

You see, in normal church life, the outreach dimension of our mission gets buried under the pile because almost no one is there to advocate for it. Members of churches complain about a lot of things - the length of the sermon, the style of the music, the haircut of the youth pastor – but not usually about the lack of outreach. You see, those served or unserved by our outreach, are not around to complain. So, there is little pressure on the leaders to make it happen, like there is for other things. Look at our story in Acts 6. Verse one tells about a problem in the Jerusalem church. They had a meals-on-wheels ministry, that took food to the widows in the church. But apparently, in this all-Jewish church, there were the Greek-speaking widows and the Aramaic-speaking widows and the Greek ones weren't getting served equally. So, there was a problem. And the apostles, who were the leaders heard about it. Their response is interesting. They did not say that feeding the church's widows was unimportant. But, they were careful not to let this problem or any other internal problem distract them from their mission. Their view was that we have a family to love and a city to reach. A family to love and a city to reach. So, they put together a ministry team of godly men to work on the widows' issue, but they said in verse 4 *we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.* With the result in 7ab *the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly.* What I see happening here is that the apostles were determined not to let the church become ingrown and lose sight of the mission. But that is very difficult and something that, as a church, we must be vigilant at doing.

Now, let me add a balancing thought or two here. The mission of the church is not just to reach out to the lost. There is more, much more. And we see some of the more right here in this passage. There was a concern for the members of the church. Part of our mission is internally directed. The church in Acts 6 appointed seven men who became the original mercy team of the church, and they were focused on inreach. We are to be concerned about one another in both the physical dimension and the spiritual. I John 3:17 (NLT) *If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—*

how can God's love be in that person? God's love in us moves us to take care of the physical needs of those who are called what? Our brothers. Our sisters. This is inreach. This is living together in caring community. There is certainly a place for reaching out to the lost in expressions of material compassion. We want to do that. But the emphasis of Scripture is on taking care of the people of God. Galatians 6:10 *while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith*.

Beyond this, there is another important inreach dimension, and that is the spiritual one. We are to be growing together in our faith, our love, our hope in the Lord. We are to worship God passionately – which pertains to the vertical dimension of our faith – our relationship with our God and Savior. This involves teaching, discipleship, training, counseling, worship and prayer. Paul expressed his pastoral goal in this way in Colossians 1:28 *We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.* "Complete" means "mature." Many of you are in our church today because in a previous church you found that there was little concern about this. Christians were not challenged to learn and to grow. They were not taught at any level of depth. And well, relatively speaking, you have found North Park to be a place where you are challenged to mature in your Christian thinking and in your Christian conduct. We must be committed to that – to inreach both in the way of service and the way of discipleship. Great, wonderful, lovely. But, may I suggest, that an important part of building mature believers is to equip and mobilize them toward outreach – what we, in our mission statement as a church call – *impacting the world through word and deed.*

Gospel outreach, is not the only mission of the church – but it is an essential mission of the church. I have a cartoon that shows a large, but almost empty church, with the preacher saying, "God calls us to outreach. The bank that holds our mortgage has mentioned it too." I am glad we have no mortgage, but we could use a little nudging from somebody on our outreach. I hope that some encouragement from our gracious God will be sufficient, and any pressure we feel is more than a burden of guilt, but a burden of love for lost souls and the glory of Christ. I thought about that story we find in Numbers, about the people being healed from deadly snakebites when they simply looked at a bronze snake on a pole. If you were dying and were healed by such a look, how would you relate thereafter to those you met who were dying from snakebite? Would you not long to share with them the good news, to tell them about how they could be healed?

Even though they may think you were crazy? Romans 10 - Speaking of his Jewish kinsman, Paul said - 1 *Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.* Paul was concerned for the church as an institution. He longed to see believers mature. He was concerned about theological purity. But he still had a passion for the lost. Do you? Do I? I am much too comfortable with my awareness that I live among many who are unsaved. Much too comfortable. I want to tell you – being the chief executive of a fine institution like North Park Church- can become somewhat comfortable. And I would be, were it not for God. He won't let me rest with where we are, with where I am. You can easily lose the mindset of a missionary or a missional church. There are too many vocal Church members to please, who has time to be concerned with the silent non-religious out there? May I find time, may you find time to love on our lost neighbors.

Now, our specific callings from God will vary. Some of you will be called to see that the widows are cared for. Some of you will teach our kids, train the adults, care for babies in the nursery, welcome visitors to our church. You have important jobs, needy families. How has God made you to have an impact? What are your gifts? What might you grow into as you stretch yourself for Jesus' sake? In an army there are all types of personnel, and only some shoot the weapons. You may not be the one pulling the gospel trigger, but my earnest hope for us all is that we will grow in our perception of being together on mission. I really believe our elders share this desire and have labored together in crafting a plan for our church that is missional in focus.

All of that is intended to provide the Scriptural context for our PB&J initiatives. We want to continue to encourage you to grow. And we want to do so by working on some muscles that may not have been given enough attention. But this is really not terribly new. You have done well. You are doing well. I look out there and I see many of you whom I know are making a difference at your schools, in your workplace, in your neighborhoods. That is awesome! What we are putting in place will be more needed by some than others, for sure. But, many of us find that we are not engaging, at least not much, with unchurched people in a significant way. And we long to have more influence for the kingdom. So, the elders of your church have discussed this, have prayed about this, and have concluded that it would be good to place in your hands some tools to help you see, move toward and engage certain opportunities for impact that, in our busy-ness, we might otherwise miss. In our discussions and planning, someone referred to PB&J as being gimmicky. It was meant as a criticism – but I didn't see it that way.

In my life, I have run across some very helpful gimmicks. What does that word mean anyway? I grant that it can have some negative connotations, but here is the first definition for gimmick that came up on dictionary.com - - *an ingenious or novel device, scheme, or stratagem, especially one designed to attract attention or increase appeal.* Hey, that fits. PB&J is a stratagem – maybe even ingenious – and it surely is designed to attract attention to our Jesus. We want to produce hundreds of PB&J Christians. For us that means followers of Jesus who pray – that is the P – prayer for God's heart, prayer for unchurched friends, prayer for personal impact. Then there is the B – which is *bless*. We want all of us to on the lookout daily for ways to bless others in Jesus' name – through words of affirmation, through gift-giving, through eating with them, through listening to them, and through serving them. That we use those things to spell out BAGELS is just a happy coincidence – or not – but it helps me to remember several ways to bless folks in practical ways. Will that lead to any real impact? It will definitely impact you. It will change the way you think and behave. It will grow your soul when you focus on serving others. That is for sure – but as for impacting other persons in meaningful, lasting ways?

Well, it certainly can when we get to the J word which is Jesus, of course. His gospel is the power of God unto salvation. We want to learn of Jesus ourselves and introduce him to others, which can be done in a variety of ways that we will be talking about over the coming months. There are tools we will place in your hand to assist you with that third part. But for today – I am asking you to join me in step one – Praying. Just talking to the Father, asking Him to give us his heart, asking Him to fill every crevice of our lives, asking Him to show us what he would have us do to impact the world through word and deed. PB&J – Pray, Bless, Jesus. Would you say that with me – Pray, Bless, Jesus. One more time. Pray, Bless, Jesus. Like the popular sandwich sticks to the roof of your mouth, we are praying that this call to PB&J will stick in your mind, transform your heart and grow you into a more missional disciple of Christ, who spreads the love – chunky or smooth, your choice. We end with I Thessalonians 4:1 *We request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more.* Next Sunday we will open the Scriptures to consider the treasure we have been given in our Lord's invitation to pray.