

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Hope Producing Church

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Scripture:

Acts 11:19-30

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.

²⁷ During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Transcript:

Well, I want to say hello to those of you here in the room, as well as those of you joining us online on Time Change Sunday, the most wonderful time of the year, right? Thank you for joining us. The scripture comes from Acts 11:19. "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 the Jews. Some of them went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."

"The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord." Second time this passage says that. "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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." So Holy Spirit, please use Your word to make us Your people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I saw a social media post this week that said, (singing). I'll be here all week, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you. Doesn't that describe the last two years in some ways, like the news is so bad, sometimes you don't even want to get out of bed, or I mean, like the pandemic is getting better, we think, but it's kind of still out there, it's still with us, inflation, Russell Wilson? No. Then, of course, the unjust Russian invasion of Ukraine, plus our own struggles, whatever they are, with career, or relationships, or school, or whatever it is.

We need hope. We all need some hope, and that comes from Jesus, but it also comes through His people, the community, the Bible calls Church. When the Church is being who Jesus intended us to be, and let's be honest, sometimes that doesn't happen, but when the Church is what Jesus intended, when we are a community of believers becoming like Jesus, on mission together to heal the world, there's nothing like it. Historically, when that has happened, that community of people has brought Jesus hope and healing both inside the church and outside, and the text I just read kind of shows us, kind of describes four hopeful miracles that happened in Antioch that I think we could use today, and then the text also shows us the kind of community that produces those hopeful miracles, and I'm going to talk about both of those things.

It starts out by saying, "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 among Jews," so hopeful miracle number one, God turns tragedy into triumphs.

God used the tragedy of the persecution that scattered the disciples, and as they went, they told people about Jesus, and that resulted in lots of people becoming Christians. God brought good out of the tragedy. That's what God does. He brings good out of tragedy. The loss of a job leads you to a better one.

The health crisis gets you closer to God and gives you a sense of supernatural peace and joy you've never had before. Verse 20 then says, "Some of them, however, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord," so hopeful miracle number two, the bigger the city, the more Christianity flourished. That kind of seems counterintuitive to us, and it would've to them as well back then, because then, as now, we don't think of cities like New York and LA and Seattle as being like hotbeds of Christianity, right? We don't think of those places being like super Christian, neither today, but Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman empire. It was wealthy, urban, secular, a lot of educated people who felt they were too sophisticated to believe in any religion.

Does that sound familiar? They also had big city problems like crime, poverty, urban decay. Do we see any of that in King County? But we know from history, including secular history, that the bigger the city and the more problems they had, the more Christianity flourished. When it says in this text that they started to tell Greek people about Jesus, that means non-Jews, but it also means non-religious people who became all kinds of Christian, and cities are full of non-religious people.

The more of those people that became Christian, the more the problems began to disappear because they took care of them. Wouldn't that be great if that happened here? Third hopeful miracle was reconciliation between enemies, and we need that too. I know so many families who are no longer speaking to each other because of disagreements over how to handle COVID, and we've got bitter divisions around politics and race, but in Antioch, a miracle happened that had never happened before in history. Antioch was very, very multiethnic, and a lot of ethnic tension.

In fact, they had to build walls between the different ethnic neighborhoods to protect them from themselves, because if someone of one race so much has accidentally bumped up against someone of another race in the marketplace, a riot would erupt, and they all try to kill each other, but Acts 13 says now in the church at Antioch, it was very different.

In the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, that means he's a black man from Africa, Lucius of Cyrene, that's in Northern Africa, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch. Herod was a ruler, which means Manaen was brought up in the upper political and economic class, and Saul, who used to persecute Christians, all in one church. That's just a lot of reconciliation happening. We also know that that church had young and old alike, so it was all these different generations, all these different races, crossing those walls between ethnic neighborhoods to worship together, because they discovered something deeper than culture, a reconciliation not brought about by politics or buzzwords, or slogans, but grounded in Jesus.

They loved each other, they made sure everyone was treated fairly, made sure there were no practices that disadvantaged some groups over others. That list that I read of names, they're prophets and teachers, the highest level of leadership in the Church, so in a Church, that was a majority Jewish. They made sure that people of all ethnicities were in leadership, and this had never happened before in history, and that's why the text says the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. This kind of multi-cultural, multi-generational community was so new, was so unique, they had to come up with a new word for it, Christian. It was so beautiful that people flocked to the churches.

That's why it says twice, large numbers of people became Christians, because it was so compelling. In a world that's divided as ours, to see people of different politics and races and generations, reconciling would be so hopeful, we wouldn't be able to build churches fast enough in King County to handle all the converts. Then, the last hopeful miracle, the mending of real problems together. Later in the text, it says a famine arose, and it says the disciples, as each was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters in Judea. Everyone gave what they could in order to mend a real problem, and this is just another historical fact. Christians were instrumental in addressing real problems in the Roman world because they didn't just care for their own sick, poor and homeless, but all sick, poor and homeless, because Jesus calls us to make it on earth as it is in heaven.

Those are four hopeful miracles, tragedies transformed a triumph, people flocking to Jesus in the cities, reconciliation of divisions, and the mending of real problems. Those are four miracles that, I think we could use here today in King County, and you probably agree with me, because we need those things to happen. They've happened before, they're happening now in other places in the world, it can happen here, so how? What do we need in order for those four hopeful miracles to happen? What do we need? Well, for sure, we need the Holy Spirit, the power of the Holy Spirit, because we can't do this on our own, so we need the Holy Spirit, who works through us as individuals, but who also works through us as a community the way it did in Antioch.

I want to spend the rest of the time talking about, "What are the characteristics of a biblical, hope-producing community, that produce these kinds of miracles? What are the characteristics?" Well, first, a biblical, hope-producing community is made up of disciples, not just church attenders, right? Verse 26 doesn't say the church attenders were called Christians. It says the disciples were called Christians, and we're in the middle of a sermon series called More, about how there's more to following Jesus than just going to church. Now, going to church is a great thing. Going to church is essential for our spiritual growth, so keep going to church and joining us online.

It's just that Jesus asks more of us than that and He promises more to us than that. He promises these kinds of hopeful miracles, tragedies turn to triumph, reconciliation, real problems mended if we move beyond just going to church to become what the Bible calls a disciple, and a disciple is someone who is becoming like Jesus day by day, and we see that in this text, where it says, for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. That is they entered into a deliberate process to move them from convert to disciple, and the word for that is called discipleship. Disciples are marked by six characteristics. They have six characteristics.

Disciples are marked by Jesus' love, which we talked about last week, live connected to a multi-cultural, multi-generational community, they're equipped and eager to share the Good News of Jesus, they live sacrificially, they're healers of injustice, and they obey Jesus' law through prayer and scripture. Today, we're talking about living connected to community, which flows from the first one we talked about last week, marked by Jesus' love, because it's His love that allows us to love each other, and we cannot become like Jesus. We cannot become disciples without community. Disciples are made in community. Without community, we die spiritually.

There's a well-known experiment where researchers put rats by themselves alone in a cage, and they gave them two bottles of water, one regular water and the other bottle of water was laced with drugs. The rats in the cage by themselves would all go to the water laced with drugs.

They'd get addicted, and sick, and then they would die, but in other cages, they put rats together with other rats, not by themselves, but with other rats, a little community of rats, and they called it a rat park, and they had little rat toys for them to play with and little rat tunnels for them to run through, and every rat would try both bottles of water, but the rats in the rat park with other rats avoided the water with the drugs. They never went to the drugged water. They just drank the regular water instead, and as a result, they stayed healthy.

One of the conclusions of the study is, that in order to be whole and healthy human beings, we need other rats. We need other people around us, and that's good news, because you're in a

church. Churches are filled with rats, so go get yourself another rats, like maybe even the one right next to you, because we can't become disciples without community, and without community, we will never see these kinds of hopeful miracles. These come out of community. Hope-producing communities are filled with disciples.

Second characteristic of a hope-producing community is truth and grace in equal measure. The text says the Church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, and he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord. The Greek word for encouraged is so multifaceted. There's no one word to translate it. The Greek word is parakaleo.

Kaleo means to exhort people toward a goal or a truth, para means to come alongside, kind of like paramedic and be sympathetic, so it's kind of a strong, tender word, maybe tough love or loving insistence on the truth, which is why it says Barnabas encourages them to stay true to the Lord. In a hope-producing community, we challenge each other. When we are doing things that are destructive to us or to others, or that are slowing down our spiritual growth, we challenge each other for our own good, but we do it with compassion and grace, because if everyone around us never challenges us, if we're never challenged, we're not going to grow, but if someone challenges us too quickly or too forcefully, we're going to get defensive and we're going to just block them out.

Then, we're not going to feel able to be honest about our flaws and failures, which is essential to becoming a disciple, so we need both grace coupled with truth and challenge. Third characteristic of a hope-producing community is that in that community, I am sometimes called to sacrifice a little bit of me so that we can be we.

Community requires sacrifice for others. See, community is great if it weren't for the people. Like if it just weren't for the people, community would be awesome because those other people, they don't always agree with me. They think differently than I do. They want different things than I want, which means I have to sacrifice.

Not everything. Not always, but sometimes some things so that we can be a community. I got to sacrifice a little bit of me so we can be we. In Antioch, you had lots of different generations, lots of different races, lots of different socioeconomic classes, and they did not agree, and that is a good thing. I need people who disagree with me around me.

You know why? Well, this is a secret, so don't tell anybody, but I'm not always right. Whoa.

Whoa, right? Like news flash, right? I'm not always right. You know what else? Neither are you, and we need people who disagree with us to correct us, modify our opinions, help us come up with deeper, better thought-out kind of conclusions and understandings and ideas.

Think how much better our country would be if everyone was allowing others to correct them and their extremism, and that takes sacrifice. I have to listen to try to understand people who don't agree with me, and that can be kind of hard, but again, here's the good news, BelPres, you all don't agree on anything. There are plenty of people in this room that you can practice disagreeing with, right? The very thing that you love someone in this room hates, the thing that you hate someone in this room loves. Welcome to my email, but that is good for us because it grows us.

The disciples also sacrificed time and money to help others, the way they did with the famine victims, and because that's part of being community, is we sacrifice to care for each other, and BelPres, you do this amazingly well. Like when someone is sick or going through a hard time, man, the casseroles come out and the offers to babysit come out, and you guys do this great, and that's part of it. Disciples sacrifice. If we can't sacrifice for each other, it means we're not disciples, we're just church attenders. We're just like our culture, and we have nothing to offer our culture because we're just like our culture, which has lost the ability to sacrifice for the common good, and instead, everyone is shouting about their rights, insisting on getting their way in the schools and in the churches and in politics, my way, my way, which is why marriages fail, it's why families fail, it's why our country is failing, and we're so divided.

I mean, the word we use for it is polarization. Maybe that's just another word for selfish, but as we work through our differences, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we learn how to love other people, and now we have something to offer the world because now we're doing something the world can't do, and that's going to bring people to Jesus. BelPres, we have such possibilities in this church. What God is doing here, I mean, I cannot think of another church that is traditional Presbyterian, contemporary American, African Pentecostal, Chinese church. That's not a thing.

That's not a thing, except here, except here, because of what God is doing. I went to the prayer nights that New Hope Revival and Chinese Covenant are doing on Wednesday nights through lent. We prayed for two hours, in different ways, African style, and Chinese style, and Presbyterian style. That expands all the different ways I know how to pray, and that means I've got a bigger view of Jesus, and that's why multi-cultural, multi-generational is so important. We experience more of Jesus in our differences.

It's not a loss, it's a gain. It's not subtraction, it's addition, which is why you don't find any homogenous churches in the New Testament. They don't exist. In a community of people uniting what the world divides, sacrificing for each other is so hopeful, it's just going to draw thousands of people to Jesus. A hope-producing community is made up of disciples who give each other truth and grace, sacrificing for others, and then finally, on mission together to heal the world. The disciples in this story are on mission together to bring people to Jesus and mend real problems in the world, as they did with the famine victims. In the New Testament, it is clear, community is non-optional for disciples. We will not see marriages healed, families restored. We will not see these kinds of hopeful miracles if we are not in community together, and only disciples can make this kind of community. Just church-going doesn't make this kind of community, and this kind of community makes disciples.

This week, two action steps, summed up in the acronym IT, as in get it? The first action step is initiative. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how you can take a step into a community, and then take initiative and do it. Join an all-in group. Pre-pandemic, some of you are going out to lunch with the people that you sit in here.

Maybe do that again, or at least start by introducing yourself. Spend time with Christian friends and ask the deeper questions. "What's going well in your life? What's not going well in your life? How are you going spiritually?"

Take initiative. Then second, the T, time. You got to spend time together. I mean, I'm not even going to elaborate on this point. Just you got to do it, right? You got to spend time together. The people who help me become a disciple are people I spend a lot of time with weekly, if not, more. Get it? Intentional, time. Some of you have heard of Juan Carlos Ortiz, who recently died, and he was pastor of one of the most influential churches in South America. There was a season where he would frequently preach about community, but his congregation knew a lot, but they weren't doing what they knew about community.

One Sunday, after working on a sermon all week, as we pastors do, as he got up to preach and was walking to the podium, the Holy Spirit just kind of said to him, "Juan, how many times have you preached this topic to your church?," and he said, "A lot." Then, the Holy Spirit said, "Did any of those sermons do any good?" That is a mean question to ask a pastor. Like just don't be asking us that question. That hurts, okay?

That just hurts, and he got to the podium. Pastor Ortiz, he got to the podium and he just stood there, frozen for a few minutes, not saying anything, thinking I have the wrong sermon. Finally, after all this silence, he just said, "Love one another," and then he sat down, and people were like, "What?" The elders were probably like, "Do we need to call a special meeting, because

that's weird?" Then, a few minutes later of silence, he got up again and said, "Love one another," and then he sat down. Then, a few minutes later of silence, he got up again and said, "Love one another," and then he sat down.

He just kept doing this. Well, finally, after in one of these awkward silences, one guy stood up and said, "I think I know what he's getting at, but how can I love you if I don't know your name?" so he turned to the people sitting near him and he introduced himself. Then, another guy got up and he said, "I think I get what our pastor is trying to say, but how can I love you if I have a grudge against Jose, which I do?" and so he walked over to Jose, and they began to reconcile. There was a family there that had come to the city to get treatment for their little girl, but they didn't have enough money to get home, so the people sitting around them gave them money to buy a bus ticket, and on and on, this just started breaking out all over the church that day. Well, after that, for the next six months, Pastor Ortiz preached on nothing but community.

Over time, that church moved into their city on mission to care for their city, to build clinics for sick people and job training for people who were unemployed and all kinds of things, and they moved out in the world as well, to do similar things. He launched worldwide ministries that brought thousands of people to Jesus, as well as humanitarian efforts that really made a difference in people's lives, because that's what a biblical, hope-producing community does. It changes the world. Now, I know that you know many things about community, and you know that I know that you know many things about community. We are knowledgeable people, but better than knowing is doing what we know, and today, I gave you a whole sermon, not just three words, and I'm not going to ask you to get up and start doing all that stuff because you know, we're Presbyterians, so we won't, but we probably should.

At least after the service, maybe just introduce yourself or something, because when the church is what Jesus intended us to be, a community of sinners, redeemed by the grace of Jesus, becoming like Jesus, on mission together to heal the world, there's just nothing like it. As I said, we have so much possibility here, what God is doing here, bringing all these different cultures together, our mission in the city with Jubilee REACH and Eastside Academy that are breaking cycles of poverty, our involvement in Congo, trying to end ethnic violence there, involve our involvement with Muslim refugees who are becoming Christian by the thousands, and yes, it is harder to be this kind of church. It is way harder to be this kind of church, but we're BelPres, and at BelPres, we do hard things, because they're better things. Do you see what I see? God is moving us to be that Antioch church, bringing hope to ourselves, hope in our schools, hope in our neighborhoods, hope to our city, our nation, our world until the earth is filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

Mar 13, 2022

For such a time as this, BelPres, we've been called. So Jesus, thank You, that this is what You do with Your people. Thank You that this is the kind of community You create. Thank You that You, through Your community, make it more on earth as it is in heaven, and so Jesus, make us this kind of community. We know we can't do it on our own.

We need Your love, we need Your grace, we need Your power. Jesus, You and You alone have ever been able to create this kind of community, so Jesus, do it here, please. Do it in our hearts, do it among us, do it now in this church. We ask this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question:

- What is a talent, hobby, interest or passion of yours that you think the group might not already know about you?

Opening Question:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g. traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What do you find most compelling about the community described in Acts 11:19-30?
- Disciples live connected to a multi-generational, multi-cultural community, where we give each other truth and grace in equal measure, sacrifice for each other, and are on mission together to bring hope to the world. What part of that sentence do you feel you are doing well in? What part seems most challenging?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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