

July 12, 2015  
Church Planting  
*My Addiction*  
Acts 13:13-15

**Opening words:** I love this story. There was a pastor who never prepared his sermons in advance. His name was Ralph. Every Sunday morning he'd sit on the platform while the church was singing the hymns, desperately praying, "Lord, give me your message, Lord give me your message." One Sunday, while desperately praying for God's message, he heard the Lord speaking to him. The Lord said, "Ralph, here's my message. You're lazy!" Let me say this clearly. Preaching is hard work.

This is sermon number twenty-seven in my sermon series called *Church Planting*. During the summer months, I have been preaching through the Book of Acts. This is no small task, because Acts has so much to offer. I believe the Holy Spirit is vital to our future success. Human effort and determination are not enough to revive the church. It is the Holy Spirit who created the church originally, and it must be the Holy Spirit who revives the church again. With this understanding, let us look at our scripture lesson for today, Acts 13:13-15. Let me call this message *My Addiction*.

**Acts 13:13-15** <sup>13</sup> From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. <sup>15</sup> After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the leaders of the synagogue sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a word of exhortation for the people, please speak."

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Years ago, on the editorial page of the *British Weekly*, this provocative letter was published:

It seems ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending church quite regularly for 30 years and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I discovered I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister's time might be more profitable spent on something else?

That letter triggered a great debate that went on for weeks. It ended with this letter: I have been married for 30 years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals--mostly my wife's cooking. Suddenly I have discovered I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet . . . I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago.

That leads me to some interesting questions. How many sermons have you heard in your life? How many sermons do you actually remember? Do you think that God made a mistake calling preachers to change the world? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

This morning we find ourselves in the thirteenth chapter of Acts. Do you remember what has happened in the past? The answer is, a great deal. It will have to suffice to say that Paul and Barnabas are on their first missionary journey. According to the text, they are on the island of Cyprus. Their method is simple. They have been going into various communities, locating the synagogue and telling people about Jesus. The people seem to be open to their message. Last time, we were told even the proconsul, or the governor of the island, wanted to hear about Jesus.

This week, we are told Barnabas and Paul are in Pisidian Antioch. That community was the hub of trade in that area. It had a large Jewish population, so a synagogue was easy to locate. The order of worship must have been familiar to them. They heard the appropriate pieces of scripture, the Law and the Prophets. What came next was of no surprise to them. Visiting rabbis were always asked to speak. The synagogue rulers were more than inviting. They said, to quote verse 15, "*Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement, please speak.*" I read that verse one time and got it. They were not just asked to speak and tell them about life in Jerusalem. The rulers didn't want to hear about their adventures. The rulers didn't want to hear the latest news. They were asked to do much more. They were asked to preach, because the rulers wanted to know if God had a word for them. They did not have a clue how their theology was about to change. Standing in a room filled with strange faces, Paul didn't just talk, he preached about God's plan of salvation for the world. In other words, he told them about Jesus. I have no doubt about the next line. If I had been there, I would have preached too. I love to preach, I love talking about Jesus. I have discovered in the past few decades that preaching is not just my calling, it is my addiction. It is important to me that I be the best preacher possible, because preaching is important. It is how God has chosen to save the world. And all of God people said, "**Amen!**"

It must have been Easter morning 1984. I was a first year seminary student at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana. I was also the youth director at the First Christian Church in Frankfort. It was about Ash Wednesday when the pastor of the church asked me if I would like to preach the Easter sunrise service. His question filled my heart with fear. I had never preached before and I didn't know where to begin. I hadn't taken a single preaching class and didn't feel comfortable enough with him to ask for help. I can remember sitting in the seminary library with an open Bible and a blank piece of paper trying to prepare. When Easter morning came, my primary text was John 20:24-31, the story of doubting Thomas. My handwritten manuscript was filled with abstract thoughts and my delivery was nervous. The only thing I felt when it was over was relief. How successful was I? The next day someone called the church to complain about my message. They said I wasted their Easter morning. I really began developing my preaching at my next church.

When I transferred to Asbury Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky in 1985, I became a student pastor at the Pleasant Grove Christian Church near Danville. That congregation changed my life. They understood their calling to train and encourage students.

For three years I stood in front of those people and did my best. At first it was a little rough, then I began to settle. My sermons sounded a great deal like my classroom notes, with a story or two thrown in. I must have been OK. The church exploded. We grew from thirty per Sunday to fifty. It was an emotional day when I announced I was leaving. I was near the end of my formal education and wanted to return home. When I packed my boxes I didn't have a single sermon manuscript. I did most of my preaching from a single index card. I am sure I was horrible, but I was convinced I was quite good.

When I first served in East Ohio, I was appointed to the Morristown Charge in the old St. Clairsville District. That charge consisted of three churches. There was Morristown, Lloydsville and Bannock. I lived in Lloydsville and could make the circle in twelve miles. My District Superintendent was a man by the name of Abraham Brandyberry. He too had a past with Asbury Seminary, and found a place for me. He said, "Russ, if you want to be a great preacher, then you have to preach!" I never forgot those words. I preached three times a week there. I preach three times a week here. It is easier here because I get to stay in the same building!

When Kathryn and I were married, I was appointed to the Waltz United Methodist Church near Medina. I stayed a single year, but I learned a great deal about preaching from those people. They were a former Evangelical United Brethren congregation. They valued preaching and expected a 45 minute sermon. That gave me the opportunity to tell more stories or illustrations. It gave me an opportunity to develop my thoughts.

When we moved to Garfield Heights, I was appointed to the Hathaway United Methodist Church. That church was known for one thing, their horrible music program. The choir was filled with wonderful people, including the choir director. She had held that position for years because she was the matriarch of the choir. There was only one problem, she was a terrible choir director. They actually got better when she was always recovering from surgery. Generally, everyone looked forward to the summer, because the choir was gone. For the first time I felt the pressure to deliver a quality sermon. I felt like I had to bail out the service! I must have done OK. The church grew from 60 per Sunday to 100. That brings me to here.

When I came to Western Reserve everything changed again. In the past 21 years, this church continues to change. How many people who are here today were here when I came? The percentage of those original members is very small. Our church has evolved and our worship styles have evolved. Contemporary worship has forced me to be more organized. I have fallen in love with preaching sermon series. Contemporary worship has forced me to be more faithful to the manuscript; the pictures and words must match. Our liturgy-free traditional service features one of the best chancel choirs in the area. Because of them, I no longer have to bail the service out. I just hope I don't mess it up! Let me say this from the bottom of my heart. This is a great place to preach. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

I have spent all this time talking about my preaching history for one reason. Preaching is important! I work hard at my craft because it is a large part of my calling. I spend more time preparing to preach than I do anything else. In my vocation, preaching is important, it is vital. People don't call me the administrator. They don't call me the worship leader. They don't call me a counselor. They don't call me chaplain. They don't call me "conflict manager" or the head of the complaint department. Whether people like it or not, they value the art of preaching too, because they identify my vocational group as preachers. That is fine with me, because preaching is my addiction.

Through the years, I have learned every sermon must have four vital characteristics. Kevin DeYoung of the University Reformed Church in East Lansing, Michigan put them in print. If you do not find them in this sermon, then I have failed.

- 1. Veracity** – Every sermon must be true to the Bible and God. Preaching is not just an opportunity to express your opinions. People want to hear what God has to say to them, not me.
- 2. Clarity** – Every sermon must be understandable. Clarity doesn't mean the congregation must remember your three points, but they should know what the text is about and what you were trying to say.
- 3. Authority** – Every sermon must be delivered with certainty. No preacher is infallible. Our authority comes from God himself. It is God who makes claims on people's lives, declares the truth with boldness and takes courageous stands where others fear.
- 4. Authenticity** – Every sermon must connect with the congregation. Your personality must come through, and at the same time, your concern for the congregation must come through. It is impossible to preach someone else's sermon.

Preaching is my addiction. I do not know if I am a good preacher, but I love to preach. Without a doubt, I would have stood up with Paul on that day in that sea of strange faces and talked about Jesus. There is no greater privilege than to talk about our Lord.

Several years ago, I was out at a local funeral home. It was a nice summer night and I was visiting with friends. Others came to pay their final respects. One lady passed by and looked at me. She took a double take and caught my eye. She slowed down and said, "Are you a preacher?" I threw my shoulders back and said clearly for the world to hear, "Yes!" May God help me, I love it so.

Will you pray with me?