

August 2, 2015
Church Planting
They Continued
Acts 14:1-7

Opening words: Bob Woods tells the story of a couple who took their son, 11, and daughter, 7, to Carlsbad Caverns. As always, when the tour reached the deepest point in the cavern, the guide turned off all the lights to dramatize how completely dark and silent it is below the earth's surface. The little girl, suddenly enveloped in utter darkness, was frightened and began to cry. Immediately, her brother replied, "Don't cry. Somebody here knows how to turn on the lights." Can I state the obvious? Our world can be a dark place. That is exactly why the church must continue to preach the Good News.

This is sermon number twenty-eight 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 14:1-7. Let me call this message *They Continued*.

Acts 14:1-7 ¹At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed. ²But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the other Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders. ⁴The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. ⁵There was a plot afoot among both Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. ⁶But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, ⁷where they continued to preach the gospel.

It sits at 702 Mahoning Avenue. It is located next to absolutely nothing. However, at one time it was considered "out in the country" next to the once proud city. It is the home of the Victorian Players, one of the community theater groups in the area. I have been inside several times because Kathryn has been in several of their productions. It wasn't built as a theater, it was built as a church. It doesn't take much imagination to imagine the good old days. The audience sits in uncomfortable pews. The chancel area has been replaced by a small flat stage. The fellowship hall in the basement has been converted into tiny changing rooms. Every time I go, I ask the same question, "What was the name of this church?" Every time, I get the same answer, "I don't know." The next line has nothing to do with the quality of the productions. However, it has everything to do with the unknown church. Every time I walk into that building, I grow

sad. That building was not built for entertainment purposes; it was built to proclaim the word of God. That building was built to tell people about Jesus. That building does not stand alone. There are other church buildings that have been "repurposed".

It is located at 3525 Liberty Avenue in Pittsburgh. It was the home of the Saint John the Baptist Catholic Church. The name on the building has been changed to the Church Works Brewery. The congregation is long gone because the neighborhood is long gone. People come now for dinner and a malt beverage. I will admit, I have been there. The large structure remains, but everything else has changed. The pews are gone, replaced by tables and chairs. The altar has been replaced by vats, producing several kinds of beer. The priest has been replaced by a brew master. It is supposed to be a fun place, but I find it to be sad. That building was not constructed to be a microbrewery. That building was built to proclaim the word of God. The building was built to tell people about Jesus. You don't have to go into the city to find it to be the case. You can find repurposed church buildings in our own neighborhood.

When I came here, there were several operating churches in this area that are now closed. The buildings have been repurposed. One of those congregations was St. Andrews. It was an episcopal church. I was in there several times for a variety of reasons. The congregants were not old, no one was 58! I considered it to be a younger congregation. That is why I was so surprised to hear the news. The church was closing and the building was being put up for sale. The congregation did not die off; they gave up. They grew tired of all the fundraising and pastoral changes. One day they locked the door and never looked back. Today, that building is a counseling center with a wonderful pipe organ. Every time I drive by that building I am sad. It wasn't constructed to be a counseling center. That building was built to proclaim the word of God. The building was built to tell people about Jesus.

I could go on, but I won't. You can find a former church building on Kirk Road that is now a daycare center. You can find a former church building that is on the corner of Route 46 and Kirk Road that is now a beauty spa. You can find a former church building that is now owned by an art museum. That is not all bad. I like young children, good-looking women and have some tolerance for art. However, I have to say this. This trend is not over. More churches will close and new businesses will be opened on those sites. What business would love this piece of property? I believe some would love to knock this building down and start a housing development. How much do you think we could get for twenty acres of land in Canfield Township? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** With all this in mind, let's look at the scripture lesson together.

We are in the fourteenth chapter of Acts. Paul and Barnabas are on this first missionary journey. As I said in the past few weeks, their method is simple. They entered a community, located the synagogue, waited until the Sabbath, and talked about Jesus. This week, we are told they are in Iconium. Guess what they did? They entered the community, located the synagogue, waited until the Sabbath, and talked about Jesus.

Last week, we talked about the three reactions you can expect when you talk about Jesus (the "Good, the Bad, and the "Ugly"). They are illustrated once again in this text. The Gentiles were good because they accepted the good news. The Jews were bad because they ignored the good news. Some of the Jews were ugly because they wanted to prevent anyone from hearing the good news. Verse 4 tells us the whole city was divided. Everyone had an emotional opinion. The debate was so heated that some formed a plot to mistreat or stone the apostles. When Paul and Barnabas got wind of those plans, they fled town, but they didn't stop talking about Jesus. They traveled about twenty miles to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. When they got there, guess what they did? They entered the city, located the synagogue, waited until the Sabbath, and talked about Jesus. Verse seven summarizes it for us. It says, "*They continued to preach the good news.*" I know it doesn't sound exciting, but continuing to preach the good news is extremely important. It is the only thing that really matters in the life of the church. We must talk about Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "If the church stops talking about Jesus, then the church has nothing to say." We are not much different than Paul and Barnabas. They had to talk about Jesus and so do we. If you can agree with that point, say, "**Amen!**"

In the story for today the church is in crisis. Have you ever been in a church that was in crisis? Have you ever been involved in a church that was divided over the preacher? In many places, the pastor is the eye of the storm. (Certainly, not here.) "He or she is a poor preacher... They read their boring manuscripts in a monotone... He or she makes too much money... We used to pay for the preacher by giving him chickens... He or she gets too much vacation and is never here... He or she doesn't visit enough and doesn't spend enough time with the youth... He or she was too liberal or conservative." I was once involved in a church where the minister was too handsome (smile). This is the problem. The vote is never unanimous. Regardless of the issue, the church is always divided down the middle and people get mad. You know it is true. It has happened here. This is not a perfect place. This church is filled with opinionated, strong-willed people.

Do you remember when we decided to sell the parsonage and switch to a housing allowance? There is no other way to say it, it was ugly. In my opinion, the house was in disrepair. We had three options. We could do nothing. That is always an option. We could buy a new parsonage. Or, we could go to a housing allowance. On the day of the meeting, everyone came with their opinions. I warned the minister who came to run the meeting that it was going to be ugly. He said, "Russ, don't worry. Where I go, peace and tranquility break out." I responded, "That is funny! Wherever I go, chaos and mayhem reign." I was right. There was a heated debate, and when the vote was taken some were upset. We couldn't afford to do such a "crazy thing". Long-time friends parted ways. It was a long, memorable meeting some will never forget. That was nineteen years ago and we are still here. Do you remember what happened the next Sunday? We gathered as a church to proclaim the good news. Barnabas and Paul

continued to talk about Jesus, and so did we. If we stop talking about Jesus, then we have nothing to say. If we stop talking about Jesus, then we stop being a church. Do you remember the meeting we had about the pipe organ? How could you forget? It was ugly. The issue was \$10,000. A woman wanted to give us \$10,000 to help us purchase the organ. There was no sense in accepting the money unless we were serious about moving forward with the project. The entire church seemed to turn out for the meeting. Emotional speeches were made on both sides. Those who were in favor of the pipe organ gave their reasons why the money should be accepted. Those who were against the project gave their reasons why the money should be rejected. When the vote finally came, I stepped outside because I didn't want to be involved in the discussions of who voted which way. In the end, the money was rejected and everyone went home mad. It was ugly. It was a long, emotional meeting some will never forget. Do you remember what happened the following Sunday? We gathered as a church to talk about Jesus. Barnabas and Paul continued to talk about Jesus, and so did we. If we stop talking about Jesus, then we have nothing to say. If we stop talking about Jesus, then we stop being a church. It isn't just true of negative things, it is true of positive things.

Do you remember when we hosted 400 young people to work on 60 homes with the city? I have never been prouder of being the pastor of this church. Everybody won. City residents received free home repair. The youth who came won because they drew closer to Jesus. We won because we helped the needy in this community. I remember going to breakfast on the day they left. The school seemed so quiet. I will never forget those camps. I wished it could have never ended. Do you remember what happened the following Sunday? We gathered as a church to talk about Jesus. Barnabas and Paul continued to talk about Jesus, and so did we. If we stop talking about Jesus, then we have nothing to say. Regardless of the situation, we must continue to be like Barnabas and Paul. As long as the church exists, we must continue talking about Jesus! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" In the life of the church, without Jesus there is nothing to say.

They tell me the oldest functioning church in the world is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It is the traditional site where they say Jesus was born. It was commissioned in 327 AD by Constantine and his mother Helena. The original building was completed in 339 AD. That building was destroyed by fire in the sixth century. I was there several years ago and I was moved by its sacredness. The main doors are massive in size, yet you had to stoop as you entered. Inside the main doors were two smaller, shorter doors. Once inside, you were greeted by heavy incense. The focal point of the main entrance was the main altar. The most sacred spot in the whole church was under the main altar. To get there, you had to walk down narrow, shallow uneven stairs. The ceiling was low, so you had to be careful. When you got to the spot where they say Christ was born, it was spiritually overwhelming. It was marked by a bronze star on the floor. I remember getting on my knees and putting my hands in the hole in the center of that star. I wanted to stay longer, but a line was forming behind me.

Even to a hard-hearted person like me, it was moving. Across from that spot were three eternity candles representing the Magi. When I walked out from the other side, I was spiritually spent. I sat on a bench and tried to appreciate where I was. Do you know the most meaningful thing about the whole experience? Putting my hands in the hole in the middle of that bronze star was really something. However, thinking about how the good news has been preached from that church since 327 AD was something else.

It sounds so simple, "they continued". Barnabas and Paul continued to preach the good news. They continued to tell people about Jesus and so must we. If the church stops talking about Jesus, then the church has nothing to say. If we stop talking about Jesus, then we stop being the church. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Will you pray with me?