

THE BOOMERANG GOSPEL

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.



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Acts 11:19-30
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Paul Taylor
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Acts 11:19-30

This is the time of year when everyone looks forward to Christmas. One of my family's great traditions is the homemade cinnamon rolls that I make for my family on Christmas morning. My apologies to all you other cinnamon roll chefs out there, but I've been informed that mine are the best in the world.

Imagine for a second that I decide my cinnamon rolls are so good that I'm going to open a boutique cinnamon roll shop in downtown Palo Alto. If people will pay \$5 for a cup of coffee, and \$6 for an ice cream sandwich, maybe they'll pay \$7 for a warm, gooey cinnamon roll. I know it's a competitive market, but I think my creation is that good, so I go for it.

One year later, what do you think has happened to my boutique cinnamon roll shop?

As I'm sure you expected, it is a fabulous success. People line up to get my cinnamon rolls. Everyone talks about them. Cinnamon farms all across the world have to ramp up production because demand is increasing. In fact, things are going so well, that I decide to open a second location. I'm killing it in Palo Alto, so I decide to open a shop in San Jose.

Everyone knows that college students love cinnamon rolls, so I pick a location right near San Jose State University. I make sure that the winning recipe from Palo Alto is replicated exactly. Everything in my San Jose store looks just like my Palo Alto shop. And when it opens, things are going great.

But then something unexpected happens. My manager from the San Jose store calls me and asks me a tough question. He says that things are going great, but the staff has been talking. They have an idea to tweak the recipe. They think their changes will make the cinnamon rolls appeal more to their customers.

They want to take my winning recipe—the one that everyone everywhere is talking about—and they want to change it. Is that okay? What should I do? What should the relationship be between the original and the branch?

This is the kind of issue we are going to see this morning as we continue with our series in the book of Acts called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. We've seen the early formation of the community of Jesus followers in Jerusalem. We've seen them scattered because of persecution around the world.

For the last two weeks, we've been following the story of Cornelius, a Gentile centurion. That story is a turning point in the book of Acts and the history of the Gospel. Through Peter, God has officially validated the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Those people. The ones you weren't even allowed to eat with. The prejudice doesn't just end. It's replaced by full inclusion into the family of God.

That is a huge shift.

Last week we saw a full-fledged Gentile convert join the family. Today we're going to meet the first Gentile church. In fact, this church isn't just the first Gentile church. It's the first church community that we meet outside of Jerusalem. Today we see a picture of the first time a new community in a new city forms around the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be planted from the church in Jerusalem? What kind of church would they be? Are they supposed to look just like their mother church? We've seen how people from Jerusalem have been sent out with the Gospel. But today we'll see the Gospel take root in a new city, but return back to Jerusalem in a different way. Today we'll encounter the boomerang Gospel.

Our story in the last half of Acts 11 describes the Gospel coming to the city of Antioch. It's like a new franchise of this whole Jesus community. The Gospel takes root among these Gentiles. The church begins to thrive and they are changed by the message of Jesus.

What does the Gospel do when it creates a new community? What are among some of the earliest changes that happen in a group of people who first organize themselves around Jesus? How do they respond when life happens to them?

As we encounter this new community in Antioch, we are going to learn some important lessons about what is central about following Jesus. We'll see what the Gospel does and we'll see what the Gospel inspires a community to do.

We'll also notice a surprising kind of relationship between Antioch and the mother church in Jerusalem. It isn't what we might expect. But it gives us a great model for thinking about how we relate to other churches, and how we see the work of God in us.

Maybe by the end of this story, we'll have some wisdom for my cinnamon roll venture, as well.

From Jerusalem to Antioch

The story begins in Jerusalem. For now, that's where all the stories in the book have begun. But that is about to change.

Acts 11:19-21:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

The story begins with a reference back to Acts 8 when the persecution in Jerusalem became so great that the disciples were scattered throughout the region. Disciples go as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. At this point the story focuses in on Antioch.



Antioch was an important city. The ancient historian Josephus says that it was the third most important city in the Roman Empire at the time. That would put it just behind Rome and Alexandria. Antioch was an important place. It had a sizable Jewish population, but also it was a powerful Gentile city.

The first people that came to Antioch from Jerusalem apparently only spoke to the Jewish population. Not much came as a result. But then we hear about some more disciples. These people came from Cyprus—an island in the Mediterranean—and Cyrene—a city on the far northern coast of Africa. People from those areas came to Antioch. They had probably been in Jerusalem, gone back to their original areas, and now were travelling to Antioch.

These people had the courage to preach to the Hellenists, a word used here to refer to Gentiles. It's only at this point that we hear about success. Now a great number of people come to faith in Jesus. Preaching to Jews didn't work. It took preaching to the Hellenists for things to take off in Antioch.

This isn't exactly the strategy that the apostles in Jerusalem would have devised for planting new churches. Like everything we've seen so far in Acts, the Gospel seems to go out in unconventional ways. So when the church in Jerusalem heard about what happened in Antioch, they reacted how we might expect.

Acts 11:22:

The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Sending Barnabas to check out things in Antioch was an interesting choice. The first time we heard about him was when he sold all his property and gave the proceeds to the church. He was also the one to defend Saul to the apostles after Saul's radical conversion. And he was a native of Cyprus. So perhaps he knew some of the people who had preached in Antioch.

Barnabas was a significant guy in Jerusalem, but he wasn't an apostle. The last time someone was sent from Jerusalem it was Peter and John. Barnabas wasn't one of the so-called "deacons" from Acts 6. He had no title that we know of. And yet, he was the one the church sent to validate what was going on.

What do you think Barnabas was supposed to look for? What was he making sure was okay about this new community in Antioch? How would he react when he sees how they do things there? What was he looking for?

What would you be looking for if you were Barnabas? How would you evaluate this new community? How do you discern the work of God now? The New Testament speaks frequently about false teaching and temptations that might lead churches astray. There are ways to do things that are good and ways that are dangerous. But there are also just different ways. How do you evaluate the work of God? How do you judge the work of God?

When my kids were little, my wife stayed home to take care of them. With little kids, there are a thousand decisions to make every second. That was one of the most surprising things about parenting to me. Before you had kids, you read books about how to respond when your child says this or that. You think about it; you consider the alternatives; you try to imagine the consequences down the road.

But when you have actual kids, there's no time for any of that. Parenting is a constant series of ill-informed, spur-of-the-moment, incredibly significant decisions made by a sleep deprived individual.

So when my wife was watching the kids, she'd be making tons of these kinds of decisions. Dozens every hour. Then I'd come home. I had enjoyed the space to think about stuff in my office. I had some stimulating thought-provoking conversation with thoughtful and spiritually mature adults.

So naturally, I was critical of many of her decisions. How could you have done this? Why did you do that? If you'd thought about the repercussions and compared that course of action to seventeen other alternatives, you would certainly have discovered a better way to handle that situation.

It's our tendency to be critical of the way other people handle situations, especially situations that we care deeply about. Barnabas had been part of a thriving community in Jerusalem. How was he going to think about this new community in a faraway city that certainly did things very differently than he was used to?

In Antioch

This is similar to that moment when my cinnamon roll shop in San Jose tells me that they want to change the recipe. How is Barnabas going to respond to things in Antioch? It's the first chance for the mother ship church in Jerusalem to respond to another community. What will happen?

Acts 11:23-24:

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

What would you have been looking for in Antioch?

What Barnabas finds is the "grace of God." He doesn't notice what they are doing so much as he sees the work of God in their midst. In particular, he sees "grace." He senses something in the air. Something in the way these people treat each other. The way their lives have been changed.

He sees the "grace of God." He doesn't tell them everything they were doing wrong. He doesn't make sure they were singing the same songs they sang in Jerusalem or following the same worship order. He sees grace. So he tells them to keep it up. Remain faithful. Stay in the purpose that you started with.

Is this how you normally react to people who do things differently than you?

How do you feel when someone sings a song you know just slightly differently than you're used to? Doesn't it bother you?

Think again about how Barnabas responds when he arrives in Antioch. He affirms everything. He is thrilled with how they are doing things. This city, 300 miles away from Jerusalem, must have developed their own ways of doing things. And Barnabas affirms it. All of it.

In fact, when we hear the results of the evaluation, it isn't Antioch who is evaluated. We are told that Barnabas is "a good man." He is glad for what is going on, not because they got it all right, but because he was a good man, full of faith. He's the only person in the entire book of Acts to be described as a "good man." The first martyr, Stephen, was the only other one to be described as "full of the Holy Spirit and faith."

That doesn't mean that the church in Antioch had everything figured out. They had started well, so much so that Barnabas wants to stay and be part of their continued growth. He decides he needs some help, so he goes to look for someone that we haven't heard from in a while.

Acts 11:25-26:

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Saul was the Jewish leader who had begun as one of the worst enemies of the Gospel in the early part of the book of Acts. Then in a dramatic conversion, he had encountered Jesus and immediately professed faith. His early attempts at preaching the Gospel ended in disaster.

The last time we saw Saul he was being put on a boat by the apostles and shipped off to Tarsus. Only after he left did the church experience peace and continue to grow. That was twelve years ago. For that whole time he had been safely tucked away in his hometown where he couldn't do any damage.

Why does Barnabas go to find Saul? It's a decision that comes out of nowhere. Why decide that what the church in Antioch really needed was the persecutor-turned-proclaimer who created so many problems a decade ago? Why Saul? Why here? Why now?

We don't know. But we know it was a good decision. This would give Saul the opportunity that eventually turns into the most famous missionary career of all time. But first, Barnabas and Saul spent a year in Antioch teaching them about Jesus.

After that we are told, "in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians." That doesn't seem like a big deal. For us, the term "Christian" is everywhere. It's been a common part of our language for centuries. But this is actually a very rare term in the New Testament. We only see it three times.

The term "Christian" seems to be used in reference to the way that outsiders referred to those who believe in Jesus. In the New Testament, believers don't refer to each other as Christians. They call each other "saints" or "brothers and sisters." It took until the second century to start using this word to describe themselves.

So this is how the people in Antioch started referring to the followers of Jesus in their city. It's a Greek word construction made by adding a suffix to a normal name. It's kind of like saying they are "little Christs." The people in Antioch looked at the new followers of Jesus and said, "those are the people who try to act like Jesus."

Wow.

Here's the second church that we are ever told about. They have a surprising way of starting. Barnabas recognizes and encourages the "grace of God" among them. He fetches the troublemaker Saul to help teach them. For a year, they grow in faith.

And the city around them notices. They recognize these people as the people who are trying to live like Jesus Christ. Some commentators even think it was meant as a derogatory term. But it's the farthest thing from that. This is the ultimate compliment.

In fact, I would like nothing more than for us to be seen that way. In our culture most people think much higher of Jesus than they do of Christians. Imagine if the people of Palo Alto thought of us that way. Those are the people who try to live like Jesus. I don't think that is currently how we're perceived.

Instead, we have all sorts of labels. What do they call us? Evangelicals. Religious right. Progressive Christians. Fundamentalists. Mainline. Pentecostal. Denominational. Non-denominational. All sorts of categories that define us. What would it take for us to be perceived as little Christs? How could we be known as little Christs?

But what if we were perceived as “little Christs”?

What if people noticed that those who follow Jesus put others’ needs above their own, just like Jesus?

If there’s an opportunity at work to get ahead, those who follow Jesus seem more concerned that others succeed than that they do. When people around them are vulnerable to criticism, they stand up for them.

They care about life passionately—whether it is the life of the unborn, the uneducated, the uniformed, the under-privileged, or the undocumented. They welcome those who are different: the outsider and foreigner, the orphan and the widow, and even that awkward guy that no one wants to get stuck in a conversation with.

They stand up for women and children and minorities and seniors and the disabled.

They have strong ethics around sexuality and marriage, but they refuse to demonize those people who disagree with them.

Who are those people? They seem to act just like that man named Jesus. We should call them “Christians.”

Wouldn’t that be amazing? Isn’t it amazing that this young church in Antioch, in a fabulously important city of the Ancient world, so quickly learned of Jesus and developed a reputation of acting like him. Not to each other, but to outsiders. The people in their city noticed that they looked like Jesus.

How can we do that? How can we be like this community in Antioch? These guys are amazing.

From Antioch to Jerusalem

But it only gets better. This church really shines in the last part of the story. They get some scary news.

Acts 11:27-28:

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).

Traveling prophets were common in the ancient world. It was like their equivalent of Twitter—how you found out what was happening all around. So Agabus swings by Antioch. We’ll hear some more about Agabus later on in this book. He tells them there is going to be a famine “over all the world.”

We have other historical records of this particular famine. There are records from Egypt that tell us about a flood year for the Nile just before this. All the agricultural economies of the ancient world were connected. A flood for the Nile meant that Egypt produced less grain, which meant that all the areas that traded with Egypt had to use their stores of grain in addition to selling some to Egypt. Over the course of a year or so, this would drive up the price of grain until it was out of reach of normal people.

The ancient historian Josephus actually describes this time period as the great Judean famine. He says that the price of grain in the region doubled in the year following this flood of the Nile.

But famine didn’t hit everyone equally. In fact, one historian stated that “In the ancient world...famine was always essentially a class famine and it turned on the price of grain. The poor and improvident lacked reserves of money and food, and suffered immediately when prices rose, while the rich had reserves of both and seldom went hungry. Though the rich might experience economic discomfort, it was the lower classes who suffered actual hunger and starvation (Gapp 261).

The same thing is true today. If the price of groceries doubled next year, some of us would be fine. Some might drink less or cancel a vacation. But few of us would starve. But others who might live closer to the edge of their financial margin would be devastated. Homes would be lost. Jobs would be impossible because of lack of housing or transportation. There would be some who would literally starve to death.

This is the difficult truth of economic hard times. It always hits the most vulnerable the worst. When the water rises, the people who barely have their heads above water are the ones who drown. Others just get their pants wet.

So the news of this kind of famine comes to the new community at Antioch. The world around them had recognized them as acting like Christ. How would they respond to a crisis like this? When things get hard, you really find out what is true about people. What will be true of the Antioch Christians?

Acts 11:29-30:

So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

This is incredible. What a great description of a community coming together to meet the needs of others. They “determined”, “every one”, “to send relief.”

Think about what they are doing. They are a new church plant from the mother ship in Jerusalem. This famine is affecting everyone in the region. You would think that if one church was going to help another, that the Jerusalem church would send reinforcement aid to the new church in Antioch.

But it's the other way around. The Antioch church responds to the needs of the poor in Jerusalem and they send them relief. It's the opposite of what you'd expect. It's like the baby taking care of the mother.

But it makes sense when we understand what the Gospel does to a group of people. The Gospel is not like a secret recipe for cinnamon rolls. It is not a closely guarded secret that is meant to be implemented in every last detail, replicating exactly what it looks like everywhere it goes.

The church at large is not a centralized command and control structure. It isn't a franchise where all the little church plants have to do things just the way the mother ship operates and they are constantly under the authority of the “head church” that started them. The church is not like a franchise.

It's more like an orchard. Each tree spreads its seed and more trees sprout up. But each tree is its own tree. It is independent and fruitful on its own. It may have come from the fruit of another tree, but as soon as it is mature, it is just like that first tree. Nothing inferior or subservient about it.

The Gospel had come to Antioch from Jerusalem. But now it was returning back to Jerusalem in a new form. It wasn't the message returning. It was in the form of resources meant to relieve the suffering of those who would be hit hardest by the famine. The Gospel has become a boomerang.

The same is true for us. The Gospel comes to us. It changes us. And it is sent out again. How does that work in your life? The Gospel doesn't stop with you. How do you send what you have received?

It's actually very interesting how the history of the church played out in this region of the world. In a few centuries, Antioch would become the most important center of the church in the whole region. By the 4th century, the Patriarch of Antioch—that's the network of churches that it managed—was the largest in the Christian world. Today, there are five different branches of the Orthodox church that each have their headquarters in Antioch.

In fact, it's interesting to note that one of the main differences between the Orthodox Church in the East and the Roman Catholic church in the West is how each saw the relationships between churches. As it developed, the Catholic church gravitated more and more to a centralized command and control structure. Rome would become the headquarters and every church existed in a hierarchy under Rome.

But the Eastern Orthodox church developed with the idea that each church could be independent and exist in a peer relationship with other churches. In fact, it's time for a little vocabulary lesson. Cyprus, one of the churches that help to found the church in Antioch, was the first church to become what theologians describe as “autocephalous.”

This means that they were in charge of themselves. They weren't subject to the bishop to do whatever they were told. They could make their own decisions.

I think this is the one reason it hard for us to allow the Gospel to be sent out from us. We think we need to ask permission. We think it needs to look a certain way. We think we need approval from someone else.

But you don't. We are all “autocephalous.” We are all under the head of Christ. You don't need approval. Your ministry doesn't need to look like anyone else's. You have the Spirit of Christ. If you have received the Gospel, you have been changed. It's up to you to see the Gospel sent out into your world, making you a little Christ wherever you go.

When a crisis strikes all around you, what do you do? Are you focused on yourself? Or do you look for vulnerable people around you and see what you can do to help? Are you worried for yourself? Or is your

mindset to be a little Christ to someone else? The Gospel has come to you. How will it go out? How will you send what you have received?

Conclusion

Let's wrap up by coming back to my imaginary cinnamon roll shop. After thinking about this story in Acts, maybe we have some different ideas about how to respond to the San Jose store that wants to alter the recipe.

Perhaps the employees have figured out something that I didn't originally see. Maybe they know something about their particular community that I can't understand because I don't live there. Or maybe they have even discovered a universally better recipe. Maybe I need to get over my pride to listen to them. Maybe my recipe should change after all.

Our story this morning has shown us a fascinating journey of the Gospel. It started in Jerusalem. The message goes out into all of the land. Something special happens in the city of Antioch. The community there develops a powerful and unique faith. And then the Gospel returns to Jerusalem, not in the form of a message, but in the form of material aid. Antioch ends up taking care of Jerusalem.

This is what the Gospel does. It creates equals—partners in mission. We receive the Gospel. And we are sent.

But the reverse is also true. Antioch has been transformed from recipient to sender. But Jerusalem has gone from sender to recipient. As we conclude, let's imagine ourselves in the place of Jerusalem. Imagine what it must have felt like for the largely Jewish church in Jerusalem to receive aid from the brand new largely Gentile church in Antioch that had been shepherded for a year by Barnabas, who wasn't an apostle, and Saul, who had only demonstrated himself to be a failure.

There is a humility there that is incredible. And beautiful.

We need to be sent. But perhaps we need to receive, also. The sender becomes the receiver. The receiver becomes the sender. We do some sending, but we also need to do some receiving. What do we need to receive? What do we have to send? This is how the Spirit leads us.

We are senders. We are receivers. We are partners in the Gospel with all the people and churches around us who follow Jesus. May we live the mission of the church. And may our community see Christ in us.

Endnotes

Gapp, Kenneth Sperber.. "The Universal Famine Under Claudius." *The Harvard Theological Review*. 1935. p.261.