

11 April 2010

“Punching Above Our Weight”

Reading: Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3.

What an *odd caption* for a sermon! Is it advisable to use a pugilistic idiom as a sermon title? Boxing is such a brutal sport! Aren't we supposed to be peaceful around here? Well, I suppose if I needed to justify the metaphor, I could quote Paul, who said that he did not fight like a boxer beating the air (1 Cor 9:26). If he were living and writing in Canada today, he would no doubt refer to the sedate sport of hockey. And, being a very cultured man, I think he might even refer to cricket.

To “punch above your weight” means, figuratively, to perform at a level far above what could realistically be expected of you. If an institution punches above its weight, it succeeds in an activity which needs more power and resources than it seems to have. Or, to put it differently, it exerts an influence out of all proportion to its size.

That is a dream we have for our church. It is an expectation that, when all is said and done, we will have made a genuine difference to the community and contributed meaningfully to the advance of the kingdom of God. Or, to revert to the metaphor, we will have “punched above our weight.”

But how *does* a church punch above its weight? How do we exert an influence that is out of all proportion to our size and natural ability? Can we be a church that makes a substantial difference to the way the community here in White Rock and South Surrey functions? Can we be instrumental in bringing hoards of people out of the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son? Can we make a vital contribution to the witness of the wider church on the Peninsula? And can we play a significant role in the *worldwide* church of Jesus Christ!

The answer to all these questions is a resounding “Yes.” And I am not living in “la-la-land.” In fact, I think we should settle for nothing less. We can and we should “punch well above our weight.”

Our cue

I am suggesting this morning that we take our cue from what is arguably *the* most influential church of all time. Yes, I am full of appreciation for the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, which has almost a million members. And we can be grateful for the ministries of the Willow Creek Church, near Chicago and the Saddleback Church in Lake Forest,

California. It's not a competition and it would be foolish to play these great churches off against one another. But, when Christian history is viewed as a whole, I still think the Church at Antioch enjoys pride of place!

“Big”

Everything we read about the church at Antioch portrays it as a “big” church. Yes, it would have been relatively large, but nowhere near as large as today's megachurches. But it was big in the best sense of the word. It was characterized by a largeness of spirit. It was expansive in its mentality. And, whatever its numerical strength, it “punched well above its weight!” I am going to highlight five key features that help us to see why this church exerted such a profound influence.

I. FIRST, THE FOUNDERS OF THE CHURCH REFUSED TO BE BOXED-IN BY MAN-MADE STRICTURES.

A. The church is founded

Listen to this short but relevant account of how the church came into existence (Acts 11:19-21).

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.

B. Segregation

Let's run through the story as Luke tells it. He backtracks a little. When Stephen was stoned, Jewish Christians were forced to flee to the neighbouring countries. Wherever they went, they spread the good news about Jesus. But society, in those days, was strongly segregated and Jews would not dream of speaking religion to non-Jews. God had to use shock tactics to get Peter to speak to Gentiles. In the normal course of events, it was the last thing he would have thought of doing.

C. The “Jews only” evangelists were doing the “correct” thing.

So when we read that those who were scattered by persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message *only* to Jews, we should *not* be in the least bit surprised. This was the

conventional thing to do. It was a perfectly regular course of action. It is what we might have expected. They could not be silent about Jesus, but it never even crossed their minds to share the good news with anybody but Jews.

D. Breaching convention

“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.”

The term “Greek” refers to Gentiles whose language and culture was Greek.

What’s more, Luke tells us that the Lord’s hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. It is not unlikely that Luke himself was one of these. There is a tradition, traced back to the end of the second century, that he was a native of Antioch. In addition, one of the old (Western) manuscripts introduced verse 28 with the words, “When *we* had gathered together . . .” Luke may even have experienced these events first-hand.

E. What possessed them?

What on earth possessed these maverick Jewish Christians to do such a thing?

1. They’d heard something?

Well, the answer is obvious. They checked their emails that morning and there was a message about Peter going into the home of Cornelius. So they logged on to Cornelius’ website and discovered that he was now a Christian believer. Of course not! I mention emails and websites simply to underline the fact that *it is most unlikely that they knew anything about Peter’s ministry to Gentiles*. In fact, Luke may not be following a strict chronological order here. For all we know, Peter’s visit to Cornelius may not yet have taken place. If it had, apparently these dispersed Jewish Christians were none the wiser. This barrier-crossing evangelism took place independently of the events that unfolded in Caesarea.

2. They were acting off their own bat?

Were they simply acting off their own bat? Actually, they were doing nothing of the sort. I think we can say that they were being led by the Spirit. It was the same Spirit who directed Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch and who filled all those gathered in Cornelius’ home at Caesarea. *“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”* So, clearly, they were doing what the Spirit wanted them to do.

That is how the church at Antioch was born. The founders transcended national barriers at a time when it was not the done thing. They hadn’t yet

connected all the dots, but they understood that the gospel was for all and they “broke out” of restrictive conventions.

Come to think of it, this should not surprise us. Several weeks ago we noted that the *God of Glory* cannot be confined and restricted. He is gracious and generous. He makes himself known when and where he pleases. The Holy Spirit is God. Spirit-filled Christians are “big” people. It cannot be otherwise!

II. FROM THE OUTSET THE CHURCH WAS INCLUSIVE AND COSMOPOLITAN.

A. Apartheid?

A week ago, I watched an interview on the TV program, “It’s a New Day.” The man being interviewed had a South African accent, so I kept listening to find out who it was. Turns out it was Brenton Brown, a musician, who lives nowadays in Malibu, California. I checked his website and discovered that he had studied law and politics at the University of Cape Town and then proceeded to Oxford. I picked up an interesting comment on his blog. Apparently he inquired about church planting when he was at Oxford and was told, “Find a bunch of people who are just like you and get them together.” He commented, humorously, that in South Africa that was called apartheid.

B. Homogeneity?

I know that there are those in the church growth movement who argue that churches ought to be socially and culturally homogeneous. But I beg to differ. The healthier a church is, the more church-like it is, and the less club-like it is. It breaks down barriers; it does not erect them. It not only appeals to people who are racially, socially and culturally different; it *welcomes* such diversity. Such was the church at Antioch from Day One! In fact, it appears from chapter 13 that the leaders of the church comprised both Jews and Gentiles including an African or two. Their very names speak of demographic diversity.

C. Inclusiveness at WRBC

This has to be part of our ethos here at WRBC. But if we are going to be genuinely inclusive, we cannot say to people, “You are welcome here, so long as you conform to our cultural and social norms.” We cannot have young couples if we do not make space for their children. We cannot have new Canadians in our church unless we see them as full participants we march together into the future.

THE LEADERS THEMSELVES WERE PEOPLE WHO SAW THE BIG PICTURE AND PUT THE INTERESTS OF THE KINGDOM ABOVE THEIR OWN.

A. Consternation?

²² News of this reached the ears of 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.

1. The ideal man

When news reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, they seemed a little concerned. It was gratifying news, but it was also disconcerting. It can hardly have been otherwise, given what we know about the general mindset of Jewish Christians at the time. Fortunately they had the ideal man to investigate these “goings on.” If the Church at Antioch is my favourite New Testament church, Barnabas is my favourite New Testament person. He was originally from Cyprus and he was a Levite. They obviously had great confidence in him. He was highly respected in the church and generosity in word and deed. They knew he was an open-minded man with a big heart. William Barclay called him “the man with the biggest heart in the church.” But they also knew that he was thoroughly Jewish and sound in his outlook. If anyone would be able to discern whether this initiative was of God, Barnabas would. If some of these Jewish-Christian evangelists had let their enthusiasm run away with them, he would get them back on track.

I wonder if there was some apprehension as the leaders met with this heavyweight from the mother church in Jerusalem. If there was, it would have been eclipsed by the excitement at what had taken place. Barnabas was overjoyed when he saw what God was doing. He stayed on and probably fulfilled the role of pastor-teacher. He was full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. He was having a great ministry. It was one of those situations that pastors dream about.

2. Saul

But he believed that this church needed the ministry of Saul, so he went looking for him in Tarsus, brought him to Antioch and shared the ministry with him. It was he who had first introduced Saul to the apostles when the Jerusalem church was understandably suspicious of its most notorious persecutor (Acts 9:26-30). They probably believed that Saul was attempting to infiltrate the church so as to wreak even more havoc. But Barnabas knew better and realized that God had given Saul a unique ministry. Now he believes that Saul is just the man for Antioch. He could have argued that his own ministry was more than sufficient. But Barnabas sensed the potential of this church. And he knew that Saul's ministry could provide something that his could not. He could have been protective of his own turf. But Barnabas realized it wasn't about him. He was a kingdom man.

3. Kingdom agenda

President Harry Truman once said: "You can accomplish anything in life, provided that you do not mind who gets the credit." Let me not beat around the bush here. I have been in God's work long enough to know what a crippling effect egos can have. If we are serious in saying this is God's work, then what counts is that he is glorified. This is not a place for us to win applause or to engage in power play. We cannot have side agendas.

And, let's be honest with ourselves. We all have egos! We are all capable of losing the plot, taking an illegitimate sense of ownership and protecting our turf. When Paul stood up and taught and the people marvelled at his insight, Barnabas was over the moon. It doesn't matter who's doing it, so long as God gets the glory. Barnabas modelled generosity of spirit. And generous leader beget a generous church.

III. SO, IT SHOULDN'T SURPRISE US THAT THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH WAS CHARACTERISED BY GENEROSITY.

A. Agabus

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 believers living in Judea. ³⁰ This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

B. Spontaneous action

Of course, *Antioch* would be affected by the famine. It was the third most important city in the empire after Rome and Alexandria. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. This was a time to batten down the hatches. It was a time for financial conservatism. But instead, the members decided, each according to their means, to provide help for their fellow-believers living in Judea who were likely to be harder hit than they were. They sent their gifts to the elders in Jerusalem by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

C. Fortunate

We at WRBC are relatively fortunate. Like other churches, we have certainly felt the pinch of the recession. For many on fixed incomes, and for those who depend on investments and interest rates, there has been some cause for concern. We certainly need to be responsible. But this is a time to think of others. For this reason we welcome our Keats Camps involvement. Let's continue to be generous! Indeed, let's be more generous than ever before. The Church at Antioch was able to exert an influence out of all proportion to its size, because generosity was embedded in its DNA.

IV. BUT THE CHURCH'S GREATEST ACT OF GIVING OCCURRED WHEN THEY FASTED AND PRAYED, PLACED THEIR HANDS ON BARNABAS AND SAUL AND SENT THEM OFF AS MISSIONARIES.

A. The Holy Spirit speaks

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers . . . ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

B. Willingness

I don't want to argue from silence, but there is not the slightest hint of objection or hesitation. There were no finer teachers anywhere than Barnabas and Saul. Imagine having this preaching duo on your pastoral team. And now the church was about to lose not one but both of them. To our knowledge, nobody said, "But we don't want to lose them! How can the Lord do this to us?" They had a world vision and a kingdom mentality.

Luke's observation that "the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch" is more than an historical note. Here the onlookers nicknamed (perhaps derisively)

the disciples and in so doing they unwittingly paid them a huge compliment. These are *Christianoj*, little Christs or followers of Jesus.

C. Equipping church

Part of a growing vision for our church is that we should seek to equip and train people for ministry in the wider body of Christ. At our AGM, the church took a small but significant step in this direction. We established a scholarship that will be used for this purpose. We envisage a stream of men and women spending time here and being equipped at one or other of the training institutions in our area. In some cases, we may be fortunate enough to derive the ongoing benefit of their ministries. In other cases, we will have been afforded the opportunity to make a contribution to their development and to the kingdom of God. It could be that one day there will be pastors in Denver and Toronto and Bangalore and Belfast who have been nurtured here. Right now there are people in ministry in Indonesia and Africa and Mexico who have been and are still a part of the family here.

D. Past, present and future

You and I are privileged to belong to a church that has, in significant ways, exhibited some of the characteristics of the church at Antioch. As I tried to acquaint myself with the history of the church, I asked, “Was there a common thread that ran through the life of the church during the fifty odd years of its existence?” Well, what prompted the charter members to establish a church here when there were relatively few people in the village? They saw something more than a safe haven, a nice little outpost.

What prompted our predecessors to move the church’s location, to acquire property and extend its facilities, building far more than was needed at the time? There were people who refused to be imprisoned in the present. They were dreaming about future possibilities. They wanted to exert an influence out of all proportion to their size. They realized that the church is the church for others or it is not a church at all. By its very nature, it constantly looks beyond itself.

Conclusion

There is a choice the church must keep on making. We shall always feel the restrictive pull towards parochialism and introversion. That shouldn’t surprise us. We easily settle down and become comfortable. In the process we become limited in our outlook and small in our expectations. Let’s choose to be a “big” church, an outward-looking church!

It's a choice we all need to regularly reaffirm in our own lives. We exist as God's children and his instruments to bring life and hope to others. Our prayer is, "Thy kingdom come." If our lives are aligned with that prayer, we must be "big" people!

We can be so grateful for the legacy of the past but we can anticipate even greater things in the future. We who are here today are given the privilege of shaping the church of tomorrow. The sky is the limit. Let's not underestimate what God can do. And let's behave in the present as those who have been afforded the privilege of helping to make the future a reality. Our best days are still ahead of us. We can be—we must be—a church that punches above our weight!