

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Church of the Spirit"  
SERMON TEXT: Acts 11:19 – 12:5  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: July 11, 2021, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Next Sunday, while I'm on vacation, the United Methodist Men will be in charge of the worship service, and David Barron will be preaching. Thank you, David! When I get back, I'm going to start a new sermon series on stories about water in the Gospel of John. It seems like some "living water" might help our thirstiness in this summer of drought and heat.

So, this is the final sermon in this series on the Acts of the Spirit. I hope you've been enjoying this two-month-long focus on the Book of Acts and the Holy Spirit. Even though we haven't yet reached the halfway point in this New Testament book, I think we've gone far enough for you to see why I've called this series "Acts of the Spirit." In those earliest days, months, and years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven, the Holy Spirit was constantly on the move, empowering the disciples to preach and teach the good news, and encouraging their listeners to repent, be baptized, and to devote themselves to learning more about the Christian faith. In the course of all that, the Spirit gave birth to the church and added thousands and thousands of believers in more and more places. The church was expanded, transplanted, reproduced, and opened up. The church spread from Jerusalem into cities and countries all around the Mediterranean Sea. Before long, the Spirit had planted congregations of the church in what we think of today as the Middle East, northern Africa, Turkey, Greece, and Italy.

Today's scripture reading focuses on the church that the Holy Spirit developed in the city of Antioch, which is in present-day Syria. In those days, Antioch had a population of about a half million people, and it was the third-largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. Antioch was located about 300 miles north of Jerusalem, which was approximately a 15-day walking distance. I invite

you to consider with me the characteristics of this church in Antioch. Let's see how these characteristics might inform our Ogden First United Methodist Church about how we too can be a church of the Spirit.

### **1—CHARACTERIZED BY LEADERSHIP OF THE SPIRIT**

As we read these verses from Acts 11, we see first of all that the church in Antioch was characterized by leadership of the Spirit. As a church of the Spirit, that congregation had leaders who were filled with and guided by the Spirit of God and Christ. This is spelled out explicitly in verses 22-24, where we read that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, and that Barnabas "was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." We also see this Spirit-guided leadership in a prophet named Agabus, who also came from Jerusalem. While he was there in Antioch, Agabus predicted a famine that was coming. We are told in Acts 11:28 that it was "by the Spirit" that Agabus was able to make this prediction.

While not stated as explicitly, we can see that other leaders in Antioch were filled and guided by the Spirit also. Verses 20 and 21 tell that "the hand of the Lord was with" "some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who" had been "proclaiming the Lord Jesus." The "great number" of Antiochans who "became believers and turned to the Lord Jesus" were evidence that the Holy Spirit was working through those leaders.

After Barnabas arrived in Antioch and saw how the church was growing, he quickly determined that he needed additional assistance. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to fetch Saul. The many stories about Saul, who became known as Paul, are mostly yet to come in later chapters of Acts. But Acts 9:17 tells that, after Saul was blinded on the Road to Damascus, a man named Ananias laid his hands on Saul so he could regain his sight and so that he could "be filled with the Holy Spirit." From all these examples, it's clear that the church of the Spirit was thoroughly characterized by leadership of the Spirit.

### **2—CHARACTERIZED BY DISCIPLESHIP OF THE SPIRIT**

With the church in Antioch as our example, we can see that a church of the Spirit is also characterized by discipleship of the Spirit. None of those leaders we just named came to their leadership

positions and abilities without first learning the faith. The persecutions in Jerusalem had caused many to scatter, but that scattering occurred after they had first learned at the feet of the apostles. That's how it was possible for men from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus to become Christian preachers. That's how it was possible for persons from the city of Cyrene on the North African coast of Libya to become proclaimers of the Lord Jesus. These people had likely been in Jerusalem at the time of the Pentecost festival. They had probably been among those earliest Christian converts who then met together to absorb the apostles' teaching. Likewise, Barnabas and Paul had spent time learning before they became leaders and teachers.

At the Antioch church, these leaders proclaimed and taught, and the people of Antioch listened and learned. Verse 26 indicates "that, for an entire year," Barnabas and Paul "met with the church and taught a great many people." The emphasis here isn't only on the leaders who taught, but also on the great many people who payed attention to what they said and put into practice what they heard.

In verse 28, we read a very important piece of information about the early church. "It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'" That means they focused their attention on Jesus so fully, and with such Spirit, that the people around them could clearly see how dedicated those disciples were to following in the way of Christ. Obviously, the word "disciples" in that sentence isn't referring to the 12 original men who walked around with Jesus. The word "disciple" simply means "learner." That didn't have to be someone who was called into full-time professional ministry and missionary travels. Most of the time it wasn't. Most of the time a disciple was a dad or a mom or a youth who was making a living in their community but wanted to know more about Jesus and his good news of forgiveness and the kingdom of God. A disciple then and now is any person who wants to learn about and practice faith in Jesus the Christ.

A church of the Spirit is not characterized only by its leadership. A church of the Spirit is characterized also by all the members and participants who are serious in their desire to learn and grow in faith. A church of the Spirit is made up of people who practice a discipleship of the Spirit.

### **3—CHARACTERIZED BY CONNECTIONS OF THE SPIRIT**

This story from Antioch also informs us that a church of the Spirit is characterized by connections of the Spirit. Not only were there obvious connections between the mother church in Jerusalem and this fledgling church in Antioch, there were also Spirit-filled connections with other churches all around the Mediterranean region. I had to get out my Bible maps this week to figure out where Cyprus, Cyrene, and Tarsus were in relation to Jerusalem and Antioch. This one little story encompasses people from a vast region. Antioch was at an important crossroads for trade going north and south and east and west. Antioch was to the Middle East kind of like Ogden is to our region. In October, our Mountain Sky Annual Conference is going to be held here in Ogden because people can get to us via Interstate 15 or Interstate 70 or Interstate 80. All the big roads lead here.

But connections of the Spirit aren't just about the ease of travel. Connections of the Spirit are intentional acts of reciprocity and caring. In Acts 11:28, the prophet Agabus told about the severe famine that was going to affect Christians in a wide area. "Over all the world" was likely an exaggeration, but it may have seemed that way to those who were affected. And this message of suffering didn't fall on deaf ears. Verse 29 tells us that the disciples in Antioch determined that they would send relief to the believers living in Judea. As a church of the Spirit, they decided that it was important to participate in this mission and ministry of compassion. So, each of them gave, according to their ability, and Barnabas and Saul delivered those gifts of love and spiritual connection.

I extended our scripture reading to include Acts 12:1-5 because that section also shows how a church of the Spirit is connected. When King Herod had the Apostle James killed with a sword and then imprisoned the Apostle Peter, the entire church felt that pain all around the Mediterranean. Verse five tells us that their connection in the Spirit caused them to "pray fervently to God" for Peter's safety and release.

A church of the Spirit recognizes and nurtures its connection. It cares for the other members near and far and does all it can to encourage and provide assistance. The Jerusalem church had great strength

because its elder leaders had been closest to Jesus. The Holy Spirit flowed out from those great men and women of faith, as they used their Spirit-given wisdom and authority to initiate and encourage ministries around the mission field. But the connection wasn't a one-way street. The Holy Spirit also flowed from the Christian disciples in faraway places like Antioch. From those new and small churches all around the mission field, the Spirit was sent back to Judea in tender love and strong support.

Even today the Christian mission involves an exchange of people and is carried out by mutual interest, communications, and shared financial contributions. A church of the Spirit is not one congregation all by itself. A church of the Spirit has many connections of the Spirit.

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this two-month long series on the Acts of the Spirit, I've had an underlying question. Maybe you've been wondering this also. Yes, OK, we get it that the Spirit was really active and powerful in the early church. But is it possible for the Holy Spirit to be that powerful in the church today?

Fortunately, today we have abundant resources to nurture our Spirit-filled connections as leaders, disciples, and as the church. While the past year of COVID limited us in so many ways, it also opened up for us all kinds of new possibilities with online worship, classes, and webinars—as we're now able to connect both within our local church building and across cities, states, and nations. The power of the Holy Spirit is very much available today, just as it was when the disciples in Antioch were first called Christians. Let's take advantage of these many ways the Spirit can guide and grow us in leadership, discipleship, and connection. Let's choose to be a church of the Spirit.