

Urban Evangelism and Church Planting in Antioch

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning. I am Catherine Lopez and I'm part of the Central Berkeley Community Group.

Today's scripture reading is from the Book of Acts, chapter 11, verses 19 to 30, and chapter 13, verses 1 to 3, as printed in the liturgy.

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 the Jews.

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.

[1 : 14] The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them. He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Holy Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. This happened during the reign of Claudius.

[2 : 18] The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Now in the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers. Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manan, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

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. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you, Catherine, for that reading.

Good morning, everyone. My name is Andrew, and yeah, if you've ever wondered whether you could preach a sermon so bad, they don't do your ordination after all. We're about to see. Will you join me in prayer?

[3 : 38] Father, wow, we thank you that you're a God who speaks to us. You're a God who speaks words of truth and love. And you're a God who speaks words of power.

The same kind of words of power that created the heavens and the earth. You speak them into our lives for our redemption. And we just ask to bear witness to that power. The power of the gospel in the city today.

We pray these things in the strong name of Jesus. Amen. Well, thanks, everyone, for being here. You know, today's a special day for me. I think I was in 10th grade when I first sensed my calling to pastoral ministry.

That's when I first began to start saying to people, I think I want to be a pastor. And so it's been 18 years. It's over 18 years, more than half my life that I've waited for this day to come, for this moment.

And I just consider it such an honor and really a dream come true to be called to pastor here, to minister here at Christ Church East Bay. You know, ironically, over the past two weeks, and I don't say this to puff myself up, but in the past two weeks, I was actually invited by two other churches in our presbytery to apply for the senior pastor position.

[4 : 54] And I share that with you not to puff myself up, please, but to let you know that it didn't even cross my mind that I should be anywhere else than here at Christ Church East Bay.

And Chelsea felt the same way. Chelsea felt the same way. And, yeah, just, we love the East Bay. We love this place where my parents grew up, you know, Oakland High grads, Cal grads, and even more than my East Bay history.

What excites me about being here at Christ Church is this incredibly diverse urban environment. You know, in high school, I spent a week in West Oakland, and I got my first taste of urban ministry outside of the homogenous Chinese-American middle-class suburban context that I was raised in.

And I distinctly remember one night, I was laying in my sleeping bag with Toby Ewan, a youth pastor at my home church, and we were chatting, and we were just talking about all the things that we'd love to see God do in the city.

And we were hoping and dreaming together, hoping to see in my lifetime the power of the gospel revealed in ways that we'd never yet seen in the city.

[6 : 08] And so here I am today, you know, just blocks away from Cal, and we see undergrads and PhD students and faculty members here exploring the essentials of the faith, and some of them even embracing Christ from all over the world.

People coming through our doors from all over the world. Some homeless. Others on the cutting edge of CRISPR technology, right? Some of them never stepped foot in a church their entire lives and hearing the gospel here for their first time, and boom, baptized members.

And I love also seeing people exiting these doors, exiting these doors equipped with the gospel, sent back out to their places of influence, whether it be in San Francisco or the Silicon Valley, the university, across the globe, to love and serve the world.

I love being here, Christ Church. I love being here because I love seeing all that the gospel can do and all that the gospel has been doing in this city. And so I think it's quite fitting that we are here in Acts chapter 11 today, the account of the early church in Antioch, the first majorly urban church in the history of the church, a story of what the gospel can do in a major city, even places like here in the East Bay.

And the main point this morning is this. In the city, the gospel exceeds expectations and builds belonging. In the city, the gospel exceeds expectations and builds belonging.

[7 : 31] So first let's talk about the city. After all, Christ Church, what? We exist to lead people into deeper relationship with Christ and his church through community for the city, right? You know, I've had a fascination for a long time with the city.

I don't know, maybe it's because I grew up watching too much of Friends. And did anyone see the reunion? Pretty good, I thought, pretty good. But yeah, I've always been drawn to the city. My parents are here today.

You can ask them about one of these family trips, family vacations we once went on. It was to Yellowstone National Park. And I spent that whole trip, though, complaining and whining about how I was just not having fun, nothing was interesting, this was a waste of my time, and it was so much worse than all of our other vacations to San Diego and Disneyland and Vancouver.

And my dad was fed up with me. He's right here. And he tried to play the God card on me. And he said, Andrew, we're in Yellowstone National Park.

Can't you at least appreciate God's creation? And I remember my response to him. And of course, my response was very, you know, it was the response of a selfish, spoiled brat.

[8 : 38] But I will say, I am surprised by the theological sophistication at which I responded to my dad. I said, yeah, dad, sure. Creation is beautiful.

This is God's creation. Great. But you can see God's creation in the city. You can see that God created human beings to cultivate these wonderful cities. God's creation is just as much there in the city as it is here in Yellowstone National Park.

And yes, I was wrong. I was wrong. I was complaining. But I was also on to something. I was on to something. See, the city is a major theme in the narrative arc of the Christian scriptures.

It's woven into the gospel story itself. This story that, yes, begins in an uncultivated garden, but was always intended to what? End in a city. From Eden to New Jerusalem, right?

And that's why our heart's desires, just like Abraham's heart's desire, our heart's desires are bound up in a city whose maker and builder is God. And though every city throughout history, starting from the great cities that Cain and his descendants built to Babel and Egypt and Rome and even the San Francisco Bay Area, even the great city Jerusalem under the great King David, though every city that has ever been built has failed to secure the shalom that our hearts long for, each and every city has pointed to its archetypal ideal in the city of God.

[10 : 00] The new Jerusalem coming at the return of King Jesus where every tear will be wiped away and famines and droughts erased and the streets are paved with gold and we have access once again to the tree of life.

Christ, God loves the city. God loves the city. In fact, the very idea of the city is not the figment of human sociological phenomena and inventions.

The idea of the city comes from the heart and mind of God himself. Cities are the result of the cultivation of creation by people who are made in the image of God.

Remember, God told Adam and Eve to work the garden and to cultivate it and to be fruitful and to multiply and fill the earth, not just to plant lemons and subsist on citrus, but to make lemon bars, right?

Not just to drink raw milk from the udders of cows, but to make cheese, nachos even, right? Can you imagine a world without nachos? You don't get nachos without the city.

[10 : 58] You don't get nachos without the city. Now, of course, the fall has infected each and every city, each and every city, making cities incubators for the depths of human brokenness and poverty and evil, but the city also functions as an incubator for the heights of human achievement and innovation and virtue.

The city is the place where culture, for better or for worse, is shaped, the center from which culture is spread, the place where the riches of creation are mined by people made in the image of God. It's where music and art and technology and commerce and knowledge are formed and developed and displayed and dispersed.

And as such, the city is both where the brightest and the best, the poorest and the powerless, flee. We both come, the poor and the powerless, to find refuge, the best and the brightest, to pursue their ambitions.

The city is a place of incredible diversity, hosting a wide spectrum of human experiences and perspectives and values and beliefs, all intermingling and testing and sharpening one another in a pluralistic sea of ideas with just an incredible dynamic energy that you just can't find anywhere outside of a city.

And this is why I love Christchurch. This is why I love Christchurch because Christchurch exists for the city. We want to engage this vibrant, diverse, urban context with the good news of Jesus because we believe that if and when the gospel takes hold in the city, incredible things happen in the world, both for the good of our cities and for the glory of our God.

[12 : 29] And this is exactly what happened here in Acts chapter 11 in the great city Antioch. Yes, the gospel was on the move up to this point in the book of Acts. The Spirit's power had come to unexpected individuals and they were being brought to the church, into the people of God.

But here at Antioch, this is where things really, really start to scale up amongst the non-Jewish populations. In this major city, we find the place where God powerfully launches his multi-ethnic, multi-national, multi-racial, multi-class mission church.

See, Antioch was the capital of Syria. It was the third largest city in the entire Roman Empire, only trailing Alexandria and Rome. It was a wealthy city. It had aqueducts and it had basilicas and baths and racing stadiums and it was decorated with colonnades and trees and fountains.

It was rich in cultural and religious diversity. It was a cosmopolitan city in every sense of the word. It was inhabited by Jewish people and Greeks and Romans and Persians, even people from as far as India and China, according to archaeologists.

And as you can imagine, it had tremendous influence over the Roman world. In fact, it was notorious for its influence. For like many pluralistic cities, pursuing unity through unprincipled and inconsistent tolerance, Antioch was known for its moral laxity.

[13 : 47] That city sound kind of familiar. And many bemoaned the way the filth of Antioch would spill into the rest of the Roman Empire. And yet, God in his divine wisdom, he says here, it's here, in this filthy and influential city, this is where I'm gonna start my movement.

This is where things are gonna pick up steam. This is where I'm choosing to display the power of the gospel. And as we will see, in this city, Antioch, the gospel exceeds expectations and it builds belonging.

So again, in the city, the gospel exceeds expectations. I want us to notice the unplanned unplanned and volatile circumstances under which the gospel took root in the city of Antioch.

Right, after the weakening of the Jerusalem-based church scattered by persecution at the murder of Stephen, you would imagine that the gospel movement was something like a small flickering flame, something about to be snuffed out.

I mean, think about it. The early church wasn't even in control of its own missionary spread. It just got scattered to the wind in a forced migration by persecution. So how could a persecuted church that got disbanded in its home base, how could it be the powerful witness that Christ said it would be from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and even to the ends of the earth?

[15 : 05] Well, you know, in my field of study, there's this new book that just came out. I can't wait to read it. It's by a scholar from Sierra Leone. His name is Jehu Hansels. He did his PhD at Edinburgh just like me. And he's a professor of world Christianity at Emory University.

And his new book is titled Migration and the Making of Global Christianity. And his basic argument is that the global spread of Christianity has not primarily been a result of top-down institutional and political forces of colonization or the strategic sending out of super-trained missionaries, but that the global spread of Christianity is actually owed far more than we think to the simple, historical, circumstantial, we might even say the accidental migration of ordinary Christians throughout the centuries.

And I share this not to discourage the intentional, strategic, missionary, gospel-spreading efforts in the world, but to impress upon us what Hansel says in his book, every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.

And that God often, as we will see in Acts chapter 11, he simply works through the accidental circumstances of history to accomplish his purposes. Look with me at verse 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. 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.

[16 : 32] The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Notice these people are scattered. There isn't a well-defined missionary strategy.

They're just migrating for the sake of survival. And then some unnamed people from Cyprus and Cyrene happen to go to Antioch and try to share the good news of Jesus with people who aren't Jews.

They share it with Greeks. And boom, a movement begins out of this forced migration of some unnamed, unknown, faithful followers of Jesus.

See, while we often talk about, you know, the incredible missionary journeys of Paul in the book of Acts, Acts chapter 11 reminds us that Paul's missionary efforts, they were preceded and dependent upon this forced migration of ordinary, unnamed people who really had no strategic plans other than to flee for safety and still try to follow Jesus.

No one planned to get persecuted. No one planned to have to migrate out of Jerusalem. No one said, we're going to hit Phoenicia, then Cyprus, then Antioch, and then we're going to send so-and-so with his expertise in this or that to get the job done.

[17 : 40] No one planned for persecution and migration to be the means of establishing the first majorly urban church, right? This church that would serve as a hub and center for major gospel movements throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond.

But God knew. God knew, and the gospel advanced, far exceeding all expectations. And so the question for us today is, for Christchurch, especially coming out of this global disruption of a pandemic and seeing mass migrations ourselves in and out of the Bay Area, the question for us is, what kinds of things will we expect from God in this new, unforeseen, and unplanned season ahead of us?

And what might be the ways God is calling us to accept these unplanned things that are happening and to look for fruit in unexpected fields? You know, for some of us, it's the loss of certain familiar rhythms and relationships in our lives.

I'm specifically thinking about our Oakland folk who are now worshiping here instead of Park Boulevard, who don't have Quinn and Patrick and Bart anymore. And you see a bunch of people in this room, well, most of them today are from my family and friends, but you still see a bunch of people in this room who you don't know.

And I know that's painful, and I don't at all want to minimize any of these losses. And sure, even in the diaspora in the book of Acts, I'm sure the forced diaspora by persecution in Jerusalem was absolutely devastating and heartbreaking and a deep and painful wound that maybe never fully healed.

[19 : 07] And I want you to hear that it's good and healthy to grieve and to process that and to acknowledge that loss for sure, but can I just say, can we do this without losing hope? Can we do this without losing faith in God's future?

I know many of us here have ways that we had hoped our lives would go, ways that we hoped our life would go, but might it be, might it be that the unplanned futures ahead of us might actually be better than our plans because they're God's plans?

Is God not able, is God not even wanting to do that with and through our losses, to use our losses for his kingdom gains? You know, thinking to myself about so many of the factors that have led up to this ordination Sunday for me here at Christ Church, it's fascinating to reflect upon what God's orchestrated in my life and even the life of my family history, a history that none of my forebears had planned as they journeyed through their own forced migrations.

I'm a Chinese American. My grandparents were not born here. Most of them came illegally, fleeing incredible turmoil in China. You know, the communists take over their stories in my family of certain family members getting on the last boat out to Hong Kong.

And then my parents were born here in the States, bicultural children, navigating American culture, the children of immigrants, and somehow they were sent to church and Sunday school, even though their parents weren't Christians.

[20 : 32] And somehow, by God's grace, they learned the gospel, and they loved the gospel, and that's how they raised me. They raised me in the church to love the gospel as well, and in that context, that is where I sensed a call to pursue ministry.

And I pursued it hard. I studied across the country, across the Atlantic even, and I tried really, really hard to come back home because I had a plan. My dream was to come back home to my home church and serve this huge Chinese church that had so formed me.

That was always my hope and plan, but I wasn't the right fit. So I frantically, I reached out to a bunch of churches, and I reluctantly came to this church that none of my friends or family knew, Christ Church East Bay, right?

And the rest is history. The rest is history. And so although, while back in China, you know, Ruby and David Ong and Harvey and Kay Fong would never have expected their grandson to be a Christian minister in Berkeley, and although I myself never envisioned being here pastoring you, I'm the only Chinese-American teaching elder in our presbytery, here I am today.

because of this mass migration movement out of China and the disappointments of my own life plans. And isn't it just so beautiful how God works in the disruptions of our plans?

[21 : 54] Christ Church, this is good news for us. This is good news for us that our plans don't have to go as we planned, but that God's good plans always prevail, doing far more, immeasurably more, than we could ever imagine.

See, the beauty of the gospel is that God works in and through the accidents of history, and as such, what we believe to be the accidents of history are actually no accidents at all.

The Son of God, the Messiah, was crucified, but God wrote redemption out of even that story, because in the city, the gospel exceeds our expectations.

Now, not only did the gospel exceed expectations in the city by coming into existence as a result of persecution and migration, but also by expanding beyond the Jewish people. In the city, the gospel builds belonging as well.

As it says in verses 20 to 21, a great number of Greek people are turning to the Lord. These people who hadn't been raised to even expect a Messiah, these people who had always been excluded from their circumcised Jewish neighbors, people who had formerly worshipped the man-made, fickle, and cruel gods of Greek mythology, they were now Yahweh worshippers in Christ.

[23 : 04] So the Jerusalem church hears about this, and they send Barnabas. Barnabas is this Jewish native of Cyprus, so they send a bicultural representative of the church to see what's going on and to provide support, and I love what it says in verse 23.

When Barnabas arrived, when he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, what the gospel had done in the city of Antioch, it doesn't say he was mad, it doesn't say he was in disbelief, it doesn't say he was confused as many other Jewish people might have been, but it says he was glad.

He was glad and encouraged them to all remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Even if he couldn't explain what was going on, he was glad. And verse 24 says, even more came to faith.

And we have to appreciate how incredible of a sight this must have been for Barnabas. For so many reasons, imagine Barnabas. He's this faithful Jewish follower of the way of Jesus, but he had been living his whole life in this liminal place of being Jewish, but also a native of Cyprus.

The bicultural experience of familiarity with both cultures, but also never quite fitting perfectly in either. Even after joining the way of Jesus, the Jerusalem church in Jerusalem, imagine him trying to fit in there, right?

[24 : 15] But sometimes never really understanding Peter's jokes or James and John's cultural references, always feeling like he's playing cultural catch-up to this Jewish church in Jerusalem, having this lingering sense that there was something about him culturally that alienated him from God and God's people.

But then picture him arriving in Antioch and seeing Greeks recite the Shema and living in the way of Jesus and try to imagine with me the joy he must have felt.

It says that he saw the grace of God, and what he saw, I think, was the gospel building belonging. Oh man, my whole life, I've wondered if maybe I wasn't Jewish enough.

I've even felt a bit on the margins amongst the people of God, but look, these people aren't even half Jewish, and God's brought them into the family. This is bigger.

God is bigger than I ever thought. And just imagine the relief that this bicultural Jesus follower must have felt to see even full-on Greeks engrafted into the people of God.

[25 : 22] And so in his excitement, what does he do? He goes and he finds another, even more gifted, bicultural Jesus follower, Saul of Tarsus. And they team up and they do a whole year of intensive discipleship training, and when they are done, they have a multi-ethnic, multinational, multi-racial, multi-class urban church.

Chapter 13, verses one to three, gives us a glimpse of the representative diversity of this congregation. You've got two bicultural leaders, a real estate owner, Barnabas, and Saul the professor. Then you've got two Africans, Simon called Niger, who most commenters believe was black, and Lucius, probably a lighter-skinned African of Cyrene.

Then you've also got Manan of the noble class. This guy was born and bred with King Herod. He was raised with kings. So at Antioch, all kinds of people who otherwise and apart from the gospel would have no reason, no business being together, they now constitute the first majorly urban church in the third largest city in the Roman Empire.

And it wasn't just a unity and belonging in Antioch that was built by the gospel. But so tight was the unity and belonging they all had and they all felt in Christ that when an opportunity came for them to serve and support the Jewish church in Jerusalem, people they had never met, verse 29 says, each one decided what they were able to give and sent it.

Not to the organization they were affiliated with in Jerusalem, not to some board of their new religious institution, but verse 29 says they decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters, their new family in Christ who is living in Judea.

[26 : 58] And see, this is what the gospel does in the city. In the city, the gospel exceeds expectations and builds belonging. It creates a community of hope with a unique family identity and a radical generosity that can only be identified with allegiance to Jesus Christ.

allegiance to Christ and his unique way of living. This diverse community and family like nothing the world has ever seen. And that's why in verse 26, it says that so powerful was this movement of God in the city led by these two bicultural ministers of the gospel that the rest of the city, the rest of the city even noticed and gave this community in Antioch, they gave them a new name for it is first in Antioch that followers of Jesus are first called Christians.

That's where they got the name Christians. See, the people of Antioch in that time, they knew of the Herodians whose allegiance was to Herod. They knew of the Caesareans whose allegiance was to Caesar.

They knew of the Jewish people whose allegiance was to their own Jewish culture. But here at the church in Antioch was something altogether new. Sort of related to Judaism, but like no Jewish community they'd ever seen.

A Yahweh-worshipping, Jesus-exalting, community full of Greeks and Africans and bicultural inhabitants of Antioch from many different nations and classes of society, all united not by their culture, not by their political views or their socioeconomic status, but all united in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 29] See, in the city of Antioch, the gospel defied every category, every box that they could put people in, and so the observers of this church just had to make up a new identity for those who followed Jesus.

For what kind of community could grow and flourish so quickly with an origin story that comes out of persecution and forced migration? And what kind of community could be composed of so many disparate cultures and peoples and backgrounds, a community of love and unity rather than bitterness and tribalism?

How do you get to that? Only a community devoted to Jesus, who himself was persecuted, who himself was forced into migration, only a community devoted to the gospel of Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.

For the resurrection declares that nothing is too difficult for the hand of God. And the crucifixion simultaneously declares that no one belongs to the family of God apart from the blood of Christ and also that anyone can belong to the family of God by the blood of Christ, shed for the forgiveness of sins.

In Christchurch, as I always say, this is the gospel. This is the gospel. The gospel that exceeds all expectations and builds belonging. It's the hope of the world. It's the hope of the city.

[29 : 42] So Christchurch, I want to ask you, what if we in this city, what if we in this city, in the East Bay area, what if we believed in this gospel and lived like it?

Will you pray with me? Father, we believe, but would you help our unbelief? We believe that the gospel is the power of salvation unto all who believe, all who believe.

And it is purely by grace that you save people. And because of that fact, anyone can be saved. And we marvel at that wonderful truth. And we ask that you would inspire us to go out with that truth, to love and serve this world in the name of Jesus.

We pray these things in his name. Amen.