

Acts 13:1-12 "The Flourishing Church"

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Date: 30 September 2018

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[0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Good morning, Southwood. It's good to be with you. Great to be in the great state of Alabama. Again, I married an Alabama girl. Where's Fran? She's in here somewhere, my wife.

There she is, right down here. Married a beautiful girl from Birmingham, Alabama. I met her in Christmastime of 1983. We both happened to attend a conference that was put on by Campus Crusade for Christ, CRU it's now known as, and they had a national conference for all college students to come together the week out of Christmas in 1983.

It was one of the coldest winters in American history. My diesel car actually froze over while I was there for the week. But we both attended this conference, 20,000 students.

I was sitting on the end of the row before the beginning of the first talk in this arena, and this beautiful red-headed girl comes walking down and says, Hey, my friend and I got lost from our group.

[1 : 1 0] We ran in from the buses. It's real cold out there. Can we sit next to y'all? I said, Absolutely, you can. I had a good seat that day. God was kind to me. Fran sat down next to me.

We listened to Howard Hendricks speak. We did the little prayer group together afterwards, and I invited her with my friends to go to Wendy's. Well, Fran was this pretty redhead. Believe it or not, I had red hair at the time.

I have no hair left, but I had very red hair at the time. And so we go to Wendy's, the red-headed restaurant. So there we are, standing in line. We've been there, known each other for about an hour and a half.

And she says to me, Hey, you know, if we got married, we'd have all red-headed kids. And we did, and we do. We have four wonderful red-headed children, three daughters and a son.

Two of those daughters are married. We have two grandchildren now. We are so thankful. It's fun to sort of be in this middle space of life. That's a euphemism for 55. You're sort of on the back end of things.

[2 : 0 8] There are great things about growing older. There are hard things about growing older. One of those is that you write, can read the same book that you've read just a couple years before. And it all seems new to you.

Like you don't remember any of the twists or turns or what's going to happen. I recently was on a plane. I didn't have anything to reread. So I looked on my Kindle and I saw *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins.

And so I pulled that down again and reread it. And it all seemed so new to me again. I just read it before. But it's kind of like the main character, Rachel, in the book, who has fuzzy memories.

She's trying to call back things. And so the journey of the book is sort of her remembering true things as they are. But there's a key sort of figure in the book.

And that is that Rachel rides the train every day from the suburbs into London and back to the suburbs. And it seems the train will stop going to and from at the same juncture.

[3 : 0 6] There will be a stoppage almost every day at this spot that's sort of at a low area at the bottom of a subdivision. And she likes to look out the window of the train. And she'll often see early in the morning with them sipping coffee or in the evening with them out on the porch drinking a glass of wine.

This couple, she's made up names for them. She calls them Jason and Jess. Jess, Jason has that look of the man that she would want to be with. And she just imagines what kind of a loving, amazing husband Jason is.

And Jess is so beautiful and has that kind of figure and sort of manner that you think, Oh, I would love to be like that. And they look so happy together. Oh, Jason and Jess.

Well, as the book unfolds, right, things are not as they seem for Jason and Jess. What may look like a good marriage from a distance, right, is not at all.

Same can be true with churches, right? You're coming up on 30 years. You've had an amazing story here. You have one of the nicest facilities really in our entire denominational network of the Presbyterian Church in America.

[4 : 16] You've had great leaders in the past. You have great leaders here now. God has done much through you to promote the gospel going forward in this region.

But what does it really look like now at 30, you know, sort of fully matured? What does it look like to be a flourishing church?

We won't want to be fooled about that. What's it really look like to flourish as a gospel community? It's an important question to ask when you think about what's going on in the broader church across the board in North America right now.

If you think just about evangelical congregations, congregations that promote the gospel of Christ, that are preaching Christ both to Christians and those yet to become Christians in the hope that they will be converted, congregations that believe the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus really is fully God and fully man, that he was born of a virgin, that he suffered under Pontius Pilate, that he died truly, was crucified and buried, and that he rose again from the dead.

Evangelical churches. Evangelical churches are suffering in North America. The bellwether leader for the evangelical movement is the Southern Baptist Church.

[5 : 34] The Southern Baptist Church in the last 10 years has lost a million members in North America. Gone from 16 million to 15 million.

I have a friend who heads up missions in the state of Georgia for the Southern Baptist Church. He told me that the most commonly occurring number for Southern Baptist Churches in Georgia, the number of baptisms each year now is zero.

It's not the average. It's just the most commonly occurring number. That's troubling. It's troubling if you look at statistics that tell us that 80% of evangelical churches are either plateaued or declining in terms of attendance, in terms of membership, in terms of missional engagement and community, in terms of involvement and discipleship.

In the PCA, we have continued a small growth curve across the last five years. We have grown 1%. A year this last year that we have figures for, from 16 to 17, we grew only 0.2%. So our growth curve is slowing down.

[6 : 54] What does it mean to be a flourishing church? It's really important to ask. I can think of no better place to go than the book of Acts to answer that question.

Acts chapter 13, we meet the church in Antioch, and we discover the church that is flourishing and how the gospel is flourishing there and how the gospel flows from the church in Antioch.

Let's read these verses together. Acts 13, verses 1 through 12. Hear God's word to you. Now, there were in the church in Antioch prophets and teachers.

Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Menaon, a lifelong friend of 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.

Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

[8 : 12] When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews, and they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

He was with the proconsul Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas, the magician, for that is the meaning of his name, opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, would you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?

And now behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead

him by the hand.

Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

[9 : 35] Let's pray together. Father, hear us now. We're asking you. We don't want to be confused, as we so often are, Lord, about what real flourishing is in a marriage, in a family, in a business, in an organization, in a community.

Father, especially in a church, show us the flourishing church from here in Acts. Show us the church at Antioch and those who went out from them.

Show us the beauty and the flow of the gospel afresh, that we might flourish collectively here at Southwood, that we might flourish individually as your people, in and through and because of the gospel.

Lord Jesus, we pray it all in your name. Amen. What does a flourishing church look like? First, it looks like a generous church.

The flourishing church is a generous church. If you think about the church at Antioch, when you read in the earlier chapters of Acts, how it gets established, they are started, right, because persecution drives people out of Jerusalem in the earliest days of the church after Pentecost.

[10 : 51] And people persecuted get scattered, and they begin to drift around the Mediterranean world. And some come to Antioch, and they're preaching to Jewish people the fullness of what Judaism was, the hope in Jesus, the true Messiah.

And so Jews who have stayed Jews very culturally, but also Jews that are called Hellenists, those that are either from other parts of the world and have been converted to Judaism, or Jews that have lived in Greek-speaking kinds of places, in Roman kinds of places, and they're called Hellenists. They're called these people that are sort of from outside the normal way of Judaism. All these together are coming and hearing about Jesus, and a church is formed, and it's beautiful.

And so the church in Jerusalem sends up one of their leaders, Barnabas, the man who's called the son of encouragement, the one who took a piece of property and sold it all and laid it at the apostles' feet and just said, do whatever you will with this.

It's the Lord's to build his kingdom. Barnabas goes, and he goes and helps establish the church there. And as you see the church get going in Antioch, what's so beautiful is, after they're formed and they're first called Christians in that place, Acts tells us earlier, that a prophet stands up, Agabus, you know, Agabus is like a guest preacher.

[12 : 14] You really don't want Agabus to come to your church. He always says something hard and difficult when he comes. I promise I won't be Agabus. But Agabus stands up and says, there's gonna be a worldwide famine.

You know what the response of the church in Antioch was? Let's take up an offering. Not so we can just make sure that we're taking care of ourselves and our people.

Let's give it back to the mother church in Jerusalem. They're gonna have greater needs than we do. More people are gonna pass through Jerusalem. There will be greater needs of hospitality. There may be more persecution that comes there alongside of this famine.

We need to take our best and give it back somewhere else. This is how the church in Antioch functions from the very beginnings.

This is who their founder was in Barnabas. This is who they were even as they got started. But now things get ratcheted up to a whole nother level. This is next level big time.

[13 : 14] Because what happens is they are worshiping the Lord as they are praying and as they are fasting. What does the Holy Spirit say to them? Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work I have for them to take this gospel to the world.

Give me Barnabas. Give me your church planter. Give me this guy who is the son of encouragement. This one is so full, is modeled what generosity is.

I'm gonna take him from you. And Saul? You know this guy who is this amazing teacher and preacher and writer and thinker and evangelist and apologist and philosopher and pastor.

I want him too. What generosity was required of this church? And they embraced it and welcomed it.

How do you do that? How do you give in this way? How do you do like Barnabas did to take a whole piece of property and just give it away? How do you function like the church did in Antioch from the beginnings and saying, here we're gonna take up an offering and we're gonna give it away.

[14 : 39] We're not worried about us here. We're giving it to where the needs are greater. How can you take in a church that is thriving and growing and is the gateway for the gospel in the whole Mediterranean world, how can you take not just one leader, but both of your leaders and send them away in mission?

How do you do that? Only when you're in touch with how God functions through the gospel. How God gives his best away for us and his one and only son.

How Jesus gives his position of power and honor away in the heavens considering not equality with God and status with God, something to be grasped and clutched, but humbled himself, taking on human flesh, remaining God, but also becoming fully human like us in every way except for our sins so he could humble himself all the way to the point of death, even death on a cross so he could bear the weight of our sins before a just God so that we could live and know God together with him and the Spirit forever.

A God, Father and Son, who give the Spirit, the one who's so much a part of them, the connection of love between them that's so real and so deep, he's a person, to pour out that Holy Spirit to come live in us, broken, sinful, weak, frail people that the light of the glory of God should shine through the cracks of our lives.

That's the generosity of God. The only way you can be this kind of people is when you're in touch with God's generosity through the gospel.

[16 : 40] Like that, it's everywhere in the scriptures, right? It's just everywhere. God, the Psalms we read this morning, God loves to be kind to us. He loves to be generous to us. He loves to welcome us.

The stories of the Bible are just full of it. I love the whole, I'm just reading now in my Bible reading plan, the book of Hosea. It's so lovely. God tells Hosea the prophet, go marry a woman who lives on the street.

Go marry a woman who's a prostitute. Go marry a woman who's a prostitute, and she's not going to stop being a prostitute after she becomes your wife, but marry her, love her when she goes away. Go find her, and welcome her, and woo her back, and bring her back home, and tell her you love her again. Because that's how much I love Israel.

That's how much I love my people. Getting in touch with that, as the church at Antioch did through worship, and prayer, and fasting, is key to being this generous kind of people.

[17 : 46] So before we move on, where does God want you to show his generosity in fresh ways? As this church is turning 30, where are the fresh ways God wants Southwood to be radically generous, to be giving your best away financially, your best away in terms of time for this community or the broader world.

Giving yourselves away in terms of thinking about what does Southwood need to give Huntsville in the region that would radically bless, that would make this region say, we thank God that this church is in our midst.

And what does God want each one of you individually to do afresh this fall? Wake me up when September ends, Green Day sings, right?

Well, the summer's fully over, the fall is good. Where does God want you to engage to wake up and be generous in fresh ways such that change comes a little of your time to a neighbor that you know is so lonely?

engaging someone who's hurt you badly and saying to them, I really do forgive you. I don't want to hold the past over your head. I want to go forward.

[19 : 12] I want to show you the generosity of love and forgiveness because that's what the Father has done with me and Jesus. Where does God want you to be radically generous? I just want to tell you one story before we move on.

Peter mentioned it, but, you know, I not only got to marry a girl from Alabama, I got to live in Alabama for a while, got to work at Auburn with RUF, Reform University Fellowship, if you don't know it, our campus ministry associated with the Presbyterian Church in America, and God blessed our time there richly.

We were there in the early 90s. God really began to work a true revival on that campus during our time. It was wonderful. We literally got to work each year with thousands of students talking about the gospel of Jesus.

It was an amazing season. But we could never really raise our full support as missionaries. And no matter how many students you work with, they don't pay the budget, right?

And so we kept working and working and working with churches and individuals, and we couldn't overcome a huge deficit that we had as we began our time there. And as we were in the middle of our time, we still had a \$10,000 deficit, which was about almost half of a year's salary at that time.

[20 : 28] And we were going to have to look for other work. We just couldn't make it work. And so I'd been to all kinds of churches to people, and we just couldn't close that gap. And I get a phone call one day from a woman named Lee in Selma, Alabama.

I'd visited her church previously. And I answer her, and she says, Paul, this is Miss Lee over in Selma. Hey, Miss Lee, how are you? Paul, you know, I work with the women in the church for the region, for the Presbytery, for the Presbytery Women's thing, what we call the Preswick.

Yes, Miss Lee, yes. We would like you to come over to Warrior Preswick in Camden this spring and be our Showers of Blessing love speaker. Yes, Miss Lee.

And we would like you to bring Fran and your two pretty little girls. Yes, Miss Lee. And I'm thinking, they're going to collect an offering for the Showers of Blessing love gift. And it's not going to pay for our gas to drive to Camden and back.

And we're going to have two little girls in the back. It's going to be a long day. Okay. So I never thought about that again until months later when it was the day to go. We pretty up and shine up. We drive over.

[21 : 36] We get there. And in the Warrior Presbytery women's meetings, they actually had name tags for everybody in the shape of bumblebees. and they sing a Christian bubble and be song.

This is true. It's about 1992, circa. Real. And so we had the little breakfast together. I preached the sermon to them. They loved all my wife and little daughters.

And then Miss Lee stands up and says, Paul, now it's time for you to receive the Showers of Blessing Love Offering. And she began to describe what they had done. You know, Warrior Presbytery is western Alabama.

Warrior Presbytery is the region that covers the poorest part of the United States. Poorer than Appalachia. A lot of the towns where these churches were don't have stoplights.

A lot of these congregations don't have pastors because they can't afford to pay them. But she described what the women in these churches did. Bank sales and sewing circles and got their youth to do car washes and special events to raise money for the Shepherds of Blessing Love Offering for Auburn RUF.

[22 : 47] I know nothing about this going on all year long. And so, I come to this event and I stand up and Miss Lee says, and here is, Paul, our gift and it's \$5,000.

And I started crying. Every time I tell this story, I cry. And I started weeping. And she said, Paul, don't cry. That's not the surprise. She said, when we started back in 1973 when the PCA was formed and we formed the women in the church movement here, we wanted to start an orphanage. And we put aside a CD for that. We realize now, 20 years later, we're never going to be able to start an orphanage. We want to take that money and give it to you. And that was \$5,000. And I left Camden, Alabama with no deficit, with people who had been radically generous for the mission of God.

And I have never been the same. Where does Jesus want to tell stories like that in the next 20 years through you?

and in the full seasons ahead. The flourishing church is a generous church. Secondly, think about this. The flourishing church is a creative church.

[24 : 10] Beautifully and radically creative. You know, so much has been written about the rise of the creative class in our time. A gentleman named Richard Florida wrote a book on this called The Rise of the Creative Class.

And Florida talks about how cities like Huntsville are so working to get creative peoples to come live in their communities and they're trying to make that way easy.

And Florida writes about the different cross sections of people who are creative types of people, typically entrepreneurial business people. Artists are creative people.

Millennials typically are more creative than others of us. How do we get these people groups to come here and live in our city so we can become a creative place?

You know what? I've never heard a cross section of people described as creatives as evangelical Christians. By Richard Florida or anybody else. Maybe that's because they're oppressing us or maybe because we just aren't.

[25 : 14] But the church in Antioch is radically and beautifully creative right from the very beginning. As I said, they took this offering up in generosity and said, let's give it back to the mother church.

What we see Saul doing here is changing his name to Paul, moving out of a Hebraic name to a Latin name to say, I want to be all things to all people.

I want to connect. The creativity of even changing his name to connect in mission. In Antioch, we learn earlier than Acts that Christians are first named Christians.

Do you know why that was? Because there are so many different kinds of people from this Hellenistic Jewish spread of people coming together around the gospel that they couldn't identify them by race or place so they just had to call them by their connection to Jesus Christ the Messiah. And so the first time we're ever labeled Christians is there. The diversity and the beauty of that community. Think about what we know about the early church beyond Antioch.

[26 : 24] How the church met in the middle of the night at like two or three in the morning creatively. Why? Because there was less risk of being attacked, of being persecuted, of having the meetings broken up.

And because so many people who were slaves could come in the middle of the night and worship freely. They had the only space available given to them was that space in the middle of the night and the church just says, let's meet then.

You see this church in Antioch here so beautifully laying out a mission strategy. Let's send people out in pairs. Let's send Barnabas and Saul who becomes Paul.

Let's send John Mark 2. Let's even send 3. Now, we're so accustomed to that, right, with missionary teams going out. There was no precedent for this other than Jesus sending the disciples out two by two on occasion.

Beautiful creativity for the life and mission of the church. Where does God want you, Southwood, at 30? With your roots in the ground, firmly planted, to exercise creativity in fresh ways.

[27 : 45] What do we know about being and doing church? God wants us to do the word read and preached. God wants us to do the sacraments and baptism and communion regularly for all of us to not only hear the word but to see the gospel lived out to actually be able to feel it and to taste it and to eat it.

And God wants us to pray together and individually. Word, sacrament, prayer, those are the things that are never changing in the life of the church.

But out of that basis, everything else is blue sky. Everything else is creative. How do you spawn that creativity? How do you grow in that?

How do you say, what are the fresh ways? I love what you've sort of done even this fall, right? You sort of said, let's change things over. Let's have worship first so our communities of mission and life together can discuss what we've learned in this sermon and think about how to apply that and carry that forward out into the week.

I love that creativity. What are the other creative steps God wants you to take collectively? Where are the creative places God wants you individually to just live out the gospel in fresh ways in his mission?

[29 : 07] Well, the way you get fueled for that, the way you get energized for that, the way you're mused for that, if you will, is back to the gospel itself. Think about God's creativity in the gospel to say, I will step into the picture myself.

The world I have created, the world I am ruling over, I will actually step into it in human likeness to bring renewal and blessing and salvation and forgiveness to it.

That is stunning. Don't let the nature of the story, you having heard it before, take away how creative that is. Think about how Jesus exercises his ministry in beautiful ways, connecting with people, telling stories they could understand and yet backdoored them with the surprising wonders of the gospel.

Where does the Lord, out of that movement of the gospel and the creativeness, want us to go and be his creative people? The flourishing church is a generous church, the flourishing church is a creative church.

Lastly, the flourishing church is a humble church. It's a humble church. As this mission unfolds, as this generosity and creativity flow out, what was required of the church at Antioch?

[30 : 43] Can you imagine what it would have been like the first Sunday after Paul and Barnabas left? Can you imagine Peter and the whole staff being leaving and sent out on mission in fresh ways and you're going to meet the next Sunday and you go, well, now what?

Who are we? How do we do this? We are suddenly not the same church with the same sets of gifts and blessings that we were even a week ago.

What do we do? God, you have laid us low. Imagine the humility that was required of Barnabas. He goes out. He's been this key leader in Jerusalem. He's been the planter and leader in Antioch and the Holy Spirit has moved and directed for he and Saul to go out on mission.

He was the one who brought Saul to Antioch with him. He was the one who stood up for Saul back in Jerusalem with the leaders there. To tell them you can trust him.

[31 : 50] When nobody else wanted to trust Saul, Barnabas does. Barnabas trains him. Barnabas gives him every platform Saul has had for ministry to this point and yet as they get started in this missionary journey, right here within the first few verses, Saul begins to lead.

Saul begins to become the one through whom God preaches his message. Saul is the one through whom miracles are performed. Soon you're not going to hear very much about Barnabas at all. Where did the first missionary journey take them? Where was their first stop? Cyprus. Cyprus is Barnabas' home island.

All of this has been required of him back in his hometown. Humility. Saul, you can really bind up the humility required for Saul in the name change.

How many Pauls are here beside me? I'm sure a handful. I'm painfully aware of the etymology of Paul. Do you know what Paul means? little. Would that was more true of my body.

[33 : 14] Little, tiny, small. Paul is going to take a whole journey forward in his ministry growing down into that name.

Suffering. Taking beatings one lash less than that which would kill a person. Beatings with the whip, beatings with rods, being stoned and left for dead multiple times.

Near drownings in rivers and near drownings at sea after shipwreck. Fevers and diseases and difficulties. This thorn in the flesh that he lives with all the way through which some believe is either an ongoing fever problem, terrible problems with his eyes, perhaps some kind significant physical deformation in his body.

But then Paul says writing about all this, it's all these things, yeah, that are hard but it's my daily concerns for the churches that really make it hard, that really break me.

Paul was going to spend a lifetime growing down into that name. How do you do that?

[34 : 40] As a church collectively, how do we do that as individual Christians like Barnabas and Saul? The only way you do that is by contemplating the gospel. And what you realize when you contemplate the gospel and when you worship and pray and fast the way they were doing in Antioch is, you realize two deep truths is, number one, this is the Jesus way.

This is God's way. God's glory is in his humility. Jesus says throughout the whole gospel of John, my time has not yet come, my time has not yet come, my time has not yet come to be fully known and glorified.

And suddenly he says in John 12, now is the time, the hour has come and the Son of Man will be glorified and the Father who sent him will be glorified as he is crucified and lifted up from the earth. God's ultimate glory is in his humility. And the other point as you focus on the gospel is that if this is the Jesus way then it's going to be the way of his followers that there is no other way the gospel can go forward except we humble ourselves, except we give our lives away as Paul did, except we are willing to take the back seat, the second chair, to even go off stage left the way Barnabas did, the gospel can't go forward with that kind of humility flowing through us.

The gospel demands it. To carry our crosses and follow Jesus means we are humble people.

Where does God want to humble you afresh?

[36 : 38] For you to embrace humility afresh, to give up your power, to give up your position afresh, to just go love in his name, to give up status, to give up the right to hold a grudge, to give up the right of playing the victim card and humble yourself and serve in Jesus' name.

This is the hardest part of flourishing, but the creativity and the generosity can't flow except through the channel of our humility.

I want to leave you with a story of where I've seen this played out in my life. My wife grew up in Birmingham. Her family were charter members of Briarwood Church. She remembers when Briarwood Church came into the Presbyterian Church in America. She was there for that meeting. She has great memories. She went to Briarwood School growing up. And Fran is, if you get to know her even a little bit today, the kindest, most generous person I've really ever been around. I'm not just saying that. I mean, if I've learned anything about love and generosity, I've learned it through her toward others.

[38 : 02] But she would tell you that's not the way. Paul's not seeing it all right, number one. But number two, that's certainly not the way I've always been. And growing up, she at Briarwood School, the beautiful little Christian school with a group of girls was sort of in the mean girls pack.

If you've ever seen that movie with Lindsay Lohan, she was one of the mean girls, like the Rachel McAdams character who were making life miserable for others that don't fit their model and grid. And she had a couple of friends and they sort of ruled that little Christian school. Well, a new friend came to town somewhere at the end of elementary school, early in middle school, and Fran decided, I want to make Tammy's life miserable.

I don't like her. And so I'm going to make it hard on her and I'm going to ignore her. I'm going to be mean. I'm going to orchestrate so that Tammy's life is kind of bad.

Well, Tammy's mom kind of watched this play out. Her name's Beth. And Beth decided, you know, if you've ever been in that space, I've been in that space as a parent.

[39 : 16] You ever been in that space as a parent? What do you want to do to the child that's making your child's life miserable, right? You want to strangle them, right? If your child's ever been bullied at school, like you want to strangle the child.

Better, you would love to strangle the parents of the child who's bullying your child, right? Beth did not take that approach. Beth began to try to find out about Fran and her situation to discover that her mom had significant illnesses she was battling that incapacitated her, that Fran's dad was a doctor, a beautiful Christian man, but often absent, chief of staff at a major Birmingham hospital, and that Fran's siblings were older and sort of gone, and that Fran really didn't have anybody. And so Beth decided, I'm going to, instead of hating the daughter, the girl who's making my daughter's life miserable, I'm going to love her. I'm going to humble myself.

I'm going to try to be creative. I'm going to try to be generous and just give to her. She found out Fran didn't ever have lunches, so she brought an extra lunch for her as well as for her daughter and stuck it in her locker.

She worked so that Tammy and Fran could do things together and after school activities sort of behind the scenes. She then worked in realizing Fran didn't really have a place to eat supper at night and invited her over for dinner often.

[40 : 46] Invited Fran on family vacations. Fran and Tammy, instead of being these enemies, become best friends. they still are to this day. And Fran would say what she learned about loving in Jesus' name, she learned from reflecting on best love to her when she utterly did not deserve it.

Where does God want to write beautiful, fresh stories like best story in Fran, like Fran's story in teaching me?

Where does God want to play that forward through you? One thing's for sure, if the church in Antioch didn't function this way with this generosity, this creativity, this humility, if Barnabas and Saul didn't embrace it and embody it, the gospel wouldn't have gotten to us today.

This is how the gospel broke out from the Mediterranean world. This is how the gospel began to come to Gentiles. This is the story of the Gentile mission breaking out in fullness.

Sergius Paulus, another Paul who Paul connects with, and there'll be many, many, many others. Where does God want to make a new outbreak of the gospel?

[42 : 09] Through you, collectively and individually as the flourishing people of his gospel. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for this time.

We praise you for your goodness and mercy to us through Jesus. Help us, Lord, to just catch the gospel afresh so that we might see the generosity there, the creativity there, the humility there, Lord, and so that we might live it out.

Thank you for Southwood. Thank you for the ways that's marked her across her 30 years, but I pray that like the church at Antioch, there would be a ratcheting up of this, just like we saw a ratcheting up of that in the book of Acts, that there would be a ratcheting up of that here, and that change

would come to Huntsville in the world because of it.

Please, Lord, do this good work, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.