

## Mission & Ministry Sunday – October 21, 2018

### Acts 13:38-48

38 “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. 40 Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 41 ““Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.”” 42 As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. 43 When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. 44 On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 45 When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47 For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ““I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”” 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Let’s start off with some numbers this morning, specifically population numbers. Do you know how many people live in this world? The current estimates are at 7.6 billion people. That is a large number that can be hard for us to truly comprehend. So let’s try to put it into perspective. If we took all the residents of Goodhue County, just under 47,000 people, that would pretty well fill a football stadium. Yet Goodhue County is less than 1% of the population of Minnesota (5.5 million). The state of Minnesota is only 1.7% of the population of our country (327 million). And while the United States is the third most populous nation in the world, we account for only 4% of the world’s total. In comparison the two nations ahead of us, China and India, are each around 1.4 billion and together account for 36% of the world’s population. We have the phrase in our text which is a quote of our first lesson from Isaiah 49 – talking about bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. That is the Lord’s commission for us, a daunting task when you consider the 7.6 billion possibilities. And yet that is also one of the reasons why St. John’s is a member of a larger group of churches, the Wisconsin Synod, so that we can join together in this important task. As we celebrate the blessing of our Synod’s mission and ministry this morning/evening we will look at the importance of **Bringing Salvation to the Ends of the Earth**. We will focus first on the importance of that message and then how that message can be shared to the ends of the earth.

Before Jesus’ ascension into heaven in Acts chapter 1 he had told his disciples, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (v. 8). The early Christian church had followed that mission plan, starting out in Jerusalem and then spreading out to the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria. But in Acts chapter 13 that mission was expanding as Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the first of Paul’s missionary journeys. Our text finds them in Pisidian Antioch, a city in modern day Turkey, a journey for them of nearly 500 miles. While for us driving the same distance down to St. Louis might not seem like going to the ends of the earth, and while Paul himself would travel much further later on in his

ministry, when you're sailing on seas and hiking through mountainous regions, such a journey would not have been an easy task.

As Paul often did he started his preaching in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, giving them a brief overview of some Old Testament history, all of which culminated in the coming of Jesus, the Savior that God had promised (v. 23). He went on to describe how Jesus had been falsely accused and executed, only to be raised from the dead as Isaiah and David had prophesied. Our text begins by summarizing the importance of these events: "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (vv. 38-39). Among the Jews of Paul's audience the law of Moses would have been held in high regard. This was how they served God and identified as his people. But that law could not justify them, it could not save them. All it could do was remind them of their sins, their failure to meet God's perfect standards. And so only through Jesus could their sins be forgiven. Only through Jesus could they be justified and saved. Paul knew that this message of salvation was so important for their eternal future that he had travelled those 500 miles to share it with them.

This message of salvation is still just as important in our 21<sup>st</sup> century because the idea of salvation through obedience to the law still dominates in our world. Of the world's population, roughly one third identify as Christian. And while 2.4 billion sounds like a lot of fellow believers, sadly there are many who are Christian in name only and still depend on their own works for salvation rather than believing in Jesus. But while in theory they are at least exposed to the idea of Jesus, that still leaves a vast majority that do not know about Jesus. Half of the world's population falls under the world's three other major religions: Islam (1.8 billion), Hinduism (1.15 billion) and Buddhism (521 million). All of these groups teach people to rely on their works for some form of salvation. On top of this is the rising number of non-religious people who don't even acknowledge a need for salvation.

It is easy for us to forget about such a worldview when we live in a place with so many different Christian churches that while we know not everyone belongs to a church, there is at least a possibility of exposure to the message of salvation in Jesus. Among the majority of the world that is not always the case. We take for granted what we have. Imagine what your life would be like without Jesus. We would be weighed down by guilt and shame for all the things that we do wrong with no way to remove that burden. We would be plagued by fear and uncertainty, not knowing what happens to us when die or whether we did enough to merit some form of reward in the afterlife. We would be lost in pain and suffering with no hope for relief or any kind of future. But Jesus changed all that for us. The forgiveness of sins has been proclaimed to us so that our guilt and shame have been removed. We are not afraid of death because we are justified and stand righteous before God—there is nothing we have to do to get into heaven. Any pain or suffering we have is temporary as we wait for our eternal life in him. This is the impact of this message of salvation, this is the message that could change the lives of billions in this world.

So how do we bring this message of salvation to the ends of the earth? What does that ministry look like? We can look back to what happened in Pisidian Antioch. After Paul was finished speaking he was invited to come back a week later (v. 42). Almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord (v. 44), but some of the Jews became jealous and rejected the message (v. 45). Paul's focus could then turn to the Gentiles, who "were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (v. 48). We are

reminded that not everyone will believe, some will reject the message of salvation. But God knows his believers and so he can use us to bring that message to the ends of the earth.

Now of course we can't all go out tomorrow and travel to Asia or Africa or South America to go and be missionaries like Paul and Barnabas. But that is the blessing of being part of a synod. As a group of churches we can support those who go out on our behalf. Currently our synod has mission partners in 40 countries around the world with new prospective mission fields in 14 more countries. Our mission models are changing as we are focusing less on sending American missionaries to start congregations and more on starting theological training schools where our missionaries and professors can train native pastors to lead their congregations. One remarkable example is in Vietnam where our synod has been invited to build a theological training school in Hanoi because the communist leaders see the positive impact of the mission work being done there among the Hmong people. Today's technology with the use of internet and cell phones has also been a great blessing. In years past we had to call back missionaries for lack of funding. But now in Central and South America we have connected with over a million people through Facebook as our Academia Cristo program offers classes and training in Spanish to those interested in learning about God's Word. Another growing area of mission work is with immigrant communities in our country who want then to share the message of salvation with relatives and friends back home. These are just a few examples of the work that God is doing through our synod.

So what can you and I do for these mission efforts? We can support those who go out on our behalf with our prayers, asking that the Lord watch over them and continue to bless their efforts. We can also support them with our offerings. A small portion of the offerings we bring each week go to our synod to help support world mission and home missions and worker training and support ministries. We can also make special direct offerings to specific ministries that might interest us, the synod's website lists many different options.

And finally we remember that bringing salvation to the ends of the earth is not just about other countries, but it is also the mission field right here in front of us. Whether it's over the back fence or in the next cubicle, the family that moved in down the street or the family member that has strayed, the Sunday school class that might need a teacher or the outreach effort that might need some help, there are plenty of souls around us who need to hear the message of the salvation that Jesus brings.

7.6 billion is a very large number, more people than we can even imagine. The need is great for the message of salvation and the Lord has tasked us with bringing it to the ends of the earth. We thank him for our fellow brothers and sisters in our synod as we work together to do mission work in our country and around the world. May he continue to use us as his tools through our prayers and gifts and abilities to bring this message to more and more people to the ends of the earth. Amen.