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Acts 13:44-49. NLT

⁴⁴ The following week almost the entire city turned out to hear them preach the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when some of the Jews saw the crowds, they were jealous; so they slandered Paul and argued against whatever he said.

⁴⁶ Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, "It was necessary that we first preach the word of God to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we will offer it to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For the Lord gave us this command when he said,

***'I have made you a light to the Gentiles,
to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.'***

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹ So the Lord's message spread throughout that region.

The beginnings.

The book of Acts is a history book of sorts. It is attributed to the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, a man who was some sort of physician, apparently. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are dated to around 70 to 90 A.D., though some date them to earlier in the first century, perhaps in the 60s. This earlier dating fits with the ending of the Book of Acts, where Paul is still alive.

Here is a condensed summary. Acts opens with the ascension of Jesus into Heaven. Then the Holy Spirit empowers the Apostles, who are in Jerusalem, to go

forth spreading the word. Remember that the first followers of Christ were Jews and so the faith began in Jerusalem. At first, we follow the story of Peter as he preaches in Jerusalem to Jews. Peter and his associate John get into trouble with the Council of Jewish Elders and Teachers, but the Council, fearing a riot, let them go. Peter performs miracles and succeeds in baptizing many, but he also faces setbacks. A man named Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. Importantly, one of those who witnesses the killing of Stephen is Saul, who will become Paul – and who will become the most significant figure in the Book of Acts. The death of Stephen leads to the scattering of the new believers away from Jerusalem. They go to Judea and Samaria. Then Saul meets Jesus on the Road to Damascus.

Peter has a vision from God and realizes he must preach to the Gentiles, and many are baptized. Meanwhile, the Jewish believers who had been scattered spread the word far and wide, but mostly to Jewish people. Peter is arrested by Herod, and then an angel frees him from prison. The center of the church begins to move away from Jerusalem because Paul and his associate Barnabas travel widely on Paul's first missionary journey. They convert many Gentiles. There is conflict between them and Jewish believers, and Paul is almost killed. Paul and Barnabas return to Jerusalem to answer to the council. The argument is whether Gentile Christians must follow Jewish law. Paul says no. He wins the argument.

Paul and Barnabas part company. Paul, on his second missionary journey, and accompanied by Silas and Timothy, travels more than three thousand miles. But Paul and Silas are beaten and end up in prison. There is a major earthquake and many other prisoners escape. The guard, knowing he will be executed because prisoners escaped, starts to kill himself. Paul and Silas, instead of fleeing, tell the guard not to hurt himself. This causes the guard and everyone in his household to believe in Jesus. Then Silas and Paul are released. Paul continues on his journey with Silas. Again, Jews are jealous of his success at gaining converts, and Paul and Silas have a narrow escape and continue on their way.

Paul sets off on his third mission trip. He establishes the famous church at Ephesus. Paul ends up back in Jerusalem, where, you guessed it, he's arrested – by the Romans. He ends up being flogged. But Paul reveals that he's a Roman Citizen, and so the Romans release him to the Jewish Council. There is a plan to kill Paul, and he narrowly escapes. The Council presents their case against Paul to the governor, Felix. Paul is held for two years by Felix, who is actually looking for a bribe, but doesn't get one. There is a change in governor, and Festus takes over from Felix. Festus wants to send Paul back to Jerusalem, where he would certainly have been killed. Paul declares that he wants to appeal this decision to Caesar, and as a Roman Citizen, he has the right to do so. Of course, Caesar is two

thousand miles away in Rome. Paul heads off for Rome. Along the way, he is ship-wrecked, but survives. He ends up in Rome, under house arrest for two years. Then the Book of Acts mysteriously ends.

I chose Acts for the basis of today's message because I'm doing a Bible study on it. The reason I chose it for the Bible study is because I was thinking about Acts recently after I had a conversation with someone at Boulder Community Health, where I'm a chaplain. I had just been given a referral. The person who gave it to me said that there was one thing I should understand about this patient: she was "hyper-religious"; there was a grave concern that she was dangerously preoccupied with being religious, and that it had risen to the level of being a psychosis. I wondered what kind of wildly bizarre behavior I was about to witness. Was she going to start telling me that she was the Blessed Virgin or that Jesus spoke to her in the bathroom every morning when she brushed her teeth? As always, of course, I am changing details of her story for her privacy.

But let's get back to the Book of Acts. Now, during these three perilous journeys Paul establishes at least fourteen churches over a truly vast area. He visits many more. He writes letters back to churches he has founded or visited, offering them support. This is how we got some of the other books of the New

Testament – they are letters written by Paul to various churches and missionaries. His real contribution, of course, was to establish the missionary nature of the Christian faith, which is why the faith eventually spread to much of the world. Over and over, he was beaten, arrested, imprisoned, and run out of town. He was ship-wrecked. His career as a missionary lasted at least twenty years, as he traveled over most of his known world. There are extra-biblical, in other words, non-Scriptural books, that describe the martyrdom of Paul by Emperor Nero of Rome. It's thought that he was beheaded. There are those who believe that he went on two more missionary trips before he was killed, possibly going to Spain or even to what is now Britain. But we don't know for sure what happened to him. Acts ends with him in house detention, and that's all we know for sure. Finally, let's keep in mind that for most of his missionary work, Paul walked. He was a homeless wanderer, a true missionary with no other purpose in life.

There are a few other things that are worth noting about Acts. First of all, about a third of the Book consists of speeches. There are at least twenty-four of them. Peter delivers eight. Paul delivers nine. Speeches are also given by Stephen and James, and others. There are non-believers who give speeches, like Festus. But keep in mind that although we look upon Acts as being historical in nature, it is not a modern history. It isn't documented with secondary sources

and the author makes no attempt to be complete. Some call it a very accurate historical novel. The speeches themselves are suspiciously short. They are abbreviations or summaries. Luke is trying to give us the gist of what people said, not exactly what they said. But most scholars believe he did not freely invent what people said. The spirit of what he wrote is thought to be completely true.

What can we get from the Book of Acts? Well, if you think a delayed flight or a flat tire are hassles, try traveling the way Paul did. But more seriously, the book tells us how Christianity got started, and it does so in great detail. It is an amazing Book to have survived, and it is in my opinion, the easiest of the New Testament books to read. We get more details of his travels by reading the letters of his in the New Testament. There are thirteen of them, but scholars think that he probably didn't actually write six of them. Also, there are details that Paul wrote in his letters that sometimes conflict with dates and places referred to by Luke in Acts, and we have to assume that in these cases, Paul knew where he was and when – and so it must be Acts that has minor errors in it. And, remember that most of his letters were lost. Imagine what we might be missing.

But more importantly, Acts tells us what to do in a world that is pagan in nature. That word sounds silly to us. What it really refers to is simply any faith

that isn't one of the big three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It's used to describe the pre-Christian faiths of pre-modern Europe; these religions lived side-by-side with Judaism and Christianity, but the most well-known pagan faiths were practiced by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Since the word has connotations of ignorance and unsophistication, it probably isn't a good word to assign to faiths that happen to be different than ours. We avoid the word "pagan" today, with good reason. I do have to say, though, that as a Catholic school kid, I went door to door selling chocolate bars and plastic crosses to raise money for pagan babies, whom I thought lived far away, maybe on the east coast. But, what do we do in a non-believing world? We talk openly about our faith. We spread it far and wide.

There is, however, something about the Book of Acts that is eerily similar to what is going on in Europe and North America today. It used to be that witnessing and talking about your faith was normal, even expected. Today, though, evangelism is at best politically incorrect. In some ways, we are like the early Christians. We are not representative of the overall population of the U.S.

But we are here to stay. Consider some interesting facts about the Book of Acts. In Acts, Paul repeatedly must defend his faith. That is what all the speeches

are about. And every time a Roman court sits in judgement of Christianity, the court finds in favor of the faith. The Book is thus more than just a story of the success of the spread of the faith. It shows that the faith won over governments and leaders, including many who were, well, pagans. In Acts, Christianity is born, and it succeeds on all levels – among the common people, among the wealthy and powerful, and among imperial leaders.

In Acts, Christianity emerges as a legitimate outgrowth of Judaism, and not as a wholly invented religion on its own. The Israelites and Jews had been around since before recorded time began, and Christianity inherited this legitimacy. Our faith was recognized as a fulfillment of the hopes and aspirations expressed in the Hebrew Bible, or what we call the Old Testament. But we were also recognized as a community of faith, with its own unique identity. We won the argument that God endorses us. That is a major lesson of Acts that is often overlooked.

But what about that patient I was going to see, the one suffering from hyper-religiosity? Well, when I walked into her room, she was glad to see a chaplain. She was about to go into major surgery and wanted someone to pray with her. She told me about the procedure she was about to have done; it did indeed sound scary, as it involved fusing multiple vertebrae in her neck together.

So, I offered a prayer of healing. Then she started telling me that she had gotten a couple of the hospital employees upset with her and they had suggested that she was hyper-religious. I asked her what she had said to them. She said that she'd witnessed to them, telling them about how she had recently recommitted herself to her Christian faith as a result of the car accident that had fractured her vertebrae. She said the accident had been her fault, that the man in the other car had a very badly broken arm and that his airbag had broken his nose. But moments after the accident, he stood at the window of her car, blood streaming down his face, calming her, saying that help was on its way, that she would be okay. He had been so kind to me after I had run a stop sign while speeding, and had hit him, she told me. She said it caused her to recommit herself to living a Christ-like life, and to her, that meant witnessing and telling people why she was a Christian. I told her that she was a true child of God. This woman, who had been described as being so hyper-religious as to be psychotic, seemed normal, well-rooted, and no more religious than me. So, yes, evangelism, to some people, is now a mental illness.

When I was a boy and a young man, evangelism was seen as a wholly good thing. In the 50s and 60s, a majority of Americans identified as being Christian, although many actually knew very little about the nuts and bolts of the faith and

only attended church because it was socially required. And importantly, those who are in the church today tend to be much more dedicated believers. We are much like the early Christians: we are sincere in our faith and we are a minority group. But remember, we have inherited the legitimacy that the faithful in the Book of Acts earned for us. By the way, the Apostles, and not just Paul, went out on extensive missionary trips. It's just that there aren't surviving documents that describe their trips. There is evidence that Peter was crucified in Rome. So, we are here today because of an incredible story of evangelism, of conveying to the world the beauty of Jesus' teachings of unconditional love and forgiveness.

Now, it's true that Christianity is facing challenges, and not just from people in the U.S. who think that being Christian is somehow equivalent to being intolerant. Christians are being abused in Muslim countries, in China, and in Africa. But the story of the early church tells us why we're in a good place today. We are an evangelizing faith. We are spreading around the globe; we've looked at this in a couple of previous Sunday messages here in this church. And there are areas of growth already in Christianity in the U.S. Immigrants into this country, especially from Mexico, Central, and South America tend to be Christian. They are helping us build our churches back up. There is also a very active and growing youth movement in the church. We are a living, growing, vibrant church.