

## SET APART

Final in the Series: Learning Church

Acts 13:1-3

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Downstairs in the hallway is a photo array, pictures of those from this congregation who have gone into ordained ministry: Eileen Schneider, Clark Carr, Harry Cole, Linda Motter. Though this was their church, they left it, with the blessing of the congregation, to lead other churches. Ordination does not make one a better Christian, or a higher-ranking Christian, or a closer-to-God Christian. It makes one what we call a set apart Christian. The ordained are set apart for specified work, normally meaning they are set apart for full-time service to Christ and the Church.

Not everyone can be or should be ordained. It is not practical or necessary. It is important, though, that some in the body be set apart to make the complete work of the body possible. For instance, the church at large has a long history of sending evangelists, engineers, medical personnel, teachers, farmers, and pastors into parts of the world where Christ has not been preached or where extensive poverty means there is great human need for schools, clinics, wells and other life-giving infrastructure and so on. These missionaries go, usually for several years, maybe even decades, to enable this. Well, everybody can't leave their homes, their families, their work, and their country for years at a time to serve Christ and Christ's people. So, missionaries are set apart to carry out this work and, in essence, to represent us. You all should be proud of the number of people you have set apart for ordained ministry. Though it is rarely spoken about, it is actually a vitally important responsibility of congregations to train, raise up, and set apart some for full-time, lifetime service.

We see this in our lesson from Acts this morning. Just before ascending to heaven following the resurrection, Jesus commanded his followers to go into all the world making disciples of all nations. It is what we call the Great Commission, and we read it a few moments ago from Matthew. The apostles were doing this, kind of. I say kind of because their efforts were primarily confined to Israel. Some congregations existed outside of Israel, but these were comprised mostly of believers who had lived in Israel but had since moved away, or maybe had been converted on the Day of Pentecost while in Jerusalem, and then went home and started house churches among themselves. Few outside Israel were being converted during evangelistic crusades or by active missionaries. The Great Commission was local, not as grand as advertised.

Then we read about the church in Antioch in Syria. We mentioned last week that this was a strong church, perhaps the first to have both Jewish and Gentile participants.

It is the place where believers were first called Christians. Luke tells us in Acts that they had prophets and teachers as part of that congregation, strong, spirit-filled leadership. They had it going on. Ah, but God did not intend for them to keep it to themselves. This is what we read: “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” There it is: set apart.

Barnabas and Saul, whom we know as Paul, were important leaders in this congregation. They were a big part of Antioch being such a strong church. But we continue in Acts, “Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” As important as Barnabas and Paul were to that community, they did not hold onto them. They sent them off.

This is a good thing, a Spirit-directed thing, but come on, it was only two men. Did it make that much difference? Oh my, yes. Paul and Barnabas started out on what would later be called the first missionary journey. They sailed to Cyprus and preached and taught across the entire island. They sailed to Asia Minor and worked a large circle loop going from town to town. In each place they started in the synagogue, witnessing among their own people. Some Jews accepted their message. Most did not. They then extended the gospel to the Gentiles and won many converts. Eventually, they worked their way back to Antioch and reported to the church all that had happened. Two more missionary journeys would follow, although Paul then traveled with Silas and Barnabas with John Mark. We know the details of these journeys, at least the journeys of Paul, because Luke reported about them in the Book of Acts and because we have copies of letters that Paul wrote to churches he founded, such as letters to the church in Corinth and Thessalonica and Ephesus and Rome. These and other letters, of course, are now part of our scripture.

In other words, these missionary journeys fulfilled the Great Commission, taking the gospel into other nations, making the Christian experience an international experience. This was done by just a few people who had been set apart and sent out. Actually, it is not fair to say it was done by just a few people. Only a few went out. There was a congregation at home, however, who were praying for them and helping to support them.

So what do we learn about setting apart and sending workers from the church in Antioch? The first thing that jumps out is that set-apart ministry begins with the call of God. It is not a volunteer position. One has to be recruited by God for this purpose. Notice again in our lesson that the people were worshipping and fasting, but no one was saying that they ought to send out some missionaries, and no one was saying, “You know what, I think I’ll be a missionary.” God spoke both the need and the people God wanted. “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Those wanting to be ordained in our denomination go through a long process in addition to the educational requirements that have to be met. They have to meet with the pastor of their church, and then a District Committee, and finally a Conference Committee. This actually takes some years. At every point of this journey, in every meeting, the conversation always begins, "Tell us about your call." The answer cannot be, "I want to do this because I think it would be a cool job," or "I had a chance to speak in my church and I think I like to preach," or, "I'm looking for something different in my life." The Committees are listening for something like, "God has taken hold of me and told me this is what I am to do and God will not leave me alone until I do it." Being set apart begins with the call of God.

Discerning that call is not always easy, however. Now and then someone describes a startling, unmistakable experience, a blinded-by-a-light on the road to Damascus, type experience. Most, however, talk about a series of less dramatic, vaguer experiences. Often people do not pay attention to these experiences because they do not know how to interpret them or, they do know how to interpret them but they do not want to be set apart, and so they try to ignore them.

This is where the church comes in. In our lesson, it is a little unusual because the call came as a group experience. The body was worshipping and fasting and God said to them as a group, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul. This meant that the body was able to discern the call for and with Barnabas and Saul. "Hey, whether or not you know it, this is what God wants you to do." I think it is important for us to always be looking for the gifts and graces in others and to listen for clues from God about wanting someone to be set apart.

I have often shared with you about my call and how I was slow accepting it because I had other things I wanted to do with my life. A big part of my finally saying yes to God was the encouragement of others. Friends, family, fellow church members, mentors consistently said to me, essentially – why are you going down that road? You should be in the ministry. That is how God has gifted you, not for what you want to do. I already had that suspicion, but when enough people confirmed it, there was no denying it. If you hear God telling you that so or so should be set apart, tell them that. If you have someone in your class or group and you all think that person should be set apart, tell them that. Don't think of all of the reasons it would not work for them. Believe me, they will think of enough reasons on their own. Tell them. Encourage them. Help them to discern the call.

Finally, when they do, send them. It is a great gift to the kingdom to set apart and send workers for Christ. It means losing them from our body, but it is a gift to the greater good. We have some churches in our Conference, really across the country that serve as what we call student charges. Essentially this means that the pastors assigned to them

are students in seminary, and they go to school part of the week and serve the church the rest of the week. I served one of these churches when I was in seminary.

What this means for that church is that they receive a new pastor every two or three years because when the student graduates, he or she is appointed elsewhere. It also means that they have to put up with whatever is the latest and greatest in scholarship, because the students bring what they are learning and with great enthusiasm impose it upon the church. And it means that their pastor is always an apprentice. That sounds like a bum deal, doesn't it? Those churches must be really low on the ladder to get stuck with that assignment.

I don't think of it that way, though. I have huge respect for these churches and consider them some of the most important churches in our conference. Why? Because their calling is to train and polish new clergy. They get them ready and send them out. These churches serve the church at large by providing leadership. Most churches will not be sending out new clergy every two or three years, but every church has the capacity to send one now and then. This church has a good record of that. But no matter how many are sent, the question should always be, who's next?

Once upon a time the church in Antioch responded to God's call of Barnabas and Saul and, rather than clutching them to themselves, they sent them out. As a result, the gospel spread far and wide and the Great Commission was carried out. Everyone has a role to play in spreading the gospel. Some, though, are to be set apart and sent.

Maybe that is you, or someone close to you. Listen carefully.

Amen.