

Pilgrims on a Journey
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Acts 15:36-16:5

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the brothers and sisters in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. ³⁹ The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and set out, the brothers and sisters commending him to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I have told several of you this, but our recent Sr. High Witness and Service Trip to Jamaica was one of the BEST trips I have ever led or participated in. I counted it up and Jamaica was my 18th mission trip. So, saying it is the BEST is really saying something. When people ask me why I consider our trip to Jamaica "the best", I have several reasons. First of all – the travel was easy. We had no delays or complications. Secondly, our accommodations were comfortable. Not fancy, nor camping style. Air-conditioning at night, a pool for downtime, and clean bathrooms. Thirdly, we could drink the water and the food was delicious. Reason number four – the work was meaningful and well organized. Fifth – it was a great mix of people. This is often the case, in fact, I can't think of a group that wasn't a great mix. That's the wonderful thing about trips like this- you grow as a group, you make memories, you make a difference in the lives of others, and it bonds you. Our trip was through an organization known as ACE – American Caribbean Experience. This organization was founded over 30 years ago by a

Presbyterian layperson from Atlanta named Marla Fitzwater. Serving one of the poorest parishes in Jamaica, ACE seeks to positively impact the greater St. Mary's region through education, healthcare, enterprise, and discipleship. After traveling much of Saturday, our time in Jamaica began on Sunday with worship at a local Presbyterian church called Kirk Church. It was a two-hour service, but the time flew by because of the hospitality of the congregation, a beautiful view of the ocean out the window, the meaningful sermon, and uplifting music and prayers. We were even able to celebrate the sacrament of communion together. That afternoon we had an orientation to the work we would be doing throughout the week. We rose bright and early Monday to head to a local school where we mixed concrete by hand, passed the concrete via bucket lines, and poured the concrete into a hand-dug ditch to reinforce the fencing around the school property. We also got to play with the children during recess. I was so proud of our crew for doing this hard work. On Tuesday we participated in what I call the "Jamaican Meals on Wheels". We delivered food and supplies to local folks who were in need and isolated. At each house, we would offer the residents soup and supplies, sometimes even hand feeding them, and then we would sing and pray with them for a few minutes. On Wednesday we learned about chocolate making and how that micro business empowers the women of the community we served. We also painted the porches of a home that was almost ready to welcome a new family and ministered to and cleaned the home of a man who recently suffered a stroke. On Thursday we visited a local farm that employs many residents and provides food for the local community. We cleaned up different areas of overgrowth and hauled bamboo that was blocking the flow of the river after a storm. On Friday we enjoyed some downtime at a local beach before traveling home on Saturday.

Have you ever heard about the 7-year friendship rule? In the early aughts Dutch sociologist Gerald Mollenhorst conducted a study with over 1,000 participants between ages 18-65. He found that "most people lose half of their social network every seven years, with the discarded relationships being traded in for newer, more contextually relevant ones."¹ At first take, this might sound depressing, but I don't think it is a bad thing. Life circumstances change and therefore our network of friends shifts. It doesn't mean we completely forget about the friends we've had in the past, rather it acknowledges that humans are evolving beings who aren't stagnant in any arena of life.

¹ Mia Erickson, *Studies show friendships lasting more than 7 years will last a lifetime* (bodyandsoul.com.au).

I chose two scripture readings from Acts this week because I wanted us to get a snapshot of the relationships among the early church leaders from two different moments in time. In our first text, from Acts 11, we learn about the partnership between two apostles – Barnabas and Paul. In the second text from Acts 15 we experience the end of Barnabas and Paul’s partnership and the beginning of Barnabas’s partnership with Mark and Paul’s partnerships with both Silas and Timothy. While these moments are separated by only 4 chapters in Scripture, they represent a difference of several years. It is estimated that Paul and Barnabas worked together for about two and a half years. We don’t know the exact details of their disagreement and parting. In Galatians 2, Paul offers his perspective, indicating that it is a theological difference. Acts 15 suggests it is the result of a “personal quarrel”. But does the reason really matter? We also don’t know if Paul and Barnabas ever reunited on this side of heaven. But we do know that their time ministering alongside one another was impactful to the growth of the church. And their gifts obviously complemented one another. Did you catch the last line from the Acts 11 reading? “It was in Antioch that they were first called Christians.” This is a pretty important fact. And it’s one of many good results of Paul and Barnabas’ faithful ministry in that place.

There was another aspect of our trip to Jamaica that I have not yet shared with you. And that was the presence of another church. I didn’t know that there was going to be another church group staying with us and working with ACE. This isn’t odd; it often happens on trips like this; it simply wasn’t something I was aware of coming into the week. So, in a Burger King in Montego Bay during a summer storm, we met our fellow pilgrims. They were from a church in metro Atlanta called 12 Stone. 12 Stone is a non-denominational church that is spread out over many campus locations and features dynamic contemporary worship each Sunday. In other words, this church couldn’t be more different than Westminster. About half the size of our group, they had four chaperones and 8 youth. We found out that we would not be together during the workday, but that we would be sharing meals and downtime together each day. Another aspect of our trip was who would be leading our groups while in Jamaica. It was a couple, also from the metro Atlanta area, named Courtney and Emily. They also couldn’t have been from a more different background than us. Courtney is a contemporary Christian musician and has always served in large, contemporary churches like 12 Stone. He is currently the principal of a small Christian high school. He has a close connection with the organization through whom we served and was helping them out that week. Y’all, I have to say, he immediately rubbed me the wrong way. And I was immediately judgmental of him. In my mind, he was a different type of Christian than me. In my mind, he didn’t respect me as a pastor because I am female. In my mind, he was long winded and overbearing. So, this is the setting in which we

began our work. And my judgment continued. Our leaders and fellow pilgrims prayed differently than we did. They studied the Bible in different ways than we did. They talked about “winning souls” as the primary goal of our week in Jamaica, instead of serving those in need like we framed it.

But over the course of our time in Jamaica, I wasn’t only humbled by the work we did among the residents of St. Mary’s parish, I was humbled by who we did the work alongside. I saw our youth become friends with the youth from 12 Stone over volleyball games in the pool. I saw our youth join them for early morning Bible studies and express their own opinions about the text. I saw our group welcome their group into a rousing game of “Ride that Pony”. I saw Westminster Youth and 12 Stone Youth working side by side to do kitchen duty for each meal. And I got to know our leader, Courtney, better. He complimented the work ethic of our group and my leadership. He vulnerably shared the story of his own faith journey and listened intently while we shared about ours. Somehow, over workdays and meals and jerk chicken and a beach day and evening downtime, we truly became brothers and sisters in Christ who nurtured each other in the faith. Now, we will probably never see any of those people again, the fellow pilgrims we served alongside, but for one week, we were united in mission, despite our differences, and made an impact together on the kingdom of God.

In the Harbinger article for today, Megan Revson highlights how important Christian nurture is in communities of faith. We are called to nurture those of all ages in what it means to be a Christian, just like Paul and Barnabas did for those first Christians in Antioch long ago. We do this through weekly worship and so many of our programs – Vacation Bible School, Music Ministry, Witness & Service trips like the one we just took to Jamaica, It’s Elementary, Youth Group, Confirmation, West Connect, Sunday School, nursery...the list goes on. This is also what Paul and Barnabas were doing in the early church way. They were loving people, caring for them, preaching the good news to them, teaching them to theologically understand the meaning of God’s love, Jesus’ ministry on earth, and the Spirit’s movement among them. And that took time and shared effort, and the unique skills I am certain they each brought. Will Willimon, one of our past Heritage Lecturers and Greenville native, says this about Paul and Barnabas’ ministry together –

“Conversion is the beginning of the Christian journey, not the final destination. Moreover, conversions in Acts are stories about vocation – someone is being called for

godly work. Conversion is not for the smug individual possession of the convert, but rather for the ongoing thrust of the gospel.”²

The two and half years Paul and Barnabas spent together were made up of roughly a year spent in Antioch (modern day Syria), nurturing those converts called “Christians” and eighteen months on a missionary journey throughout the Mediterranean region. Often referred to as “Paul’s First Missionary Journey,” these travels took them to such places as Paul’s home of Tarsus, Galatia, and Barnabas’ home region of Cyprus. These two were perfectly suited to such a mission. But then, it is time for a second missionary journey, this time farther afield to Europe. As Willimon points out,

“New challenges to the church require new leadership...Now Timothy is chosen, not only because he is well thought of but also because in his background, he unites both Jew and gentile. Leadership in the church is a function dependent upon what the church needs to have done. One is chosen by the church as a leader not as a matter of privilege or personal right or individual status but as a function of the church’s mission.”³

One of the things I loved the most from our time in Jamaica and will carry with me is the saying, “I will see you in heaven.” The people there say it a lot. The staff members of ACE, the parishioners at Kirk Church, those we visited on the “Meals on Wheels” of Jamaica routes, our beloved bus driver, Chester. This saying communicates kinship and hope. It is a way of acknowledging that all of us who are known as Christian live and work for something more than just what the world offers. Life isn’t just about our accomplishments, our worthiness, or our talents.

It’s not even about our differences. It is about how God moves among us and unites us in self-giving, everlasting love. I am so thankful that God moved among us earlier this month in St. Mary, Jamaica. I am grateful for the ways God humbled us, nurtured us, and surprised us. I am thankful for the pilgrims we met along the way, and I look forward to reuniting with them in heaven. Relationships, even those founded in Christ through Christian communities, might turn over every 7 years or less. But I don’t think it is a reason for despair. Rather, it is a reason to pray for who God might bring into your life and into your circle. It is a reason to be open-hearted about the pilgrims you encounter along the journey of faith and open-minded about what they might offer that will nurture you and others in the faith of Christ. Thanks be to God.

² Willimon, Acts Interpretation Commentary, 103.

³ Willimon, Acts Interpretation Commentary, 134.