

March of the Penguins  
Acts 11:19-30  
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Do you remember what you did on February 26, 2008 between the hours of 5:30 and 8:30 p.m.? It was a Tuesday, if that helps. There's one thing you probably did not do. You didn't go to Starbucks for coffee. On that day Starbucks closed 7000 stores for three hours to re-train 135,000 employees. That three-hour continuing ed. session cost the company 10 million dollars in wages and lost revenue. The aim of the training was simple: we need to relearn, even if its from our competitors, how to make a good cup of espresso.

Espresso is everything to the Starbucks enterprise. Apparently, mastery of this basic skill among Starbucks baristas had gotten sloppy. So Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz found a better way, he discovered the key to good espresso and went there to see how it was happening. Then he said that his plan was to "look to the company's future with 'laser intensity' by looking back to where it all began: the coffee." The coffee is everything.

This kind of behavior good for the church as well. Every so often we need to step back, look at where fruit is being born, and then say to ourselves can we learn from their model? You heard me right, even Presbyterians have something to learn, and much as we might try, we haven't thought of everything. So this morning I want to invite you to join me in looking at a text in which the Holy Spirit takes two groups of people, not unlike us, and by placing them together, puts them through some kingdom relationship training.

I invite you to turn with me in your bibles, either the bible you brought with you or the one in the pew rack in front of you to Acts chapter 11 beginning at verse 19. If you are following along in the Red pew bibles it is on page 120 of the New Testament. Or if you'd like you can read along on the screens beside me. Again we're reading Acts 11 verses 19-30, listen carefully we're reading God's Holy Word.

**Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25 So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.**

**27 Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). 29 So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers[b] living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.**

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord lasts forever. Amen.

The story of Barnabas and Paul going to the city of Antioch is a story about encouragement, the Holy Spirit galvanizing unlike people into unlikely community. In one place the church is taking off, people are being added daily it says. But in another place they're scattered and struggling. Pretty common occurrence throughout our history, don't you think?

And yet, instead of repeating the patterns of the past, at least in some respect, maybe there's something we can learn about community that is centered on the Spirit, and gathered in from different places. What Acts chapter 11 might point us to is a way of living in the Kingdom as people being taught about what community is supposed to look like. The church in Antioch is an example of a community that is formed and reformed when people with varying gifts and passions for the gospel are brought together.

Now in the early days of the Church one of the major divisions was between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jewish people). Jews thought that they were the true believers, and criticized the Gentiles because they didn't have any of the cultural and religious traditions that gave the Jews their uniqueness. It even became a stumbling block for some because Gentiles were treated like second class followers. But the Apostle Paul rails against this sort of behavior, reminding them that in Jesus they're all in the family. In fact the Apostle Paul in the Book of Romans chapter 14 speaks out against these behaviors, he says: **Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat...and here's the key phrase, for God has welcomed them.**

But then it goes on to say that there were a hand full of them who were proclaiming Jesus in Antioch and the place was exploding. Now the Apostles from Jerusalem and the believers in Antioch are different. Here's where you say, "how different were they?"

They were so different that it would have been like a Presbyterian showing up at a prayer meeting where tongues were spoken. But maybe the point here is not their differences, but what they can learn from one another about becoming a more effective and united front.

Eugene Peterson, author of the Message bible translation grew up in deeply charismatic Pentecostal community, said of his upbringing: “the core of my Pentecostal identity is the lived conviction that everything, absolutely everything, in the scriptures is livable. Not just true, but livable. Not just an idea or a cause, but livable in real life. When he went away to seminary New York City he inadvertently became a Presbyterian. He says, “what I needed, but didn’t know I needed, the Presbyterians offered me: the gift of a living tradition. Tradition grafted me into immense continuities of prayer and worship, of saints and artists, of countries and continents.” So now he now calls himself a Presbycostal which we have adopted in our family too.

Surely the same spirit that raised Christ from the dead could bring people with even the most unlike backgrounds and transform them into the most unlikely of friends. All it takes is a willingness and even a little bit of vulnerability to let the Spirit of God move in our hearts, if it does, watch out because things will happen.

There’s a wonderful story by Isak Dinesen called *Babette’s Feast*, about a strict, dour, fundamentalist community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two elderly sisters who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babette’s dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night her austere employers demand that she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes, because, they say, Jesus commanded, “Take no thought of food and drink.”

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village.

At first the townspeople refuse: “No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food.” But Babette begs them, and finally they relent, “As a favor to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner.” But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they do not enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village, along with cages of quail and barrels of fine wine.

Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine, the finest vintage in all of France. And the atmosphere changes. Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, “After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, love one another?”

By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years

together. This pack of Pharisees is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, “Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!” And Babette replies, “I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast.”

Another major component to communities that are being reforged by the Holy Spirit is hospitality. Often the greatest changes don't take place in a church service but around a table. Because in church services one person speaks, and everyone listens. Around the table people have the chance to talk. In church you see the backs of peoples heads, at a meal you see the expressions on other people's faces. Church services are on the clock, around the table there is time to talk.

It's no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin root because they both lead to the same result, healing. When we open our lives to others the message we send is this: “you matter to me and you matter to God.” When we invite people into our lives what you might say is, come over for coffee, what they hear is I am someone important to you.

It is no accident that the growth in Antioch and the growth in the early church is 100% linked to this Spirit-led, authentic, meaningful community. When we are at our best and relationships of mercy, trust and love are forged, lives are changed. And let me tell you, that is the most infectious, most yearned for quality the church has to offer. It's not the music, it's not the sanctuary, it's not the preaching, it's community. Show me a church that lives out the gospel in this way, and I will show you a healthy and vibrant community.

But even where growth is taking place, what the Spirit will always tell us is this, stick to the basics. Sometimes when churches talk about fellowship and community they say things like well we've got these small groups happening, or you can join this study, or be a part of this committee. Whatever happened to the simple fellowship that happens around someone's kitchen table over a cup of coffee. There, my friends, is often where Jesus shows up in the most profound of ways. There's a great acronym we can use for this kind of community it's the word TABLE. Communities that reveal God's goodness to one another in real tangible and concrete ways exhibit these qualities among others (Trust, Accountability, Belonging, Laughter and Encouragement).

The text concludes with a note about a famine in the land of Judea, and just so we would know that this is truly a mutual relationship the community at Antioch determines to send relief to the people in Jerusalem. The downfall of so many places where the enthusiasm of the Spirit catches hold, is that they begin to think that it's all about them, all about building, all about growing and expanding. When in fact so often what the Spirit reminds us is that authentic community does one thing really well, it cares for people. Just like Starbucks, every once and a while it is good for us to remind ourselves how to make espresso.

A few years ago there was a movie called the March of the Penguins (some of you are probably thinking, I was wondering when he was going to get to that title reference.) And the movie follows Emperor Penguins on their journey through the Ice and Snow in the most inhospitable of conditions. Once the male penguins have reached the breeding ground they are given the responsibility for the eggs. And they place those eggs between their legs and on top of their feet beneath the folds of skin to keep the egg warm, and without it the chick would never survive. These normally competitive male penguins override their typical nature and become a team for the sake of survival. As the storms come in these male penguins huddle together, taking turns standing in the middle of the group where it is warmest. The vicious winds pelt the penguins, but while they are huddled together in community they can weather the storm. During these ravaging winters, these penguins are a united and cooperative team. They brace the storm by merging their thousand bodies into a single mass.

When I saw this film I was so moved because that is what church is supposed to be like. If the penguins can figure this out.....don't you think we ought to be able to as well? No one deserves to be left out, we are becoming a community where life...of all shapes, sizes, colors, backgrounds, is sustained by the community. This is what church is, above all else, the body, connected to the head, living in one glorious direction. Salvation comes not just through the proclamation of the gospel, but it come through the incarnation of the gospel. So that the Christ who indwells you is met and sustained and nurtured and united to the Christ who indwells me.