

A Community That Breaks Through
Breaking Through Series Week 4
Acts 11:19-26 Antioch
March 13, 2016

Welcome/intro/vision

Now I am usually the guy up here speaking, but this week I wasn't supposed to be!

Steve Tamayo our associate pastor was slated to speak this week and we knew it was a possibility that the twins might come around this time
but he's got some incredible insights on the topic that we're talking about
and so several weeks ago we put him on the calendar anyway

So I found out on Thursday that I was going to be giving this message when I'm usually about 90% DONE with preparing the message by Thursday

So what that means is that we're all going to find out TOGETHER what it is I have to say this morning!

And I ask for an extra measure of grace here today as well as obviously ask you to celebrate with us the new lives in the Tamayo house and pray for the continued health and the transition in the family

If you're new or just missed the past couple of weeks,
this is our last week in a series called Breaking Through--in the beginning of the book of Acts Jesus a job to do:

***["you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the end of the earth." -Acts 1:8]***

And in order to do this job and be on this mission it was going to require that they break through barriers that had separated people from God and from each other for centuries

in every culture, every nation, every people group has these dividing walls that Jesus is telling his disciples here to crash right through!

Jesus sends his followers out on a mission to build a community that is going to finally offer the world *the* solution to this problem that no one's been able to figure out

We believe as a church that we're participating in this same mission
to be on mission to all of Chatham County and beyond
to BE Chatham COMMUNITY Church, a church for the whole community that works to break down the same walls that plague us and that plagued people back then.

If we are not doing this kind of work, at least attempting to do this kind of work, then we're not doing what Jesus has called us to do!

So we're following along in the book of Acts as the early church fumbles their way through trying to follow through on Jesus' call to break through barriers

Quick recap if you're just joining us:

Two weeks ago we saw the church had its first internal challenge and it was along racial lines:

And the apostles do an amazing thing when they hear this complaint: they LISTEN!

They don't get defensive or edgy or ignore it or talk about how hard they're working or how hard they're trying—they LISTEN

And we talked about how this listening is mission-critical to breaking through any sort of barrier between people groups

And then two weeks ago we saw Peter being called by an angel to go visit a Gentile and tell him and his family about Jesus

This is something that he never would have done on his own ever, ever, ever, because there were rules and patterns of behavior that kept Jewish people from associating with or visiting the house of a Gentile—that is, anyone who's not a Jew

And we talked about how because these divisions between people groups have so much history in every culture

In every culture there are these ingrained patterns of behavior that are like moving walkways that will carry us, without any effort whatsoever, into racialized patterns of behavior

all of us are on multiple moving walkways that without us wanting it or intending it, these moving walkways will separate us along these lines

where we live, where we shop, who we spend time with or what kinds of conversations we have with which kinds of people

And so we talked two weeks ago about naming and stepping off of our moving walkways in order to participate in Jesus' call to break through barriers

And then last week, we again looked at the story of Peter and this Gentile named Cornelius

And we saw that both of them had grown up in a society that had told both of them that they were innately superior to the other people groups around them.

Cornelius was a Roman soldier and Rome thought of itself as the greatest nation that ever was—in fact, they were justified in conquering everyone else because they were so much better than everyone else

And Peter's been taught his whole life that HIS people, the Jews, are God's chosen people and therefore everyone else was NOT chosen

But then God calls these men to have a little meet-up—and in order for this meet-up to happen, they're both going to have to deal with the prejudice in their own hearts

And we talked last week about this kind of religious-sounding word is so important in this process of breaking through barriers

we've got to acknowledge and repent of our own prejudices in our hearts on the inside in order to participate in God's breaking through work on the outside

This is the last week in our series and our goal has been really just to start this conversation with a few different ways of coming at this

In my own life, I've had a bit of a journey with understanding God's heart for this issue.

And like most things in my life, my wife was much further ahead than I was when it came to God's heart for crossing racial and socio-economic barriers

But when I finally came around in my late-20's, she and I had been married for about 4 years

and we were in a stage in our lives where we wondered if we might move out of apartment living and see if we could afford a house—so we engaged in a very light, just sort of checking things out sort of a process

And then one day a friend of ours told us about a friend of hers who's house was on the market

a beautiful big house for very cheap, in part because it was a working-class, blue collar, almost all-black neighborhood

So we went and looked at it and we knew this was exactly where God wanted us—it was perfect for us.

AND it was way off the moving walkway, all of our other 20-something white friends were moving towards the West End of Richmond, not the Northside of Richmond

But we'd been thinking about and talking about moving across racial and socio-economic lines and this was going to put into action the stuff we'd been talking about

So we bought a house in the northside of Richmond that about 75-100 years earlier had been THE place to live in Richmond until black folks started moving in and the white folks moved out

And so when we moved in, it was a largely working class to poor African-American neighborhood with typical urban problems: unemployment, underemployment, drugs and alcohol

Thanks to Google we can see what it looks like now.

The green house is 113 Overbrook Road, that was our place—I hated that bush right there, it was my nemesis
the house to the right of it was all boarded up and abandoned when we lived there, good to see someone's fixed it up

The house on the other side behind the trees there was lived in by a black muslim man who had several wives and many kids.

He told us that some people didn't like it when white folks moved into the neighborhood but he liked it because it drove up the property values!

And we got to know some families in the neighborhood and I built a relationship with a local pastor in the neighborhood
and I began to see what life was like from a different perspective
on the other side of the city from where most of the people who looked like me lived

It was the first time as an adult that I had ever put myself in a place where I was regularly in the minority

I was outside of my own people group not just at a one-time event but I woke up to it every day, in my neighborhood

And through this little experience of intentional displacement

I began to develop a great deal of respect for what it takes to be person who lives the fullness of the cross-cultural experience every day of their lives and really doesn't have much of a choice in the matter

And what I've seen is that in my own life and in the lives of many of the men and women that I've known is that experience of displacement

Can be used in huge ways by God to be a part of this mission-critical work of breaking through barriers that have plagued humanity since the beginning of time.

That's what we're doing to see as we turn to Acts 11, starting in v. 19, and it actually picks up from the story earlier in Acts that we talked about a couple of weeks ago

Stephen, one of the leaders of the early church, is the first martyr in Jerusalem in the early church

And from that a big persecution breaks out and the Christians flee Jerusalem and they start going around and telling people about Jesus

That's where we're going to pick up in Acts 11:19:

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

Here's an example of the moving walkway effect: the Jewish Christians who get scattered go all over the place talking to people about Jesus

But as they travel, they're still Jewish! And they're most comfortable around other Jews.

And if they've got family that they're staying with, it's likely that all their family is Jewish, too.

And Steve in his research on this passage found that in Antioch alone there were an estimated 70,000 Jewish people. 70,000! That's more people than live in all of Chatham County.

So it's a legitimate people group to talk to. It's not like there's just one or two Jewish families in all of Antioch, this is a large group of people

and they could have camped out here and had a legitimate explanation— shouldn't we reach our OWN people first?

Shouldn't we take care of our own people and make sure that they hear about Jesus first?

It is ALWAYS easiest and most natural to continue to talk to people just like us, isn't it?

This is why it's so important that we not trivialize or sentimentalize Jesus's command to his disciples that they from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

This is the thesis statement of the whole book of Acts AND it's hard, hard, hard work.

And so even as they're scattered beyond Jerusalem and even as they're surrounded by Greeks and other non-Jewish people groups

they continue to hang out on the moving walkway

After we'd lived in our neighborhood in Richmond for about six months or so, I

I was out one day walking my dog and praying for the neighborhood, and I saw something I hadn't seen since we moved in—it was white people! Several blocks over but still in my new neighborhood!

And my first thought was:

“I see white people! My people! Maybe these can be friends!”

I felt this strong draw of likeness and affinity that these might be people who I could or we could connect with much more easily than the rest of my neighbors who were all around us

Fortunately by God's grace the husband that I met was totally weird. Just an odd, odd, dude

and so God helped me to stay off the moving walkway by making the only white people in the neighborhood a little cooky

But if he hadn't been so weird, I would likely have gotten right back onto my moving walkway

Because just like these Christians who are scattering from Jerusalem, being displaced doesn't always mean that you're genuinely engaging with the people around you who are different from you

Genuine engagement usually requires some degree of *intentionality*. Apart from intentionality, we'll continue on the moving walkway.

And the next sentence tells us about a group of people who take these steps of intentionality and make a huge, huge difference:

²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

So here's the people who get off the moving walkway of just talking to other Jews. And notice where they're from: Cyprus and Cyrene!

So here's the journey these men have taken: they were Jews who were living in Cyprus and Cyrene, they had come to Jerusalem probably for Pentecost, which we get the story of back in Acts chapter 2

They had gotten caught up in this movement of Jesus people along with a couple thousand other Jewish people and had stayed in Jerusalem.

But they weren't FROM Jerusalem. They were from Cyprus and Cyrene.

So while they were accepted in the church and welcomed, they were still people who had come in from the outside, they weren't Hebraic Jews who had lived right there in Jerusalem

And so when the persecution happens and the Christians have to scatter, who are the people who are the first to talk to outsiders about Jesus?

The people who started out themselves as the outsiders in Jerusalem.

They remembered what it was like, had some empathy for what it was like to be the outsider, they had affinity for people who were outsiders because that's where they started

And it's still much more natural for these guys to stay on the moving walkway and just talk to Jews, that's for sure. They're still Jewish and it's still more normal for Jews to primarily associate with other Jews

But if anyone was going to take the first step of intentionality off the moving walkway and to take the message from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth, it was going to be these guys

The guys who started out as outsiders, who became insiders, then were scattered out to the nations and displaced as outsiders again, who then take steps to welcome other outsiders into the new family of God around Jesus

And what's the result? The very first church outside of Jerusalem is this multi-ethnic mix of Greeks and Jews, all worshipping Jesus

the exact type of church that Jesus had sent his followers out to establish in the first place

One of the things that moving to our house on Overbrook Road did for me was put me in a different part of the city

I had worked in Richmond at that point for about 7 years doing student ministry at VCU, Virginia Commonwealth University.

It's an urban campus in downtown Richmond.

Now I knew that somewhere in the greater Richmond metro area there were two other universities where my organization didn't have any campus ministry—they were both Historically Black Universities, or HBCU's.

HBCU's were started for black students during a time when white universities weren't admitting any black students anywhere.

And because they were historically black universities, I didn't really take a lot of effort or initiative to find out where these schools were

and I didn't bother to go visit them to see if they had any sort of need for a campus ministry or resources that we might help out with

But once I moved to my new house, in a new part of town, I started taking new routes to get into work.

And because from my new house I was now commuting from the North side rather than the West side

I realized almost immediately that one of those HBCU's, Virginia Union University, was literally only about 4 or 5 city blocks from the campus I had spent 7 years serving on already.

And I never even knew it was there. I had never bothered to find out where it was.

And I was convicted at that point that if it had been a predominantly white school, I would not have waited 7 years to accidentally find out where the school was located

So I went on the school web site, and like many HBCU's in the south, this school has historically religious roots and they had a chapel service on Thursday mornings

So the next Thursday morning, I pulled up to Virginia Union University, got out of my car

And I prayerfully walked into a chapel service that was packed full of students and I was the only white person in the building

And my first thought was how uncomfortable and awkward I felt—"well this is awkward!" and then my second thought was:

"this is what it would feel like to be a black person in my church and in my campus ministry."

The service was lively and engaging and I tried to keep up as best as I could

As I left, I saw a sign posted on the chapel door: "Come see Virginia Union's newest student organization: the Christian Club" And it had a student's name, Jason was his name, and it had a phone number on it

I called Jason, told him that I did campus ministry over at VCU, had visited VUU, and saw his sign, would he be willing to meet with me after the chapel service the next week.

Jason said yes, he'd be glad to meet after chapel, he said, 'let's meet on the steps afterwards, I'm real light skinned!' and I was like, "hey, so am I!"

And so we met after the chapel service, and we went to the cafeteria and I met the rest of the people over lunch who were helping to start the Christian Club:

Jason introduced me to another guy they called Blue I'm not sure I ever heard his real name, a woman named Delight who was a great leader in the group and a number of other folks who were a part of it

And for that whole rest of the school year, Thursdays I went to chapel at VUU as the only white guy, got lunch with that crew in the cafeteria where I was the only white guy

and eventually my organization was able to put a full-time campus minister there to serve those students

God dropped the perfect house for us in our laps on the other side of the city at a time in our lives that we were both thinking about buying a house and when we were thinking a lot about issues of breaking through barriers
God did led us to that place, we didn't make that happen.

But then our willingness to engage our neighbors and our neighborhood, prepared me to take another step of engagement in a different context
and when I took that intentional step, I again stumbled across something that I couldn't have generated or known was happening: the Christian Club was getting off the ground just as I got there

Throughout my experience of breaking through barriers, there was this mixture of two elements:

part of it was *intentionality* and risk on my part to do some things, but a big part of it was *the work of the Spirit* doing stuff that I couldn't control or manufacture

The men from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Jerusalem well before this story happened to celebrate Pentecost—they did that on purpose

But when they got there to Pentecost, the Spirit of God did stuff that they had no idea was in the works when they first booked their flight to Jerusalem!

The Spirit of God fell in Jerusalem and they were there to participate in it and get caught up in it—that's something that they couldn't control

But then they STAYED long after in Jerusalem, even though they were outsiders, to continue to learn from the apostle's teaching as they passed along the teachings of Jesus—that was intentionality on their part

But then they got scattered in the persecution and they ended up in Antioch, which wasn't far from their home

And while other Jews were sharing about Jesus with other Jews, they started sharing about Jesus with Greeks there in Antioch—that required some intentionality

But as they did this, it says that there are things happening that they couldn't manufacture or do on their own strength: "*the Lord's hand was with them*"

God's hand was upon them, giving them remarkable success among the people--that was God's Spirit

Three weeks ago, we talked about the importance of listening in order to break through barriers. Two weeks ago we talked about moving off the moving walkway. Last week we talked about dealing with the prejudice in our own hearts

This week's big idea that Steve Tamayo was going to bring to you but I'm bringing to you instead is this:

Breaking through barriers requires a blend of both human intentionality and the organic, uncontrollable work of God's Spirit

In these passages where break through is happening, you see a blend of both the Spirit of God moving and people moving in sync with what the Spirit is up to—it requires both

As Steve and I were talking, he identified this reality that people who are just getting started in this conversation feel this tension:

shouldn't this breaking through barriers thing just happen naturally? If I try to make it happen it's going to feel forced or fake and not authentic.

And in our culture, particularly in white culture, we have a high cultural value on authenticity, on making sure that everything we do is totally in line with our sense of who we are

And some of this is because we don't like people who are fakes or who are hypocrites, so there's some value in it

But sometimes what it means is we don't want to do the right thing, even if we know it's the right thing, if we're not totally sure it's authentic to who I am in that moment.

Taken to this extreme this is, of course, ridiculous.

If I waited to be the kind of person who liked to see the dentist before I went to the dentist, would I EVER go to the dentist? NO!

Sometimes we simply go ahead and do the right thing even if we don't feel like doing the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do.

But if we're listening and repenting, like we've been talking about the past couple of weeks

then it's not inauthentic to get off the moving walkway, even if it feels a bit forced at the time--of course it does, we're stepping OFF the moving walkway!

If we want everything to feel natural and authentic and normal, then we should just stay on the moving walkway and ignore this part of God's call on our lives

and continue to let humanity be plagued by these same miserable divisions and fault lines

It's not inauthentic for men from Cyprus and Cyrene to get off the moving walkway and talk to the Greeks.

Peter and Philip have broken the ice in the previous couple of chapters in Acts, and so of course why not go to the Greeks!

They're paying attention, they're listening, they're willing to turn away from Jewish walls and their own prejudice

If we're willing to listen and if we're willing to deal with prejudice in our own hearts, then the intentional moves we make along the way, while sometimes they'll feel difficult or even forced at times, are going to be authentic steps to cross the barriers

Breaking through barriers requires a blend of both human intentionality and the organic, uncontrollable work of God's Spirit

There are things that we can't control, but there are things that we are commanded to control and to address.

If we're willing to do those, what we'll find is that the surprising work of the Spirit starts to show up in the most unexpected places

The men from Cyrene and Cyprus step off the moving walkway and share the good news of Jesus

as they do so, they meet Jesus and find that the Spirit of God is already at work in that place to do something new and powerful

And what happens next is that the news filters back to the apostles who are still in Jerusalem, and here's what they do:

22 News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

About the same time I was moving to our first house in Richmond and visiting Virginia Union

On the campus where I had been working for 7 years I was invited by a Christian African-American student group to come and speak at their weekly large group meeting

And from the moment that I got up to speak, much to my great delight, they were talking back to me.

They amen'd and they "I know that's righted" and "Praise Jesus" and 'come on now' all throughout my entire talk

They talked back when I said something smart. They talked back when I said something not-so-smart.

It was AWESOME! I loved it! So much fun!

And afterward I was walking back to the car and I called my wife Kelly on the phone and she said, "How was it?"

And I said to Kelly, "I am never talking to white people ever again!"

Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to Antioch to see what's going on.

Barnabas is a wise choice, not only is he an encourager and wise, we found out earlier in the book of Acts that he's ALSO from Cyprus

just like the guys who helped to start this church, so he's likely got good pre-existing relationships with these people already

Now, what Barnabas probably found was something similar to what I found that night when I went and spoke at the black student large group gathering:

it was the same Jesus being worshiped, but the expression and the packaging was a little bit different.

And the tricky thing that the early church is going to navigate all throughout the New Testament era is

will they celebrate that difference where it does not change the essential message or will they squash it?

What was essential versus where was it okay to have different expressions of the same faith?

Was it okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols? Was it necessary to observe the Jewish holidays and festivals? What about circumcision, was that essential to being a real Christian?

When Barnabas arrives at the first church community to exist outside of Jerusalem, it is likely that he finds some things that are very familiar and some things that are expressed differently, and he has to decide how to respond to those differences

And thank goodness he delights to celebrate those differences, or else I'd have to give up eating bacon!

Barnabas continues with Peter in stepping off the moving walk way and breaking down barriers

by recognizing that some things that he might have previously thought of as sacred were actually optional for the sake of the mission moving forward

And in order for the message to move from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth, it was going to have to be a big enough message that it touched every human being and included every human being

And so it must have something permanent and powerful about it that would never change

While at the same time, it had to be flexible enough and nimble enough to meet each person and every culture and find a way to be expressed faithfully in each culture

And so Barnabas, who started as an outsider in Jerusalem, is sent to Antioch by the apostles to assess the situation, and he celebrates what God is doing there
it's something that no one could invent or manufacture

And Luke, the author of Acts, wants to celebrate it as well, here's an important milestone that he notes as we close out our time in this story:

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

There's a signature moment right there. The employee's of Chik-fil-A can tell you the first store that changed their name to Chik-fil-A

And Luke, as he's writing the history of the Christian church, wants you and I to know the first place where Christians were called Christians—it's a signature moment in our history

When we're willing to listen and when we're willing to deal with the stuff in our own hearts that needs to be weeded out

it puts us in a place where if we're open and willing to participate in what God's up to, he just might surprise us with what he wants to do.

Because sometimes, not always, but sometimes, the Spirit is moving in ways that we can't control or manufacture to do things that we couldn't have ever hoped for or asked or imagined

This morning as we close out this series, I want to call us to prayerfully consider what it means for each of us to participate in God's call to break through barriers.

We've talked about it in these ways:

1. Listening
2. Stepping off the moving walkway
3. Repenting of prejudice in our own hearts
4. Intentionality that partners with the uncontrollable work of God's Spirit

There's tons more that could be said, but this is where we're going to start this conversation together and we'll continue to come back to this conversation in various ways at various times

And more importantly, we're hoping and praying that we might LIVE this MISSION out, the one that Jesus gave his disciples in the very beginning!

And this morning I'm going to simply ask this as we close:

1. Which of these four is your next step? Which of these four do you sense that you need to work on or lean into?
2. What's one thing you can do this week to go to work in that area?

As we close, I want to encourage you at some point to talk to Steve Tamayo about all of this, like I said earlier he's super-gifted and thoughtful and wise in this conversation

and he's got some very unique thoughts as a half-Cuban, half white guy about what's hard about this conversation for white folks and how to encourage white folks in this conversation

So if you're looking for some encouragement in this journey
ask Steve about his take on all of this, he's got a lot of wisdom to offer

And as we close, my prayer is that the Lord might take these past few weeks and weave them deep into our hearts and into our church's culture

That we might be a part of his larger work of breaking through barriers right here in our community, that we might be the church that he longs for us to be.