

# Notes for Brian's Sermon at Brentwood Presbyterian Church

Sun, Sept 8, 2019

## Nourishing Steadfast Devotion

(Ps 1 and Acts 11:19-30)



**When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:23-24)**

### Insights from the story within the story

The church in Jerusalem is anxious – they are anxious about Antioch and how disciples of Jesus are being formed there – some of those in Jerusalem still think being a faithful follower of Jesus means following strictly a set of rituals and rules – they are, we can see in retrospect, too restrictive in and protective of their particular representation of Jesus – the Holy Spirit, the primary actor throughout Acts, is about to disrupt those assumptions yet again – and the setting is the pre-industrial city of Antioch – the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city in the Roman empire, after Rome itself and Alexandria – couldn't find figures about its population at the time of Luke's writing – it's a central node in a complex system of rural villages and trade routes – a small group of elite landowners and military personnel – lived in the walled centre of the city – surrounded by artisans and casual labourers who often lived in slave-like conditions, dependent on the largess of the elites for survival – Christianity drew most of its early participants from that class – displaced people from the dynamics of the consolidation of landholding and the commercialization of the work of their hands – but these pre-industrial cities in the Roman empire did bring together a wide variety of peoples who previously had had little contact with one another – a new diversity and mixture of peoples was taking place – the old racial and religious boundaries of secure identity were breaking down – and this new movement of Jesus' followers, about to be called "Christians" for the first time here in Antioch, was playing a role in this reforming of identity – for them, to be clear, the core source of your identity was not race, or even religious rules and rituals, but your response to the forgiving and reconciling love God had shown to the whole world in Jesus Christ – a relationship gifted by God working its way to the ends of the earth by the agency of the Holy Spirit – inviting the devotion of anyone as a nourishing response to the Creator's steadfast love for the whole world

## Provocative points to ponder – as always, too many to cram into one sermon

- As I have been considering the lessons the Spirit is offering as we work our way through some of the incidents that Luke records in telling the story of the expansion of the church, I begun to see afresh the discipline that emerged as more and more people participated in the communities that were nourishing the Christian way – good to remember these folks are still small in numbers – witnessing to this forgiving and reconciling love of God in an indifferent or hostile social environment
- Three elements in the discipline stand out for me at this point – the first is **relationship** – gift of God, with God, for the blessing of God’s creation – the second is **redemption** – in that relationship, seeing ourselves as forgiven, freed, and flourishing in what is literally a ‘new humanity’ now enabled and empowered to be the companions in blessing that God created us to be – the third is **responsibility** – quite literally, gifted with the ability to respond to God’s forgiving love by participating in its work in this world – we are also cursed, if you will, with the ability to resist and reject that gift – but our steadfast devotion will flourish best if we keep opening ourselves to God’s many reminders of the steadfast love of the Lord that infuses everything, a love beyond anything we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20)

### How does this apply to our mission here at Brentwood?

If we are not nourishing you to flourish in those disciplines of relationship, redemption, and responsibility, then I want you to tell us – let us know what we can do better here at Brentwood – we keep striving to be good followers of Jesus, remaining “faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” – open to the illumination of the Holy Spirit – and inviting others to consider the claims and comforts of the Christian way – but we can always be reformed, according to our deepening understanding of the living Word of God in Jesus Christ, to nourish people more faithfully in living out their response to the steadfast devotion of the triune God to their wellbeing

### My Notes



### My Prayers