

## **“The Soul Strengtheners”**

**Acts 14:21-23**

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

January 8, 2006

Note: *The Sermons in January are based on the actions within The Great Commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20): Go, Make Disciples, Baptize, Teach, and Remember. Today’s sermon focuses on “Make Disciples.”*

Many years ago, a new member asked to come see me to talk about her role as a member of this church. She burst into my study, very excited, and announced that – as a new member of Fairlington Presbyterian Church – she had converted three souls last week and was close to “closing the deal” on two others this week. She actually used those words: *closing the deal*.

### **There were several ways I could have responded:**

1. *You did what? Converted souls? Are you some kind of closet Baptist? Presbyterians don’t convert souls.* (But that was too stereotype-casting.)
2. *You “closed the deal”? What deal would that be?* (too sarcastic)
3. *I’m concerned that **you** think **you** can convert anybody. That would be the Holy Spirit’s job.* (Too harsh – but theologically correct.)

What I *actually* did was let my jaw drop a little bit, and then regain my composure and say something mealy-mouthed like, “Great!”

*And did you actually tell them you were from Fairlington Presbyterian?  
You did?! Great!*

Don’t we want people to become Christian? Don’t we want more people to hear about Jesus and change the way they live? Absolutely.

But when Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and make *other* people disciples,<sup>1</sup> it wasn’t about tallying up conversion scores. And it wasn’t the kind of thing you could do door to door handing out literature about the essential tenets of our faith.

Being a disciple of Jesus and making other people disciples of Jesus was more about relationships and commitments and changed lives. It was about doing what Jesus did. It was about being an apprentice to the Rabbi Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19

Rob Bell is a preacher in Michigan<sup>2</sup> who explains it this way: When Jesus was a boy, all Jewish boys learned the Torah – the first five books of what we call The Old Testament. And when I say they learned it, I mean they learned every word by heart – all 187 chapters of the first five books of Scripture. And when they were about 12 years old, the very best students – the best of the best Torah students – went on for further study with the rabbi.

Other boys would leave formal schooling and instead learn their family trade. They might become fishermen or carpenters. But the very brightest boys would follow the rabbi. It was said that they were literally following in the rabbi's footsteps so that the rabbi's dust was on the feet of the disciples who followed him.

This is interesting for several reasons. When Jesus called his disciples, they were the second-stringers, the rejects, the ones who had not been “the best of the best.” They were the ones the official rabbi in town had *not* chosen.

Jesus called James and John and Andrew (who were fishermen). He called Matthew (who was a tax collector). So . . . being called to be Jesus' disciple didn't mean you were smarter than everyone else or braver than everyone else. It simply meant that Jesus saw something in you that was promising, that Jesus' purposes could be carried out even with someone that others might have rejected.

The first 12 disciples were not perfectly faithful followers of Jesus either. (Remember Peter denying he even knew Jesus? Remember Judas?) They sometimes didn't get it right. In fact they rarely got it right, in the beginning.

But after Jesus died and was risen, he appeared to them and said: Go. Make disciples of other people. Make disciples of all nations.

And they passed on the faith to others, who passed the faith to others, who passed the faith to others, who passed the faith to *us*.

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Now Paul was a Jewish leader who had his own first hand experience with Jesus even though Jesus had already died, risen, and ascended into heaven<sup>3</sup> But it was just as personal, just as real as the up close and personal encounters the first 12 disciples had had with Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Bell is pastor of the Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan and he tells this story in the Nooma video called “Dust.”

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:1-19a.

Paul was an unlikely disciple because he had persecuted other disciples as a Jewish leader. But something powerful happened to him and everything changed: his name, his way of life.<sup>4</sup> He *had to* tell people what he had experienced about Jesus.

So this is what Paul did. He traveled from town to town, first visiting the local synagogue in each town in hopes of first telling his Jewish brothers and sisters about Jesus. Sometimes they listened to him and sometimes they did not.

And when they did not listen, it was often not pretty. He might even be attacked and dragged out of town. In fact, that is exactly what happened just before he and his fellow disciple Barnabas were traveling together in what is now Turkey, the lesson for today.

They went to Derbe, close to Paul's hometown<sup>5</sup> and we are told that "they made many disciples there." Then they went on to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch where there were already followers/disciples of Jesus. We are told that in *those* places, Paul and Barnabas "strengthen the souls of the disciples" and encouraged them to continue even in the throes of persecution.

This is the crux of our lesson for today. ***What exactly did Paul and Barnabas do in those towns just north of the Mediterranean Sea?*** Did they hand out little scrolls of parchment with some sort of Christian propaganda on them? Did they stand on the corner of dusty streets with the First Century version of a sandwich board on their bodies proclaiming, "The end is near! Repent and believe!"

Not really. Actually not at all. Instead they "made disciples" and they "strengthened the souls" of those who were already disciples of Jesus.

The Greek word used here which we translate: "made disciples" is the same word Jesus used in the Great Commission. It means "to teach or instruct" or "to follow someone's instructions." To be a disciple was to do what Jesus did, to follow so closely behind this Rabbi that *the dust on his feet was now on our feet*.

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Most of us perhaps wouldn't call ourselves "disciples" of Jesus. Sure we are Christian, maybe vaguely Christian. But discipleship sounds much too drastic. And frankly it is.

I've heard many times that the problem with our church is that we need more members. Actually we have plenty of members.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul was once known as "Saul." Acts 13:9 is the first time we see that his name is changed. Saul was a Hebrew name; Paul a Roman version of the same name.

<sup>5</sup> Paul was from Tarsus about 75 miles southeast of Derbe.

Some church consultants say that the problem with our churches today is that have “too many church members. But we have **too few disciples of Jesus Christ.**”<sup>6</sup> Too many members. Too few disciples. What does this mean? It means that:

**We have too few people in our churches who are passionate about the very thing that got the Christian church started 2000 years ago: changed lives, changed priorities, being people who are more concerned with building the Kingdom of God than about our own personal comfort.**

If we are really serious about following Jesus, about being disciples who have the dust of our Rabbi on our own feet, then we need to recognize that we have a calling and a purpose that has nothing to do with climbing the ladder of worldly success and everything to do with making the world *different*.

We are called first and foremost to be servants of the living God, to read the scriptures and know what Jesus taught: that the way the world is now is not the way God intended it to be, but we will work to make it so because we have experienced a glimpse of this in our own lives. We have personally experienced a moment or a measure of moments in which we have seen how the world can be whole, how we can be whole. And that’s what we want.

This is an exciting day in the life of this congregation because we are ordaining and installing new officers who are – in a very real way – being called to be *soul strengtheners* to this body. Just as Paul introduced many people to the love of Christ for the first time, he also spent time encouraging those who had already heard about Jesus but needed encouragement. He and Barnabas strengthened their souls by reminding them that even when times are tough, God’s kingdom was worth it. Paul and Barnabas chose elders in each little congregation to further strengthen the souls of *other* new believers. That’s what we are doing today.

Many of us in this congregation want the church to thrive. But this will never happen if we fail to live like Paul and Barnabas and the early churches in Antioch and Lystra and Iconium lived, with a commitment to Christ that we can read about in the book of Acts. Those early Christians:

- did hands-on ministry (in other words they didn’t merely send checks out to far away lands; they actually got involved personally in helping the hungry and the sick and those in need.)
- they were pre-occupied with saving people (but not in “closing deals” or keeping tabs on conversion. We can assist in saving people who are unemployed or lost or unsure of their worth.)
- they were eager for *everyone* to know God

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<sup>6</sup> Consultants Tom Bandy and Bill Easum say this. See [www.easumbandy.com](http://www.easumbandy.com)

- they were drawn to people who didn't know God
- they were aware of what was going on in the community and then they responded to those needs
- they had a vision for a different world.

If we want to thrive as God's people in this congregation, we need to study how the first Christians "were the church." The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church is more like the First Century than we realize. We need to make disciples. And then we need to strengthen their souls and encourage them.

Today we are taking a leap to do that very thing. Is there anybody else here who wants to be whole? Is there anyone else here who wants the world to be whole? Who is willing to follow so closely to Jesus that we find the dust from his feet on ours? Who is willing to be sent out to make disciples of all nations? Who?

Let us pray: Like Paul make us willing to take up our own crosses and be your disciples, through Christ our LORD. Amen.