

Sermon for June 30, 2019  
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church  
Acts 2: 42-47; Matt. 28: 16-20

*Lord Christ, give us ears to hear, hearts to believe, and faith to act.*

Go!

*The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*

I want to share a story with you, a story about believers who have modeled this passage from Acts and who are living out the Great Commission to go and make disciples. I want to tell you about Sa Rang Korean Presbyterian Church (USA).

Has anyone here ever heard of Sa Rang Korean Church? And are you aware that there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in all the United States? That should give us pause to consider how well we are living out the Great Commission here, shouldn't it? Sa Rang Korean Church is located in Trinity Presbyterian Church on Holmes Ave, next to UAH, in Huntsville. Last Sunday at 5 PM, it moved from being Sa Rang Fellowship to Sa Rang Presbyterian Church, and was chartered as the newest church in the North Alabama Presbytery. Welcome, Sa Rang! This presbytery hasn't chartered a new church since Grace Presbyterian in Madison in the '90's, which should give us pause to consider how well we are living out the Great Commission here, shouldn't it?

The story of Sa Rang began about ten years ago when a group of worshipping Korean Presbyterians in Huntsville split, as we Presbyterians seem to like to do. The group that has been at Trinity invited a young pastor, Rev. "Q" Lee, to come guide, disciple, and grow them, with the intention of eventually asking to join the North Alabama Presbytery as a chartered (official) church. I doubt they thought it would take them ten years. There are several steps involved, such as having a certain number of participants; presenting proof of Christian Education opportunities and the numbers involved; having enough financial resources without Presbytery's assistance to run a church; completing paperwork that defines the congregation's vision for its future, its continuing plans for growth, its missional presence in the community, and on and on. These requirements can, indeed, become great obstacles, and, at one point, they did. Sa Rang almost wasn't.

About five years ago, I was elected to be the Moderator for the Congregational Development Ministry Team, a presbytery committee that helps with church revitalization and new church start-ups. We had been through two disappointing failures—an attempt to start a Hispanic Church at Westminster, Decatur, and an attempt to start a new church in the Harvest area. Both had taken their toll in financial resources and zeal.

When I came onboard, the Korean Fellowship was the only new start possibility under our care, and we desperately wanted it to work out. But there were problems; specifically, cultural problems. What we white, Anglo-Saxons believed was necessary to form an official church was not what the Koreans believed. They believed what was necessary was teaching and modeling discipleship. They believed what was necessary was doing what Jesus said to do in the gospels and then trusting that his church would be born. How naïve!

What the Korean Fellowship did not, at that time, believe in was all the paperwork, figures, and calculations our denomination requires to become a church. Plus, we had the real issue of a language barrier and the Korean cultural mindset that men did not take orders from women, especially the moderator of the CDMT and the then female Executive Presbyter. After a couple of years of butting heads, our committee voted unanimously to make a motion to presbytery to disband the Korean Fellowship. They would not become a chartered church.

And here is the beauty of what happened. The Holy Spirit likes to turn things upside down, and the Presbyterian system of democracy allows that. When I took the motion to the floor of Presbytery, Rev. Lee was also allowed a time to talk, and he gave an impassioned plea in his broken English to remain in the presbytery. He promised to do whatever was required because he and his flock had faith that Jesus Christ would make it possible for them to be a church. He informed us that a group of faithful pray-ers were meeting every weekday at 5:30 am until 7 am to pray to be good disciples, to pray to bring Christ to others, and to pray to become a Presbyterian Church. I think you can guess what happened. Motion defeated. Sa Rang was granted a reprieve.

Not too long afterwards, I rotated off the CDMT, but apparently Sa Rang had gotten a wake-up call, or maybe the Holy Spirit especially blesses faithful people. They continued to learn about the apostles' teaching, to fellowship together, to partake of the sacraments, to pray continuously, to invite others, and to share what they had, and they met the requirements and turned in the paperwork and even contributed financially to the Presbytery before they were even required to, and they did all of this humbly and with persistent faith. And last Sunday, at 5 PM, I joined in the worship service of their church chartering, and I was the one humbled by the witness of discipleship.

If you have never attended a church chartering, I hope one day you can because it lifts up both our scripture passages today. It underscores both learning and practicing discipleship, as we saw in Acts, and doing discipleship, as we heard in the Great Commission. The relevance of church today, as it has always been, is about witness. We Presbyterians like to make up excuses about how to avoid witnessing, but it's there in Jesus' words, in black and white. The Greek word for witness simply means telling the story. Why are we so often afraid, so often reluctant, to tell the stories of Jesus when

there is a world outside these doors, even in our own families and neighborhoods, who are hungry to hear them? Sa Rang witnessed, and in doing so, forty-something people stood up and asked for, and were granted, membership in the Presbyterian Church USA.

Sa Rang witnessed, and three people, including two women, were ordained to be their elders.

Sa Rang witnessed, and its new-start pastor was installed as its official pastor. I, who had brought a motion to disband this fellowship, now had the opportunity to bless this congregation through its pastor.

We concluded the service following the admonition in Acts 2: breaking bread together with the newly ordained elders serving us the cup and bread. We sang together in Korean and in English, and it sounded like heaven, male and female, young and old, different nationalities, raising our voices together. Sa Rang is the Korean word for love, love for each other and love for Jesus Christ, which was in great evidence last Sunday.

So, what does this story have to do with you at St. Andrew? First, it reminds us of the absolute and utter necessity of prayer. Sa Rang's prayer group continues to pray. If you want to grow, both numerically and spiritually, you must pray. If you want a new pastor, you must pray. If you want to make disciples, you must pray. If you want to teach Jesus, you must pray. I can't do it for you, and neither can the next pastor. Whenever you gather together, whether to knit, or sing, or plan, or do business, pray together for this church. Prayer moves mountains, and it brings you closer to God and to each other.

Secondly, this story reminds us that we are church for a purpose. Yes, we are hopefully nurtured in worship, and yes, we need the presence and care of each other within these walls. But being church is about witness. It is about telling the stories of Jesus Christ to others, out there. Jesus Christ did not say it was okay to be timid. He said GO and tell! If we aren't doing that, why are we here?

This small fellowship of Sa Rang faced many challenges, and some of us doubted it could survive, just like some of those who doubted Christ's resurrection. But they put their faith in Christ, they prayed, and they went out and told their stories wherever they found anyone who would listen, and then they invited them in to learn about Jesus and to learn about discipleship. And last week, they celebrated. You have your challenges here, too, but hear the story that Christ worked through Sa Rang, let that be a real example to follow, and believe that Christ will work through you. And remember, you do not do so alone. Christ himself is with you always, to the end of the ages.

Thanks be to God.