

“Christians First”
Acts 11:19-29
July 13, 2008
Rev. Curtis J. Young

*The text of this sermon may be used without first obtaining my permission. I do ask, however, that if you use any portion of the message for teaching or preaching preparations, that you would e-mail me a brief note to say you are making use of it. This would be a courtesy and help to me personally. You will note that in some sermons sections are bracketed between two sets of three asterisks (***) . The purpose is to delineate material that I did not preach, but that is integral to understanding the theology or exegesis of what was preached. My e-mail address is revyoung@comcast.net – Rev. Curt Young*

For all the firsts that Luke covers in these verses –the first evangelistic initiative to the gentiles, the establishment of the first gentile church, Paul’s engagement in his apostolic calling – if you had to pick the one stand out verse, it would probably be verse 26. As a concluding verse it is meant to be.

“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”

Until I first came across this verse, it had never crossed my mind that there was a time before believers thought of themselves as Christians. I had never imagined the term was assigned to believers years after Pentecost, and well beyond Jerusalem.

For us, the very sound, “Christian”, is a powerful symbol of our identity in Christ. But it wasn’t always so.

From the passive voice of the verb telling us that “the disciples were called Christians”, we begin to see that this name was imposed on them.

They didn’t come up with it, any more than the “Puritans” came up with their name or the “Lutherans” with theirs. The world imposes its own terms on new groups, to capture what is different or unique about them.

“Christian” is neither Hebrew nor Greek but Latin, or Roman, in form. It is like the term Herodian (Matthew 22), which the Romans used to describe supporters of Herod.

The Romans knew Herod. They had installed him as their puppet King over Judea. They didn’t know so much about Jesus. So when they came up with the name Christian, they mistakenly confused his title for his name. This is the kind of error that a stranger to our faith would make. They used his title, the Christ, instead of “Jesus”, in the place where a proper name belonged. So ever since it has been “Christian” instead of “Jesusian.”

It is worth asking: Why were these believers were called Christians at Antioch? It was not the result of their subscribing to a certain set of doctrines, but of how they related to Christ and to others because of him.

They worshipped him as Lord. Verse 20 tells us they presented him as good news for others. They proclaimed him Lord. (20) They called any who would listen to share their confidence. Most remarkably, I think, to the world, was that these Christians did not pick and choose who they would speak to, or include in their number.

Antioch was a prestigious, powerful, wealthy city of a half million people, the third greatest in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. It was called “Antioch the Beautiful” and “Queen of the East.

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All major trade routes from east to west, from the Orient to Europe, passed through Antioch. The population reflected this. Greeks, Romans, Jews, Arabs, and Asians all called Antioch home and were welcome there.

Here at Antioch for the first time, believers actively sought out pagans to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Outwardly, Jews were engaging gentiles, not as Jews or they would never have done it, but out of higher loyalty to this Christ.

The Romans and other may not have understood the message, but they could see Jews putting Christ ahead of their traditions and laws. They could see this Christ was very important to them.

For the first time, since Babel perhaps, a people had found something more significant to them, and their sense of who they were, than their own culture and ethnicity.

So the church sprang up, and just as shocking, people from many ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds were uniting together to worship and honor this Jesus. And the sense of identity with him was so strong, that they began looking upon one another as brothers.

In John 17: 20-23, just before he was taken captive, Jesus had prayed: “My prayer is not for them (these disciples) alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Jesus’ prayer was being answered. The sort of unity produced as people came to Christ testified convincingly to the world that God had sent Jesus.

I read these final verses of our text, about the collection for the saints in Jerusalem as a postscript that underscores again why the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Agabus, a prophet from Jerusalem (c.f. Acts 21:10), paid a visit, and prophesied a severe famine throughout the Roman world.

How did the church in Antioch respond? By taking a collection for the church in Jerusalem. The wealthy cosmopolitan church in Antioch responded with an outpouring of love and concern for impoverished, persecuted, Jewish congregation in Jerusalem.

Verse 29 puts it with such simple power: “The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.”

James Boice wrote based on his own study that this was “the first charitable act of this nature in all recorded history – one race of people collecting money to help another people.”

Here was irrefutable proof that these believers in Antioch put Christ first in their lives. They identified themselves with Christ.

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So, Luke underscores, they were called Christians first at Antioch. The NIV captures the double meaning of the phrase. Not only were they first called Christians in Antioch, they were Christians first at Antioch. Really, it was a great compliment!

Given our remarkable city, the wonderful diversity of Church of the Atonement, and our own calling to be Christians first, there is much for us to take to heart and be grateful for. By the grace of God the same kind of spiritual formation that was taking place in Antioch is taking place here in our lives and life together.

To spur us on in our own growth in grace, I would draw our attention to Barnabas, because Luke does that.

Of all the wonderful believers referred to in this passage – the unnamed evangelists from Cyprus and Cyrene, and even the Apostle Paul, Luke describes Barnabas alone, and places his description in the center of the story. It is fair to take from this that as Luke tells this story around his description, the church developed around him as well.

The church grew and developed around this man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and so, took on the characteristics of his own gracious, generous spirit.

He had been born “Joseph” in Cyprus, a Levite among the Jews. In coming to Christ in Jerusalem, he had given of himself and his possessions so generously that the apostles there had renamed him Barnabas, son of encouragement.

As gentiles in Antioch began coming to Christ, the church in Jerusalem had sent him to check it out. Luke tells us, “When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.” Then Luke adds literally, “For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.”

Barnabas is the only person, by name, commended in Scripture as “a good man.”

Here are three marks of this good man for us to take to heart, so we are sons of encouragement and God advances his great work through us.

The first mark was his delight in seeing how God was moving and blessing somewhere else instead of being sour about it. (Boice)

Sent as an envoy from the “First Apostolic Church of Jerusalem”, Barnabas could have been overbearing, focused on immaturity of the church and messiness of these new believers’ lives, but instead, he was quick to see and commend the work that God was doing. He kept pointing people to Christ and encouraging them. He didn’t assume the role of the critic but the servant. He was as generous with his spirit as he was with wealth.

A second mark of this good man was his genuine humility. He was self-effacing. When the Lord was using him greatly, he was thinking, “What do these people need that I can’t give them?” When the answer was the ministry of the Apostle Paul, he didn’t begrudge sharing the leadership with him. He initiated the change. He traveled a hundred miles to fetch Paul personally, to persuade him and bring him back.

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Paul would later write, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” He may well have been describing his brother, Barnabas.

This brings me to the third mark of this generous, self-effacing soul. It was so evident from his relation with Paul, with the new Church at Antioch, and later with John Mark. He honestly believed the best about them all, that Christ would have his way in each one and with all.

He was determined to give them what they needed to grow. He accepted them; he loved them; he put up with them; he prayed for them. Luke underscores that what began as a an oversight visit turned into a “whole year” of ministry. (vs. 25)

All three of these marks of a good man were the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This is how the Lord transforms people’s lives. This is how Joseph came to be Barnabas, a Christian first who was remarkably generous and gracious, humble and self-effacing, patient and hopeful. And this is how Jesus is, as the Lord of the church builds his church.

We are no less called to be as gracious, self-effacing and patient. It is part of our being filled with Christ and following him.

This is not only what leads to spiritually healthy churches, but to spiritually healthy marriages, spiritually healthy friendship, and spiritually healthy parenting. As believers relate to one another and to others, the world looks on, and rather than ridiculing them as Christians, they admire them.

May the Lord speak to each of our hearts. May he speak words of mercy and grace that we need to hear. It is easy to go negative and critical rather than be a son of encouragement. May he speak sustaining, encouraging words we need to hear so we can continue to rejoice in the midst of hard things. May he speak transforming, life-changing words we long to feel at work within us, so the heaviness of our lives shifts to him who promises to carry us as well as our load.