

They Were Called Christians

Acts 11: 19-26

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Acts 11 describes how the good news about the Lord Jesus made its way to Antioch. “Antioch was the center of the Seleucid kingdom until 64 BCE, when it was annexed by Rome and was made the capital of the Roman province of Syria. It became the third largest city of the Roman Empire in size and importance (after Rome and Alexandria) and possessed magnificent temples, theaters, aqueducts, and baths. The city was the headquarters of the Roman garrison in Syria.”¹ Antioch was a powerful and prominent city, an active and vibrant city teeming with religious activity based in the various temples, entertainment in the theaters, luxury in the baths, and comfortable amenities with the aqueducts. Nevertheless, in this thriving city the gospel of Jesus Christ came and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Not only does this passage tell us how the good news about the Lord Jesus made its way to Antioch, we also learn that at Antioch the disciples were called Christians for the first time.

The word *Christians* is formed when the Greek word (Χριστός,) Christos has the suffix (ανός) added to it. While the word is Greek the suffix is Latin, which was the language of the Roman world. One scholar, Elias Joseph Bickerman writes, “All these Greek terms, formed with the Latin suffix, express the idea that the people or things referred to belong to the person to whose name the suffix is added.” It is very possible that calling the disciples *Christians*, those belonging to Christ, was originally intended as a derogatory term. In the Roman culture of the day to belong to someone implied you were a slave to them. However, believers in Christ cherished the epithet because it was an honor to be slaves of Christ.²

Whether intended as an insult or not, the fact that the disciples in Antioch were the first to be called Christians captures my imagination and stirs my spirit. A group of disciples, a group of those who follow Jesus, formed and began living their life together in Antioch, which as we heard earlier was a major center of the Roman Empire. The way they lived was such that they became known as ones who belonged to the Lord Jesus. It might have been meant as a derogatory term by some, but three times in this passage in Acts 11 we are told great numbers of people responded to the good news about Jesus. Great numbers of people became Christians, became ones who belonged to Jesus Christ. What was happening in Antioch is a clear and compelling demonstration of the power of God to transform lives.

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica website

² Biblical Hermeneutics Stack Exchange website, <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com>

Reading of the church in Antioch, it is only natural that we would find ourselves hoping and praying that we might have the great privilege of being known as Christians. Doesn't every gathering of believers, whether 2,000 years ago, or in the year 2017, desire for others to watch our life together and say, "Those people are Christians?" They belong to Jesus Christ."

As much as we might hope and desire that others would see us and say, "Those people are Christians", there is the possibility it might prove a little more difficult than simply coming together as believers in Jesus and gathering in his name. It might prove to be that what happened in Antioch was unique, mainly because the people who gathered in Antioch were unique. After all, Antioch had Barnabas and Saul. After all, Antioch had a gathering of believers who represented a great diversity of the human race, coming from Africa and other parts of the Roman Empire, coming from a variety of cultures with many different customs and ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. As much as we might hope and desire that others would see us and say, "Those people are Christians", maybe what happened in Antioch 2,000 years ago was unique and it won't happen here in Westerly in 2017.

We don't have Barnabas. Barnabas was sent to Antioch by the church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem heard that a great number of people in Antioch had believed in Jesus and turned to the Lord, and he came to make sure everything was on the up and up. Sure enough he saw that what was taking place in Antioch as people believed in Jesus and turned to the Lord was all being done through the grace of God. This made Barnabas glad and he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. There is an earlier event in the Book of Acts where we are introduced to this man named Barnabas, and when we are introduced to him we learn his name meant, "Son of Encouragement." True to name, when Barnabas sees the grace of God being poured out on the church in Antioch, he was not only glad, he encouraged these new believers.

We don't have Barnabas in our church. We do have people who are full of encouragement. We have sons and daughters of encouragement, ones who see the grace of God and fan the flames, who lift the spirits, who exhort and exude hope in ways that bring great encouragement. But we don't have Barnabas in our church. Barnabas was unique. Barnabas was unique in that he had done something impossible.

There is an episode that is told in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. A man comes to Jesus wanting to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. As he and Jesus talk together we learn the man has lived a good life, at least in his own eyes, faithfully following the commands of God. But Jesus says the man lacks one thing. He must sell everything he has, give it to the poor, and then follow Jesus.

When the man walks away with great disappointment, you can almost hear Jesus sigh as he says, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” This baffles the disciples and they throw up their hands and ask, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus agrees with them. It is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. But instead of walking away and giving up on the subject, Jesus adds something very important. He says, “With humans this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Indeed they are.

Acts 4 tells the story of a camel who climbed through the eye of a needle. There was a man in Acts 4 who had resources. There was a man in Acts 4 who was rich. This rich man sold a field he owned and he brought the money and gave it to the church. He gave it all to the church. This rich man who sold his field and gave all the proceeds to the church was named Barnabas. Barnabas was the camel who crawled through the eye of a needle. Wouldn't it be nice to put something like that on the little sign out in front of your church? Come see the impossible. Come see the camel that crawled through the eye of the needle! Step right up. Come see what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Come see what it means to belong to Jesus. Come see what it means to be a Christian.

We might want to be called Christians, but we don't have Barnabas and we don't have Saul. If Barnabas was the camel who crawled through the eye of the needle, Saul is the man who was born again. A Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of night. He was interested in the kingdom of God. He was intrigued by the signs Jesus had been performing. But Jesus told Nicodemus no one could see the kingdom of God unless they were born again. Baffled, Nicodemus asked, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb.”

Once again it seems that something is impossible. Being born again seemed impossible to Nicodemus. And then we read about a man named Saul in Acts 9. Saul was an enemy of the church. Saul was an enemy of Jesus Christ. Saul was an enemy of the very believers who would one day be called Christians. This man named Saul set out on a journey toward the town of Damascus intent on finding any who belonged to the Way, who belonged to Jesus, which was exactly what the word Christian meant, so that he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. Chapter nine in Acts begins with these ominous words, “Still breathing out murderous threats....” That is who Saul was, a man breathing out murderous threats against all who belonged to Jesus.

But on the way to Damascus something impossible happens. This man named Saul is born again. How can a man be born again? Can he climb into his mother's womb a second time? No, that is not what happens. Still, what happens to Saul borders on the impossible. His life changes instantly, radically, completely, and eternally. The man who once persecuted the church became the man who gave his life completely to Jesus Christ. Saul was unique. When Barnabas, who was unique, saw the grace of God that was poured out on the believers in Antioch, he went and found Saul, who was unique, and he brought him to Antioch where together they spent a whole year teaching all the new believers what it means to belong to Jesus Christ. So now they had to build a new sign for the church. Come see the camel that crawled through the eye of the needle. And that's not all. Come see the man who was born again.

We might want to be called Christians, but we don't have what Antioch had. We don't have Barnabas and we don't have Saul and we don't have this other strange, fascinating, wonderful but a little unsettling thing they had in Antioch. Antioch was able to say not only do we have Barnabas and Saul we also have a wolf that lives with a lamb. Talk about unique. Wolves don't live with lambs. Surely that is impossible. Wolves eat lambs. But not in Antioch. In Antioch the wolf lives with the lamb.

The prophet Isaiah had a vision of what is called by some The Peaceable Kingdom. Isaiah, as just about the all prophets in the Old Testament, lived in a time of great turmoil. There were wars and rumors of war. There was the impending threat of exile. Nations rose up against one another, and within the kingdoms of Israel and Judah there was near constant strife and conflict. Isaiah knew all this. Isaiah saw all this. And then the Lord gave Isaiah a vision. The Lord allowed Isaiah to see something that had not yet come to be, but would one day become a reality. The prophet Isaiah saw a vision of a future where, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them...(and one day) they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," said the Lord. Well, that sounds about as likely as a camel crawling through the eye of a needle or a man crawling into his mother's womb to be born again. The wolf and the lamb living together is pretty much impossible.

And then in Antioch the intent of that vision comes to fruition. The focus of Isaiah was not wolves and lambs. What Isaiah was envision was a day when human beings would live in harmony and unity and trust and in peaceful relations. In Antioch there was a community that included believers who were Jewish and believers who were Gentiles. The community included some from Cyrene which is in Africa and some from various places in the Middle East. The community

undoubtedly included men and women, some who were wealthy and some who faced economic and financial struggles, in that day and age some were free and some were slaves. But the impossible happened. Everyone set aside their own identity, as a Jew, as a Gentile, as a man, as a woman, as a slave, as a free person, as a rich person and as a poor person. They all found a new identity in Jesus Christ. Their identity in Jesus Christ became the most important thing in their lives. Each one who was baptized in Jesus Christ and anointed with the Holy Spirit and filled with the grace of God the Father became ones who belonged to Jesus Christ.

People saw the unique things happening in Antioch...they saw Barnabas who was unique, Saul who was unique, the diverse and creative and colorful community that was unique...the people saw the unique things happening in Antioch and they said, "Those people are Christians. They belong to Jesus Christ."

By saying that Antioch was unique, that Barnabas was unique, that Saul was unique, that the diverse community that found unity was unique, I am trying to point out that something truly incredible was happening in Antioch. People stood up and took notice. People said with genuine feeling, "Those people belong to Jesus Christ. They are Christians." What took place in Antioch was unique. By saying that Antioch was unique, I am hoping we don't feel that we have to be exactly like Antioch. As soon as Barnabas gave his great gift somebody else tried to do the same thing but they weren't sincere in their giving and things ended in disaster for Ananias and Sapphira. We are not called to be Antioch, or Barnabas, or Saul, or the community of believers that we in Antioch. They were unique.

Instead of being called to be Antioch or Saul or Barnabas, we are called to be our own unique community in this time and this place. We are not called to be Saul or Barnabas, but each one of us are called to find our identity in Jesus Christ. We are called to explore in the deepest and most personal and most devoted terms what it means for us to live our lives as ones who belong to Jesus Christ. We are called to live our lives in such a way that hopefully people would see us and say, "Those folks at Dunn's Corners, those unique followers of Jesus Christ, those people at Dunn's Corners, they belong to Jesus Christ." Hopefully people will see us and say, "Those people at Dunn's Corners are Christians."

There might not be a Barnabas in our congregation, but there are sure a lot of you who have the gift of generosity, and there are more than a few who give sacrificially, and a whole slew of you who give faithfully, and it feels like every single one of you is a son or daughter of encouragement. And to hear how others perceive the things that are becoming normal in our life together as a church is helpful. Some things happen in our life together that we do so regularly and so often we start to take it for granted, but in reality, some of the things we do are unique. So when I was the phone with National Grid a few weeks ago trying to

arrange to help someone out with the power bill, I was doing what I do regularly, using the gifts you all give to help others. The person on the phone, the representative from National Grid, was in Ohio and I was in Rhode Island and we were talking about how to help someone in need with their power bill. For the life of her, the woman could not understand, all I wanted to do was to help pay for the power bill. After what felt like a long time, the light finally went on in her mind. She said, “Oh, you just want to help out.” I said yes, exactly. When she finally realized what we were doing as a church, she said, “I wish there was a church like that here.” I hope there is a church like that where the woman lives. But it also was such a sweet thing. I felt like she was saying about all of you, “Those people in Rhode Island, they belong to Jesus Christ. They are Christians.”

When we gather together as a church family, we are doing something unique. We might look pretty similar on the outside, but there is great diversity. People have all kinds of different backgrounds and orientations and political beliefs and social practices and families of origins and religious experiences. There is enough within just our small church for there to be plenty of conflict and disagreement and division. But then we have a baptism and we all agree that in Christ Jesus there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female...no we are all one in Jesus Christ. We all have our identity in Jesus Christ. And so a meal is served. Bread is broken, words are spoken, and we realize there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, and we remember we brothers and sisters. We are family. We are community. We are the Body of Christ. And people notice. They notice when we share life together and when we worship and when serve together. They notice and they say, “Those people belong to Jesus Christ. They are Christians.”

When we receive a note in the mail like the one that came last December, I tuck that note away. A woman wrote, “In early November, my husband and I went through the heartache of having to bury our only child. He was only 28 years old. After years of struggle, he was finally taken from us by the insidious disease of addiction. He tried so hard, over and over, for many years, to overcome this malady of the body, mind and spirit. The morning of his death, his phone records show he was trying to contact a treatment center. The center he was calling did not do intakes on weekends. Within hours of those calls, he made his last, fatal mistake. The reason we wanted to write you this letter is to provide an expression of gratitude that our shock and grief prohibited us from doing around the time of his funeral service in your beautiful church...When our son died we were forced to make decisions we didn’t dare allow ourselves to even think about prior to that day. We needed to decide how and where to put our son to rest. Here we were, sitting in a Florida hospital, far away from our home in New York. It occurred to me instantly that we would bring him home to Rhode Island, to Westerly, where my husband and I grew up, met each other, and got married. It was very clear to us

that Westerly would always be our 'Home.' Our son loved visiting there. It meant visiting family and being surrounded by love...On the day of the service, you helped us through each step. As I met friends and family upon arrival, I will never forget seeing two women I didn't recognize personally. They approached me and told me they were church members and that the community had been praying for us. I was so moved and grateful for their loving gesture of attendance. It personified the feeling inside the walls of your church and will forever be a comfort to us."

The mother who wrote that letter had a broken heart. We couldn't fix that. She will live with that pain, and so we pray for her and her whole family. But I save letters like that because in her own way this grieving mother was saying, "Your church showed what it means to belong to Jesus Christ." In her own way this mother was saying, "Those people at Dunn's Corners are Christians."

I don't want to rule anything out. With God all things are possible.

- Maybe someday a camel will crawl through the eye of a needle right here in our sanctuary. But for now I'm giving thanks for a congregation that gives generously, faithfully, and even sacrificially.
- Maybe someday a man will crawl back into his mother's womb and be born again. But for now I'm giving thanks for the many ways God is causing new life to fill the hearts of so many in our congregation, like the dear friend who titled her Vespers Message, "How this church saved my life."
- Maybe someday we will have a wolf and lamb lead worship here in our sanctuary, sitting side by side and discussing reconciliation and living in harmony. But for now I'm giving thanks for a table like this, and a baptismal font like this, and pews filled with people like you, who come together from many different backgrounds and beliefs and yet you say the most important part of your identity, the most important part of our identity, is this one thing. We belong to Jesus Christ. He is our Lord. He is our Savior. He makes us one. In him we are united. And it is our greatest hope that when people look at us, when they watch us, when they worship with us, it is our greatest hope that they would say, "Those people at Dunn's Corners, they are Christians." For truly, we do belong to Jesus Christ. And may his name always be praised.