**Acts 11:19-26** May 6, 2018

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*Acts 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23When 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. 24He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 25Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**He Was Called Barnabas;  
They Were Called Christians**

He was sent from the home office, one of the big-wigs; not a top level big-wig, but a second level big-wig. Out in the branch office they had been doing some new and different things. They had brought in people who didn’t have the usual credentials. The home office had mixed feelings. The numbers looked good, but at what cost? When you let just anyone in the door, who knows what can happen? So they sent big-wig Joe to check it out.

When Joe showed up, one wonders what they thought at the branch office. I imagine they did what they usually do when the big-wigs come: greet them with a smile, give them a comfy chair in a quiet office, ask if they would like a drink, and wait for them to bring up whatever they want to talk about. Don’t make more trouble for yourself than you’re already in!

We really don’t know what the believers in Antioch thought when Joe arrived. By the way, he was named Joe. But the man born Joseph was later renamed Barnabas, which is the name we see in our reading. We don’t know what they thought when Joe arrived because their reaction isn’t recorded. In fact, we really don’t even know what the home office back in Jerusalem was thinking when they sent out Joe. The one clue we have is the way it is recorded in Acts: ***“News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem.”*** (22) It “reached their ears.” That doesn’t sound like an official report, written by the secretary, filed, then forgotten. When it says that it “reached their ears,” it sounds like juicy gossip that started conversations, and a little bit of jumping to conclusions too. “It reached their ears.”

The home office was the Jerusalem church. Jerusalem was where it had all started. Believers in Jesus had even more reason than Jews to hold Jerusalem as sacred. Abraham only stopped once in Jerusalem. Moses never saw it at all. For the first 400 years of the nation of Israel, Jerusalem was not under Israelite control but Canaanite control.

For followers of Jesus, Jerusalem was the center of it all. Jesus’ paid for the sins of the world with his death at Jerusalem. Jesus rose from the dead as a guarantee of our own resurrection at Jerusalem. Jesus ascended into heaven from a hilltop overlooking Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had fallen upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the mother church.

But like every church, the Jerusalem church had its issues. They had inherited a bit of the Pharisaic legalism that Jerusalem had had when Jesus preached. Remember how the Jewish authorities followed Jesus around with their ledger books and magnifying glasses? “We know he can’t be a prophet. He healed a man on the Sabbath!” “He can’t be a prophet. His disciples don’t follow the tried and true tradition of handwashing before their meals.” That nit-pickiness had lost the soul of the faith of Abraham. More than a grain of it had carried over into the church of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem when these same people, by God’s grace, had become believers.

I am not calling those people unbelievers! You get saved in an instant. But re-ordering your life to Christ is life-long process. So those Jews who had been brought up in the old way couldn’t help but bring it with them.

For example: The Apostle Peter had been sent by the Holy Spirit to evangelize a Roman soldier named Cornelius. This Roman soldier had converted to Judaism before Peter visited him. Yet after Peter visited him the believers at Jerusalem roundly criticized and cross-examined Peter for going into the house of a non-Jew. They finally relented, but… (see Acts 15 also.)

And now there was Antioch. It raised concerns in the mother church, the home office. What had happened was that the early church had been going along just fine in Jerusalem. On Pentecost day 3,000 people were baptized in Jesus’ name. A few months later their number was over 5,000. Then one day it all came to a crashing halt with the lynching of one of their number, Stephen. Once that happened, many followers of Christ got out of Jerusalem. It’s one thing to stand up for your rights when it’s just you. But when you have a wife and kids, well, many of them got out of town. They had friends, family up north in Phoenicia, or a couple hundred miles farther in the city of Antioch. So that’s where they went. ***“Some of them… went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.”*** (20)

It had never been done before. Just telling pagans about Jesus! Up to that time, the message of Jesus had been shared with among the children of Abraham. The Ethiopian whom Philip evangelized in last week’s reading, he may have been an Ethiopian, but he had followed the Jewish faith first. Cornelius the Roman centurion may have been a Roman, but he had been a convert to Judaism first.

But now, believers were taking the news of Jesus out to whoever would listen. They were so overjoyed with what Jesus meant to them and their lives that they were just telling anyone who would listen! They spoke news of a Savior on the street corners, to their associates at the Antioch Chamber of Commerce. Can you do that? Tell just anyone about Jesus? Isn’t that like throwing pearls to pigs?

So Jerusalem sent a man to investigate. The sent Joe, Barnabas. And the big-wig from Jerusalem watched, and they explained. And you know what happened? ***“When he saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them.”*** (23) Barnabas saw the believers, former pagans, worshiping Jesus. He heard about people, not who did everything according to the Law of Moses, but who believed on the Lord Jesus and began to orient their lives with Jesus. He watched people so excited about Jesus that they boldly shared Jesus with people who had not the least inkling of the Jewish faith! And they got saved. Big-wig Barnabas was overjoyed!

The church in Antioch was not a church of perfect people. Those Greek converts to the faith of Jesus would struggle to overcome the sinful habits of their pagan upbringing. Just like in the church back in Jerusalem, many would struggle to overcome the legalism they had inherited from their childhood. In the same way, some of you spent decades at more than arm’s length from your Lord, and now, saved in Christ, you wrestle to conquer those old sinful habits for the glory of your Savior. Some you, have been Christians from before you can remember, saved through the waters of child baptism. Yet you too fight the good fight for Christ. Faith saves the instant the Holy Spirit works in your heart. But we spend a lifetime, by God’s grace, conforming our lives to our faith. ***“People believed and turned to the Lord.”***

And when Barnabas saw this, ***“He was glad and encouraged them.”*** The last thing he wanted them to think was that he was a frowning investigator from the home office. He was a brother in the faith. He rejoiced in their victories, in Christ’s victories, as soul after soul entered the kingdom of God!

As he watched them over days and weeks, a thought came to his mind. He remembered a man he had known a few years previously, a man named Saul. (You probably know him as Paul, but he wasn’t the Apostle Paul yet. He was just Saul of Tarsus.)

Barnabas looked at these Christians in Antioch who were not content to keep the Gospel within the four walls of their church, but wanted it to break out into the world around them. Barnabas knew just what they needed. They had the zeal, the desire to share Jesus, and the man they needed to take it to the next level was Saul. So Barnabas left them and searched out Saul. But how did Barnabas know about Saul? Ah, another interesting story, and one worth knowing about Barnabas.

Maybe you remember how Saul started. The first we hear of Saul in the Bible was that he played a leading role in the lynching of Stephen. Then through an amazing confrontation with Jesus, this Saul the persecutor became Saul the believer. When he showed up in Jerusalem a few weeks later saying to the Christians, “Hey guys, I’m one of you now” people were kind of suspicious. He had Christian blood on his hands. It was kind of like those old Westerns where there is going to be a big shoot-out and people open their doors just enough to peek out with one eye. They weren’t fool enough to run out in the street to welcome Saul. It was a trick! They’d get gunned down. “Hey, come on guys. I really am a believer! You can come out now.” No one came out—no one except… Barnabas. (Ac 9:26-27) Barnabas befriended Saul and managed to convince the church at Jerusalem that he really had converted. And Peter, James and John and the rest of the Twelve welcomed Saul with the right hand of fellowship with Barnabas at Saul’s side.

But that had been ten years ago. Saul had gone back to his hometown of Tarsus and fell off the radar. Humanly speaking, Saul would never have become the apostle Paul except for Barnabas. But Barnabas, sitting in the multi-ethnic congregation of Antioch, knew that they needed Saul. So Barnabas searched Saul out—kind of the Obi-Wan Kenobi moment of the New Testament. Barnabas found Saul living in obscurity and by God’s direction led him out to become the most influential follower of Christ, ever. ***“Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.”*** (25-26) So the man from the home office – far from someone to fear, became a great blessing to the remarkable believers at Antioch.

So, what would I hope that you remember from this sermon today? I have kind of wandered. But it comes down to two names. Not two things, but two names: Barnabas and Christian.

In Christ’s church, our goals are not for our own career or income or prestige. When we have known the surpassing joy of the forgiveness in Christ, our greatest desire is God is honored and that others know the Jesus we know. That was Barnabas. He rejoiced to see foreigner believers, encouraged them, and lived that they could grow.

Remember the name of Barnabas. Do you know what the name Barnabas means? It means, “The Encourager.” It was a nickname that stuck, because whenever they saw Joe coming they thought, “Here comes ‘The Encourager.’” And they smiled.

And there is another name. It was the name given to the believers in Antioch, where the Gospel was first proclaimed to true outsiders. Those Antioch believers had the great honor, the very great honor described in verse 26: ***“In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”*** [[1]](#footnote-1) By God’s grace that has called you into his kingdom, has forgiven all your sins, may you remember the first people to be called Christians.

He Was Called Barnabas; They Were Called Christians. Are there any better names to be called? Amen.

1. (Amplified Bible – more in line with the Greek work order) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)