

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter / Confirmation

May 9, 2021

Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church

Acts 11:19-26

### **The First Christians**

Dear Friends in Christ,

What do you think of when you hear the title “Mom”? Hopefully you have good thoughts when you hear “Mom.” We may think of how mom fed us, cared for us, nursed us to health when sick, read stories to us, prayed with us, sang to us, and loved us as only a mother can. Sometimes the good and happy thoughts are mixed with the sadness of missing mom who is already in heaven. And then there are those who have mostly bad memories and thoughts when hearing the title mom. They think of the mother who was an addict or who neglected their child. A mother who abused or abandoned their child. The title mom will bring to mind only what someone has experienced from someone holding that title.

While it is a good day to talk about moms, the Scripture before us today talks about a different title given to a specific group of people. We hear about the first group of people called Christians. That word can bring different thoughts to mind depending on someone’s experience with Christians. Maybe someone thinks of Christians as judgmental people because that is what they have experienced from Christians. Someone might think of Christians as the compassionate friend who is always ready to help because that is what they have experienced from Christians in their life. The questions before us today are 1) What is a Christian? And 2) How can we live so that others get the right idea of what being a Christian means? We answer these questions by considering the first people to be called Christians, the believers in Antioch of Syria.

#### **Acts 11:19–26 (NIV84)**

*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. <sup>20</sup> Some 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. <sup>21</sup> The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> 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. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

#### **What is a Christian?**

After Stephen was stoned to death, other believers in Christ were targeted by the Jewish leaders. Saul was there at the stoning of Stephen and proceeded to get approval to arrest and even execute believers in Damascus of Syria. Of course, the risen Lord Jesus would appear to Saul and bring him to faith before he arrived. But the persecution by Saul and others forced many believers to flee their homes and go to new cities and regions. Instead of hiding their faith in Christ in the new place, these Jewish believers told other Jews about Christ. Some of them went beyond this to tell the Greeks, the non Jews, about Christ.

So what is a Christian? A Christian is someone who is known to talk about Jesus to people they are like and to people they are not like. Do people who know you know what you believe about Jesus? Of course, it can be dangerous to talk about Jesus. It was for the first Christians. But they talked to the people they lived among about Jesus.

The second thing we learn about Christians from the first Christians is what they did when they heard the message of Christ. Those first Christians “*believed and turned to the Lord.*” This is what Christians continue to do. Jesus said to “Repent and believe the good news.” Christians turn away from sin and turn to the Lord. Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who forgives them by his suffering, death and resurrection. What do the people we live among think about us? Do they see us as quick to repent and ask for forgiveness? Or do they see us as holier-than-thou types who think we are always doing what is right?

Certainly we do not need to advertise our sins so that we can be seen repenting of our sins. But neither do we hide our sins. When harmful words come from our mouths, repent. When we fail to keep a promise, repent. When our actions are not according to God’s law, repent. Repentance is always difficult for our sinful pride to do, but as Christians repentance becomes easier. For we know that Christ has paid for our sin and has forgiven us and will forgive when we turn to our Lord.

But what about accepting someone as a Christian who has done some really big sins? Can we consider someone to be a Christian who has a child without being married? What about someone who aborts a child? Or a person who spent the last decade in prison? Or a person who embezzled funds from a church? Or what about a person who spent years arresting Christians and putting them to death? The group of believers who were first called Christians accepted such a man in their midst and even as their teacher.

*Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> 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.*

Not ten years before this Saul had been one of the chief persecutors of the believers. He was a chief cause for some of the believers to have fled their homes. He had committed some of the really big sins. And the Christians accepted Saul as a fellow Christian for he had also repented and believed. He never tried to hide his former way of life as one who persecuted believers, but lived in repentance and faith in Christ. Are we Christians known as those who accept the really big sinners who repent and turn to the Lord? Or do we put some people on probation and treat them as second class Christians because they fell into a sin that we have not struggled with?

Christians repent, receive Christ’s forgiveness and forgive others from the heart.

And we learn one more thing about Christians from the first Christians in Antioch and from the believers in Jerusalem. Christians care about the truth and want to hear God’s Word.

*Some 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. <sup>21</sup> The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> 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..... So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.*

The believers in Jerusalem must have rejoiced to hear the news that Jews and Greeks were coming to faith in Christ in Antioch. They did not leave this new congregation to fend for itself but instead they sent Barnabas to encourage the new gathering of Christians. His message to them was simply to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. The growth of a congregation in number of members is always exciting and gives us reasons to rejoice. We can see this growth. We can measure this growth. But the congregation in Jerusalem was most concerned that the believers in Antioch remained in the true faith and grew in the true faith. Growth in faith is not easy to see or to measure. Yet it is most important for Christians.

There is sometimes a tension between reaching out to others with the gospel and nurturing the faith of those who are already members of a congregation. Our look at the first Christians today shows us that Christians do both. As our own mission statement says, we “nurture each other in God’s Word and spread the good news of Christ to all.” If all our effort is on making sure members remain true to the Lord, then outreach efforts will lag. If all our energy is on spreading the good news to others, then there may be many in the congregation with a shallow faith. Christians do both, nurture and outreach, and we used the same tool for both. The Gospel in Word and Sacraments feeds the faith of those already in the congregation. The Gospel is also the only tool the Holy Spirit works through to bring someone to faith in Christ for the first time.

May the Holy Spirit keep us as Christians who remain true to the Lord with all our hearts. And may those around us see that a Christian is not someone who follows a set of rules, but instead as someone who believes in Christ and turns to him for all that we need.

Amen.