

To Be Known as Christian

Acts 11:19-30

The Nature and Purpose of the Church - Studies in Acts

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

All of us, whether we intend it or not, are known for something. Some are known around the world for who they are and what they have done, for decisions or actions that change the course of history. Others might be known only by a small group of family and friends for acts of kindness, words of insight, or simple service.

For better or worse, on a greater or smaller scale, all of us are known for what we believe, the people with whom we associate, or the actions we have taken over time.

When I read our passage for this morning, the second half of verse 26 jumped out at me. It reads, *it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians."*

I'm sure the designation of Christian was uttered in other settings prior to that moment, but there was something about what happened in Antioch, something about how the Gospel was proclaimed and received there, that changed how people thought of Jesus' followers and their mission in life, how they were known to the world.

From that period on, those who follow Jesus, in a multitude of ways, have been known and remembered by this name, Christian. And today I want us to consider, if just for a moment, what that means and how we are called to live into that name.

Let us pray:

Living Lord, we are known by a name we do not fully understand and often fail to live up to. But we come today with a sincere desire to live as Christian. In order to do that we must know Jesus, our Christ, more fully and more truly. Draw us closer, we pray, to the one who gives us our name. Amen.

You may know that the Book of Acts has an overarching narrative that flows from Peter's early apostolic ministry following Jesus' ascension, to Paul's missionary activities to other nations. You may also remember that this was the time in the church's early history when questions were raised about how non-Jews could be incorporated into the Jesus community.

You may remember a man in Acts by the name of Stephen, who got into trouble because of his prophetic preaching and his challenges to critics. Stephen suffered, and was eventually stoned to death, because of his convictions. Stephen's persecution sent many believers like him fleeing from Jerusalem and other communities where they were at risk of similar persecutions. Some of those made their way to Antioch, north of Jerusalem, including two unnamed individuals from Cyprus and Cyrene who, we are told in verse 20, shared the news about Jesus with both Jews and Gentiles in that city. It turns out that God really blessed their proclamation. As verse 21 states, *a great number became believers and turned to the Lord* in Antioch.

Word got back to the church in Jerusalem that the Spirit was lighting another fire in Antioch (creating this curious new mix of Jewish and non-Jewish believers), and so in their wisdom they sent brother Barnabas to make sure things weren't getting out of hand.

Barnabas, noting how successful this mission had been in drawing in new believers quickly declared: if it ain't broke don't fix it (or something to that effect). And then he immediately sent for Saul, who also traveled to Antioch and with Barnabas, spent a whole year leading these new believers in their devotions

to the apostles' teachings and way of life.

In my mind this is one of those moments in Scripture when God signifies a new way of doing things that is consistent with his character throughout time. He broadens the circle of his followers to include the Gentiles, not through a rejection of the covenants he has made in the past with Israel, but through the life and ministry of his Son, through whom all people can be reconciled to their Father in Heaven.

It is not a rejection of tradition, but a reformation of tradition orchestrated by God's own authority.

I think that's why this moment is so important, and the name or title of Christian is so significant. It is a name that harkens back to moments such as this, when the Jesus movement went international, and broke through boundaries that some had attempted to frame around it.

Now it's a name that applies to all who follow Jesus, the Christ, all around the world. At the heart of the name Christian, is that sense of the forward and widening movement of God into the world and the realization that no national border or difference in ethnic or cultural background can get in God's way of reaching people through his Son.

It's this widening of the circle of followers, through any conventional or cultural boundary, that is at the core of our Christian identity. To be known as Christian means that we shall be known as a people who are continually widening the circle of Jesus' followers, and continually widening the circle of those whom we serve and minister to in his name.

This morning I want to tell you about an experience from our NPC mission trip to South Africa from which I returned early this past week. I want to share about a sermon we heard at the Change Bible Church in a township of Johannesburg two Sundays ago.

Our team was blessed to sit in the front of a congregation of approximately nine hundred South Africans led by Pastor Jones Xola Nzo, a very talented preacher.

After the service, Pastor Nzo asked me how long Presbyterian sermons usually go. When I told him fifteen to twenty minutes, his jaw dropped to the floor. After twenty minutes of his preaching that morning, he was just getting warmed up, and all of us were ready for more.

But toward the end of his very effective sermon that was delivered in a combination of English and other tribal languages common to the area, he asked a man to step forward from his seat to the front of the sanctuary. The man appeared to be in his late thirties, thin, in his best Sunday clothes, and looking self-conscious at having so much attention drawn to him. I'll come back to this man, but I need to explain some background before I do.

If you have been following the news for the past few weeks, you'll know that during the time when our team was in South Africa there was a great deal of violence against foreigners. Not against Americans such as ourselves, but mostly against Zimbabweans, over two million of whom have crossed the border to flee violence, political trouble, and hunger in neighboring Zimbabwe.

South Africa prides itself on its new identity as a welcoming, inclusive nation. But sadly there is still much poverty in many communities of the country, where jobs and resources are scarce. Some criminal elements in those poor communities have incited xenophobia and, over the past few weeks, killed over 56 non-South Africans, and have raped, maimed, and beaten countless others. Some of those killed were doused in fuel and set on fire to burn alive.

This has been an extremely upsetting time for South Africans, who are profoundly sad to see such atrocities in their nation that is working so hard to move forward from its troubled past.

But back now to two Sundays ago in church. In front of nine hundred South Africans, the pastor put his arm around this man he had called forward and told them all the man was from Zimbabwe. Just as all of this violence was flaring up in the communities around the church, this pastor proclaimed in that

moment, with absolute conviction to the congregation: "This is my brother."

The topic of the sermon was pastoral care, by which he meant the kind of care members of the church are called to share with one another.

Who are we, he asked of the congregation, if we call ourselves Christian, but do not stand with our brother and sisters? If we do not care for our family?

We were seated in the front row of the church, not ten feet from the man, and so I could sense the hesitation, even fear, in this man's eyes, as he stood anticipating the crowd's response to the pastor's words.

But when cheers and applause came forth, you could feel the Spirit's presence in the room. The glory of the Lord had been revealed. And in that moment I heard a woman in the row behind me yell out, "He is my brother!"

This morning I could offer you an academic definition of what it means to be known as Christian, but perhaps this one experience I've just described gets at the meaning better than anything we might publish in a book. Because God, I believe, would much rather have us publish that definition in how we live our lives.

Each of us is given opportunities every day to be known as Christian and to minister in the name of Jesus in ways that are consistent with God's character of action through history. When we study the book of Acts, the chronicles of the early church, we notice time and time again this pattern where the conversion and welcoming of one or more into the Body is a moment when the whole identity of the church is changed, transformed into something new.

In the welcoming of even one, the whole of the faith community is changed for God's good, and for his eternal purposes. If you and I want to be known as Christian, we will have to welcome others into his body one by one, saying "You are my brother," or "You are my sister." As we extend ourselves by faith in Christ, God extends the reach of his family, so that in the end, *every knee should bend...and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.* (Philippians 2:10, 11)

Paul writes in Ephesians 3:16: *I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.*

Truly, the inner strength of one Christian, taken into action, can be the source of transformation for many. This is not by coercion or will, but by the power of the Spirit at work through our inner convictions that guide our actions toward others and draw us together into one family of faith.

A family known as Jesus' people. A family known as Christian.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.