

January 18, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

A People Called Christian

Acts 11:19-26

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

What a dramatic and amazing week this is. This is the week in which we are grateful for the American democracy. And this is also a week when we as a country remember the life and ministry of Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. The flowers here in the pulpit today are in honor of Dr. King, and the flowers in the Court of Flags are in honor of our president-elect Barack Obama on his inauguration. This is an exciting time for this city because the democratic experience of our republic is experienced more in this city than in any other city in America, and we are grateful that we have a chance to be here and to watch it happen. We are in the middle of a series we just started last week focusing on Saint Paul and his friends, and we're tracking Saint Paul's ministry and life in the cities of the Mediterranean world of the 1st century.

Paul was a man of the city. He loved cities. He shared the good news of Jesus Christ in the cities. His first experience, of having the assurance of his faith was in a city named Damascus. On that road to Damascus, he met Jesus Christ, and he discovered that Jesus is alive. He said to Jesus Christ, "Lord, what would you have me do?" And our Lord says to him, "Go to Damascus, you'll find out." In Damascus, a little church with their leader perhaps a deacon, Ananias finds Paul on the street called Straight. He puts his hands on Paul. And Paul is then assured. He receives the fullness of the Holy Spirit and the assurance of his salvation. He is healed and strengthened with food. That happened at a Christian fellowship in Damascus.

Therefore when we think of Saint Paul, we always think of two things about this man: he was always a man of Christ because he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. He never forgot that. That's the great event of his life. And he's always a man of the Church because the little Church at Damascus played a key role in assuring him. He would never forget that. Well, the story goes on.

From Damascus, Paul returns to Jerusalem. But he doesn't stay there very long. It is narrated for us by Luke in the Book of Acts chapter 9. "And when he came to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples but they were all afraid of him." We are not surprised. And they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took Paul and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, and in Damascus, he had been assured. But still the people are unsure of Paul. They are not safe with him and disputes began to arise especially among some of the Hellenists. And so the disciples at Jerusalem decided to send Paul off to Tarsus. Tarsus, which is in modern southern Turkey, is the city where Paul grew up, the city of Zeno the father of stoicism; and Tarsus was a great university city in the 1st-century world. And so, Paul is sent home. We don't know how long he stays there, but evidently the early Christians felt he needed to mellow. He needed to have a time just to collect himself before anything else happens, so he goes to Tarsus. Now the rest of the story. Chapter 11 of Acts, we continue our narrative with verse 19. "Now those who are scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen," [remember the stoning of Stephen] "traveled as far as Phoenicia over on the coast, Cyprus, an island, and Cyrene."

Cyrene is modern-day Libya, North Africa. Remember Simon of Cyrene, a man from North Africa who carried the cross of Jesus part of the way to Mt. Calvary? These folks that have become believers from Phoenicia, Cyprus and also Antioch. Antioch is a very large city in the 1st century. It is located in what would today be southern Turkey on the coast. And they spoke the word of Christ to none except Jews at the beginning. They are sharing the Gospel in the synagogue with those that are of Jewish heritage, telling them that the fulfillment of their yearning for Messiah is now fulfilled. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch also spoke to the Greeks. That would be the non-Jews. "And they preached

the Lord Jesus.” That’s an interesting line. That is Luke’s way of describing the message of the early church. Notice how simple it is, how simply it is described: “they told about the Lord Jesus.”

You ask a question, “What did the early church actually preach?” When Peter gave his Day of Pentecost sermon, what did he actually preach? A good example of Peter’s preaching would be the Book of Mark because Mark traveled with Peter for many years. Mark’s Gospel is what Peter preached, the narrative of the life of Christ. When Paul preached, it would probably be the Book of Luke. Matthew is a book mainly aimed at Jews, but it is the life of Christ narrated and that would be the early preaching. So Luke describes that basic message as the story of the Lord Jesus, the life of Christ, as Lord and Savior. “So they preached to these Greeks, the Lord Jesus. And the Hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” That would be a great number in this city of Antioch of not only Jews but also Greeks.

“News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas [here is that man again] to Antioch. And when he came, he saw the grace of God. He was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose for he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a large company was added to the Lord.” Now the plot thickens. “So Barnabas went to Tarsus several miles away up to look for Paul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.” Maybe Barnabas said, “He couldn’t fit in at Jerusalem but I think he can fit in here,” and he brought him to Antioch. “And for a whole year,” this is an interesting line, “they met with the Church and taught a large company of people.” They taught. We will see that teaching will be Paul’s strategy throughout his whole ministry, to find a place where he can teach the content of the faith; they taught the people. And then, this last line of Luke’s account here, “And in Antioch, the disciples were for first time called Christians.” Let me tell you a little bit about Antioch, first of all.

When Alexander the Great swept the ancient world, his empire was unprecedented, nothing like it really before or after, and the date is 336 B.C. The extent of Alexander’s empire went all the way into India, all the way down to Egypt, that is why Alexandria in Egypt is named after him, and all the way into the area which we call the Roman Era now in modern-day Turkey,

Persia. When he died, Alexander did something interesting. He did not pick an heir to follow him, instead he said, "Let the strongest lead." That was a dangerous thing to say to a crowd of ambitious young generals. Because when Alexander died, his whole empire broke apart. Each general took a part of the empire, and that marks the end of the Alexandrian Empire.

One of those generals was a man named Seleucus Nicator. Seleucus Nicator took all of the property from southern Turkey to what would be Lebanon today and what we call the Holy Land. And that's why that period from 336 B.C. up until 80 B.C. when the Romans came under Pompeii, is called the time of the Seleucid Empire. And the Jews were under the Seleucids, or sometimes called the Syrians. The Seleucids named after Seleucus Nicator. And he decided to build a capital city. In 310 B.C. he built a city called Antioch. That is the city. Antioch is on the coast. It owned a great harbor in those days; it was a safe harbor so it became a shipping mecca because it opens to a trade route to the East but also where ships could come into that harbor and be safe from pirates.

Antioch became the third largest city of the Roman Empire by the time of the 1st century. Today there are only about 12,000 or 13,000 people that live in ancient Antioch because the harbor is silted and that ended it as a port city. But in the 1st century it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The first largest is Rome, the second largest is Alexandria, the third largest is Antioch. And it became extremely wealthy because of its surplus of water and its trade advantage. Under Antiochus and his successors, the Seleucid Empire, they built an absolutely powerful and wealthy city. It had a complete water system ahead of every other city of the ancient world that supplied water throughout the entire city with aqueducts and pipes. It had tremendous wealth but it also became a place of luxury and immorality. It was a city of decadence and cynicism. It was so noted by 1st-century historians, who write about the cities of the ancient world, all of them looked down on the city of Antioch, because Antioch had the reputation of mocking orators and actors who would come and perform in the Greek theaters. They would always come up with scurrilous phrases and epigrams to describe actors, so as to imitate and ridicule them.

The reason I am bringing that up is that some interpreters wonder if where Luke says, they were first called Christians here, was this ascription not seen as a compliment to the early believers, but maybe a sign of mockery. "These

people, all they talk about is Jesus Christ.” You see, the Lord Jesus, that is their message. “They’re Christ-ians!” All they talk about is Jesus Christ. And so they mock them with that, what we now think of as an honorable title, Christians, those who belong to Christ. But it could be that in the beginning it was an example of that cynical Antiochian tradition seeking to ridicule these early believers.

Antioch is a city that was so decadent, here is an interesting trivia item. Did you know that in the 1st century the one city in the Roman Empire where Roman soldiers were not allowed to have liberty was Antioch? But Roman commanders felt that they would be badly contaminated by Antioch. And if a Roman soldier was caught in certain districts of Antioch, they would be thrown out of the Roman army and disgraced. So it was that kind of city. Now, I’m bringing that up because does it seem like a city like this would have in it people who would turn to Jesus Christ in faith? When you think of Las Vegas, do you think of Las Vegas as a great center for evangelism? The city with its slogan at one time, “What happens here stays here.” What a slogan. Would that be the kind of city you would expect people to be open to the gospel and want to hear about Christ? They did at Antioch.

Antioch becomes a city where the Christian Church grows and thrives. Does that take you by surprise? The city that makes fun of everybody. The city that makes fun of orators until they do not want to come there. And yet Paul and Barnabas taught for a whole year there. They put themselves out in the open in that city, and the people who were perhaps mocking them by saying, “Oh, these are Christians!” And yet here many people became believers. And that is the city that will send Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys. Antioch, ancient Antioch. Isn’t that interesting?

I don’t know. I’m intrigued by people who make light of your affirmation because sometimes when people mock you they know what is really going on even in the way they decide to make fun of you. They made fun of these people by calling them “Christ-ians.” But in making fun of them, they, in an intriguing way, pay them a compliment, too.

Have you read the *Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky? I list it as one of the three greatest books, I think, ever written. This book, the *Brothers Karamazov*, is about three boys and their father. But these three boys, Dmitri who is maybe a murderer and then Ivan the older brother who

went to Paris, became an atheist. There is a moment in the story where Ivan age 23 decides to take his brother Alyosha, the young brother who is age 19 to a restaurant for lunch.

And that is the famous lunch room scene in the *Brothers Karamazov*. Probably the most famous scene in all of literature is Ivan with his younger brother, Alyosha, where Ivan tries to correct his brother Alyosha who had become a Christian. He has become involved in a Russian Orthodox monastery. His leader is Father Zossima. Ivan wants to get him out of that monastery. He wants to draw him away from his Christian faith and so he decides to mock him and his faith. He takes him to lunch for that purpose. At the beginning of that scene, he tells him horrible stories about terrible things that happen in the world and how, in that evil, the gospel of Christ and the church with its message of Jesus Christ are both helpless. They can't do anything in the face of that evil. Christians, they talk about forgiveness, hope, and good news but what does it mean in the face of all that evil? It does not work.

And he tells that over and over again, the church cannot solve that problem. The church can't do it and in this he is trying to humiliate his young brother. At one point, Alyosha who has been listening all this time, after all, he's 19 and the other is 23, he finally says, suddenly his eyes are beginning to flash. He said, "You asked just now if there is in the whole world a being who could and would have the right to forgive. But there is such a being," he says to his brother Ivan, "And he can forgive everything. He can forgive all and for all because he himself gave his innocent blood for all and for everything. You've forgotten about him, Ivan, but it is on him that the structure is being built", "Just art thou, oh Lord, for your ways have been revealed." At this point, Ivan decides to continue to mock his brother. He says, "Oh, yes." Now, listen to Ivan. "Oh, yes, the only sinless one and his blood. No, I have not forgotten about him. On the contrary, I have been wondering all the while why you hadn't brought him up for so long," "Because in discussions with your people, usually," and here is a famous line from Dostoevsky, "Your people usually trot him out first thing." You trot Jesus out first thing. "You know Alyosha, don't laugh. I composed a poem once about a year ago. If you can waste 10 more minutes on me, I'll tell it to you." And then he tells a poem to his brother, "The Grand Inquisitor" parable in which, a great inquisitor, 90 years old, is standing in a cathedral

and Jesus shows up at the door of the cathedral and a dialogue begins. The inquisitor mocks Jesus because he is so irrelevant to the world. "You made men free but they want to be happy, you misunderstood men." One charge after another, it sounds like the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness. That's what it really is. And he makes fun of Jesus. And then at the end, Alyosha hears all of this and this great line from Alyosha that Dostoevsky gives us. Alyosha says, "Your poem praises Jesus. It doesn't revile him as you meant to." So you've been mocking him but you have actually been describing him. It is just like the people at Antioch. They call them Christians. They are right. That is what we are. We belong to him. You know something interesting. Mockery often has it right and the irony is that it is the person, Jesus of Nazareth who is the good news that in the end, sooner or later, wins over the cynical people of Antioch.

In this international and diverse city, this simple singularity of the person of Jesus Christ and the story about him, we call it the *kerygma*. The message about him, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, that is what the early message of the church was. It made sense. They saw that Jesus Christ was Lord, had the authority. Notice, that is exactly what Alyosha tells him. That Jesus Christ is savior. His life given in our behalf is what saves. And that Jesus Christ pulls the pieces together and makes sense of it all. I think the city of Antioch was made ready, even if its shallowness and irritation at the Lord of center. Isn't this ironic but they were made ready to hear the gospel partly because of their cynicism. Very often, cynical people are very close to the truth because they have written so many things off and they're so fatigued maybe with wealth or so fatigued with all the other things that sometimes, they are ready to hear when they hear something fresh and genuinely true they recognize the truth.

So there is one thing we learned from Antioch and that is we should never too quickly prejudge a person or a city. Don't do it. Do you have somebody in your family that is presently at a cynical point in their life? Do not prejudge. Wait it out. There are usually clues even in the jokes that come from a city or a person that shows that there is a hunger inside that sometimes is longing for what only Christ himself is able to fulfill. But it may take time before that finally dawns on them. And that is what I love about this text. The text is clear that Paul and Barnabas decided to wait it out and it took perhaps a whole year of teaching. They spent a year teaching, a year waiting, creatively waiting, thoughtfully waiting, but waiting for the gospel to make

sense. That will be Paul's approach. You will see it over and over again.

He will try to get into a situation where he is able to get their attention, to listen to what they have to say and to speak when they let him speak and to share the content of hope. The story is not over for the people of Antioch. By the way, the story is not over for Ivan. At the end of "The Grand Inquisitor" parable after Ivan has told the story, Alyosha comes up and kisses his brother. Not the kiss of betrayal but the kiss of love. Ivan could never forget it. You have to read the story.

Heavenly Father, thank you. Thank you for the story that is not over. Even sometimes when people are so sure that it doesn't make sense and therefore, they make up jokes about it. And that's what the people of Antioch did, this wild city. So they made up stories. They made fun and yet even in making fun, they put their finger on the heart of the whole matter. These believers did belong to Christ and it is Christ who makes the difference. So Lord, help us to make that discovery and sometimes if we are around people who are unable to see it right now to wait it out and to find a way to share thoughtfully to catch them off guard so they can discover it, too, so that we can discover it. In Christ's name, we pray.

¹Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Brothers Karamazov*, "The Grand Inquisitor." translated from the Russian by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; introduced by Malcolm V. Jones. New York: Knopf; distributed by Random House, 1992.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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