



Sunday, January 28, 2024

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Acts 11

Sermon Title: Christians ARE Disciples

Good morning. We are continuing as a church, looking at the church that began as we read in the book of Acts. And today, we're going to be looking at **Acts 11**. In Acts chapter 11, we have a number of stories which occur, but they are all connected in the aspect of how God is working through people to make people become whom He has created them to be in relationship with Him. I invite you to open your Bibles and turn to Acts 11.

We have a couple of different stories here. We're looking at the first part which is a repeat of what we've done over the last two weeks. And you may say, "Why are we repeating this?" But it says something when Luke actually repeats a story three times. Now, we might not think about that because we think you know, "A copy and paste and it just prints on the next page, and it's no big deal." Luke is writing this by hand on papyrus, which is not easily found or accessible, and very valuable for space. So when he writes, he is writing thinking, "I've only got so much space, and yet he repeats the story of Peter and his vision, and Cornelius and the angel. And so we'll see today at how important it is that Luke took this valuable space and time to rewrite that story.

And we'll see a couple of things in there where you go, "You know, this wasn't said in the first two." And then we look at how Christians were growing in the city of Antioch. And we'll look at how God worked through people there and began to develop His church in a broader way. So I invite you to follow along as I read from Acts 11.

Peter Explains His Actions

11 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. **2** So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him **3** and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." **4** Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: **5** "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. **6** I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. **7** Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

8 “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ **9** “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ **10** This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. **11** “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. **12** The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. **13** He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. **14** He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

15 “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. **16** Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with[a] water, but you will be baptized with[b] the Holy Spirit.’ **17** So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” **18** When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

The Church in Antioch

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. **20** 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. **21** The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

22 News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. **23** When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. **24** He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, **26** 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.

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. **28** One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) **29** The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. **30** This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You, Lord, that in Your Word, we can see how You direct us. Lord, we thank You that You speak to us personally in Your Word. And Lord now, we ask that Your Spirit may move within each of our hearts individually. We move within our church, as a group. That we may see Your desire for us, as we too, Lord, are Your disciples.

Lord, I pray that the word spoken may be Your words, and that nothing of me may come out, but that it all may be to Your honor and glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

As I said earlier, here, Luke is taking up valuable space to write for the third time, this story of Peter and Cornelius. And Luke decides that this is important because he understands that when God moves in new places, there will be people who will not understand it or agree with it. So there are pieces within this section for when Peter comes back to Jerusalem, he is right away accused of, "Hold on! You went to the uncircumcised. Don't you know that you are not supposed to do that? You know that, Peter. What are you doing?" So Peter, rather than just saying, "You know what? God told me to do this. And you have to understand this is the right thing to do." Peter instead says, "Let me show you. And let me tell you the story of how God has moved in my life and in Cornelius's life, and how God's Spirit showed up. And we are to preach to those who are not circumcised."

So Peter begins. And as he begins his retelling of the vision that is there, he begins in a very personal way. Remember, in **Acts 10**, it says that "he saw," because Luke is telling the story. And now you get the emotion of Peter telling the story, saying, "This is what I saw. It's not something that somebody else did. This is what happened to me. And this is what God was teaching me at that moment." And so he tells of the blanket coming down, and the animals in there, which Jews were not supposed to eat according to their dietary laws. And he once again goes through the piece of how God says, "Kill and eat." And how he and his self righteous judgment says, "I've never done that. I'm not going to sin against this law now." And God says, "Do not call unclean what I have declared as clean."

That piece of telling the story is important for the people to hear because there is an indirect way in which they too now participate in that piece. Because now they know it's not just about preaching to the Gentiles. Now they know that God is saying, "You need to evaluate some of the things that you did on your own. Things you did not specific to Scripture. You did it on your own as tradition as to what you think needs to be done. You need to evaluate that. Are those holding you back from reaching out to other people?"

And so then he talks about Cornelius. He mentioned how he went to Cornelius and Cornelius said that he was to go. And when he goes there, he doesn't go alone but he takes six people with him. In the Old Testament, Moses told the people of Israel that if you are in court, the witnesses of two or three are enough to sentence a person. They are now living during the time of the Romans. And in the time of the Romans, the Romans said you needed seven people to seal something in order for it to be lawful, which makes you also look at the seven seals in Revelation. In Egyptian culture, you needed seven witnesses to make something legal. And now here you have Peter and six others for a total of seven. So even within the culture of those who are not Jews, this is now a valid story to be used because we have a sufficient number of witnesses.

And then he goes on and he tells of what Cornelius says. And there is a very important line here that he says what Cornelius tells him, which Luke did not write in the first two stories. It starts at just the end of **Acts 11:13** when Cornelius says, "... 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter.' Then, **14** He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

If we look at the story in Acts 10, we see how Cornelius was seen as a God-fearer. And the angel, when he said to him, "God has honored you. God has honored your prayers and He sees that as valuable," Cornelius knew what he needed to do. But Cornelius had not yet been saved. So he sends Peter to come and share the gospel of Jesus so that he and his household may be saved.

Think about people that we know. How many people do we know, who know that there is a God? Who might, even in times of need, pray to a god. Who might respect your faith and say, "Yeah, you know, that's good for you. That's great." But until you accept the fact that Christ died for you, you will not be saved. And here, we see how God is reaching out to the Gentiles, but in many ways, he is telling the Jews as well, "You need to accept the Messiah who came to give His life for you." Next week we celebrate communion, that celebration of seeing and participating in the death and the resurrection of Christ.

So here, Peter begins to share. And here's another very important distinction. It says in **Acts 11:15**, "**15** As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning." Peter is telling the people in Jerusalem, "As I began to speak, there was a second Pentecost." Now, it didn't have the tongues of fire, but it was evident. Peter is like, "It was just like when we were back in that room and the Holy Spirit came on us, and we knew it was the Holy Spirit. And it was evidence that it was the Holy Spirit. And we celebrated with that. And as I'm standing there and as I'm beginning to share the gospel, the Holy Spirit comes down and pours out on all these people." And then, as he says at the end of **Acts 11:17**, "**17** ... who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" When the Holy Spirit moves, we just better back up and let Him do His thing. And then step in line behind Him.

So in this story, we see how Peter proclaims to these people, "You need to hear the story of what God has been doing." And Luke says, "I need to write this a third time because we need to make sure everybody gets it. Jesus is for everybody. Everybody who calls on the name of Jesus will be saved." At that response, **Acts 11:18**, "**18** When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God..." Now here's an interesting piece of that, right? It's not like, "Oh, well, if God wants to work that way, that's fine. I'm still going to kind of do my own little thing." No, this is a celebration. This is a celebration of God enlarging His church and enlarging the kingdom of God. It's like, "Wow! There are more people out there who are gonna join us in heaven. This is awesome! Praise the Lord!" [Congregation says, "Hallelujah."]

Now we've got that story. Now we're going to shift a little bit. In the second story, we see the same thing. And this is where it becomes really important to us. The second story is about the church in Antioch. Antioch, at that time, was about the third largest city in the Roman Empire.

So this is a sufficient place. It is also a place in which many Jews, many of them Hellenistic Jews, who, as we read in the beginning during the persecution that happened just after Stephen was stoned, many of the Hellenistic Jews went to Antioch. But with this persecution, these Hellenistic Jews who became Christians would share the gospel with Jews who had been spread out before - because earlier on during the dispersion of the Babylonian Empire and during the Roman Empire, the Jews got moved out all over the place - they would share the gospel only with Jews because they too thought it was only for the Jews. "After all. The people of Israel were God's chosen people."

So they went. But then, you've got these rebels from Cyprus and Cyrene. They started thinking, "You know, this is too good to keep it to ourselves. We need to start sharing this with some of the Greeks as well. So they did. Now many of these Jews that were sharing were Hellenistic Jews, so they were Greek Jews as well. So it's still kind of with the same people. And they start sharing. Word gets back to Jerusalem. "People in Antioch, they seem to be sharing the gospel with non Jews. Are we okay with that? Like, is it still the same gospel or are they changing things?" And so they decide to send someone up there to see what's going on. "Let's just make sure everything is kosher. And we'll send up Barnabas."

Do you remember Barnabas? Barnabas is the gentleman who, when Saul came back after receiving his conversion, Barnabas welcomed him in. Barnabas is the Son of Encouragement. It is interesting that the people in Jerusalem are sending Barnabas to check it out. Because they know that if this is really happening, the people there need encouragement, not criticism. When they are sharing the gospel with other people, they need to be encouraged in it, not criticized for it. And so they said Barnabas, and Barnabas is up there. And it says in **Acts 11:23**, "**23** When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." Barnabas encouraged them to remain true to the Lord.

I think one of the challenges which the people in Jerusalem felt was, "When we begin to go out into the world, will we begin to change the truth to what the world says?" And Barnabas was there saying, "I'm going to encourage you to share the gospel with everybody. But I'm also going to encourage you to be true to what the Word of the Lord says. Do not let that change as you share the Gospel." And so Barnabas is there. And Barnabas realizes that he's out of his league. He realizes he can't do what needs to be done. He also realizes that he knows a man.

How many of you have ever been in that situation? Right? You're doing some work around the house. All of a sudden, you realize, "This is a little bit out of my league. But I know a man who can help me with this one. Or I know a woman who can help me with this one." Right? And so what do you do? You go get that person to help you with whatever needs to be done. And that's what Barnabas is doing.

He's saying, "I've got areas of gifts. I can be an encourager, but I also know that there are other people who do this better than me." So he travels to Tarsus. Tarsus is where Saul is. And he says, "I remember back in my time in Jerusalem, there was a guy by the name of Saul. He would be really good at this. He was kind of outspoken, very driven. He'd be great at doing something like this."

So he travels from Antioch to Tarsus, and says, "Hey, Saul, I want you to come back with me. I think God's got a space for you to share your gifts." And so he brings Saul back with him to Antioch. And then it says in **Acts 11:26**, "...for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people." Barnabas and Saul. We are not meant to do church by ourselves. We are meant to do church as a group. And today, we commissioned Renee to fill in that piece of Barnabas. To be that encourager, the person who hears God in a different way, and walks alongside the ministries of the church, to encourage them to continue to grow and develop.

Barnabas walked alongside Saul at this time and encouraged him in his gifting of preaching. Barnabas walked alongside the people of Antioch and encouraged them as they grew in their faith. And so as a church, we see that that's an important piece into who we are. We need people to walk alongside us, to continue to challenge us to grow in our faith.

And then we read right after that in **Acts 11:26**, "... The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." Christian. A word which gets thrown around now. I think for many people, that word has lost significance. The people in Antioch were living in such a way which was distinct from anything else. Throughout Scripture, we often hear of people following the way of Jesus who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." But here, the people were called Christians. Christ is that first part. They are Christian. So they are Christ like, or Christ followers. Or belong to Christ.

For example, many of us in this room are Canadian. We belong as citizens to the country of Canada. And so to be called a Christian, you belong as a citizen to Christ. And Christ is that Greek term for Messiah, which means the anointed one. And so it makes sense that they would say, "These people belong to Christ." But who are the people that belong to Christ? They are disciples. And what is a disciple? A disciple is one who learns from someone else to be and to think like them. So Jesus called 12 disciples. These 12 disciples walked with Jesus for three years. Jesus wasn't the only teacher that had disciples. Many people had disciples.

In fact, John the Baptist had disciples. Anybody who was leading a group would have disciples, and these disciples would walk alongside this person, not so much to see what they did but to see how they fought. What was their thinking process? Because that way when they are gone, I know how to think in that same situation. Because we all know that I can watch you do something but if the situation is a little bit different, I might not put two and two together. Or I could watch you do something, but unless I participate in it, I'm not going to become really efficient at it.

And for many of us, I can watch you do something but unless I really know what is the, for lack of a better term, mechanics behind it, I'm not really going to understand why you were doing that.

So the life of the disciple is to say, "I am going to live with Jesus so that I understand how Jesus thinks. A number of years ago, one of the phrases that was going around was W.W.J.D. What would Jesus do? There's good to that but I think there's a better part, which would be W.W.J.T. What would Jesus think? If you know the process of His thoughts, you would understand what He would do. And so here we have disciples who are now being called Christian. And so today we ask the question, "If I call myself a Christian, am I also a disciple? Or am I Christian in name only? Because Christians are disciples and Christians need to be in that space.

Jonathan Parnell, in an article writing about discipleship says, "Disciples of Jesus are three things. They are worshipers. They are servants. And they are witnesses."

They are worshipers. We gathered this morning to worship Christ. As we sang this morning, you could see and hear and feel this aspect of worshiping God. Giving God the glory that He deserves. Giving Him all of our praise, all of our hearts, and understanding that it's not I, but that it is Christ through me in which everything is done.

And then there's the aspect of servanthood. Jesus, the night before he was crucified. He washed the disciples' feet. He knew what was coming the next day. He could have said, "You know what, Lord? This is just too much for me to handle right now. Like can somebody else do it?" But he understood a principle which needed to be done. Which is not saying, if you're at that place where you're like, "I don't have any capacity to do this right now," that you're expected to do it. What it is saying is, "What's your mindset?" Is your mindset one of those who wills to serve other people? Or is your mindset in a place where it's about me and my recognition?

The disciples learned it's about serving other people. We see this as we go through the book of Acts. How Peter just leaves and goes to Cornelius. We saw how Philip left, went to the eunuch. How Barnabas leaves and goes to Antioch. And it's not like he's going for a weekend. He goes and spends some time with them, realizes that he needs someone else to help him. He goes to Tarsus. He comes back to Antioch and spends another year in Antioch. It's a mindset of, "What is it that you want me to do? And if you are calling me to do this, Lord, I'm going to do it because I am Your disciple."

And then the third one is this aspect of witness. Siggi and Heather (Buschhaus) just flew out to the Philippines and they are going to spend a few weeks there encouraging pastors there who are sharing the gospel with other people. They are being like Barnabas to encourage other people. And oftentimes, I think within the history of the church, to be a witness meant you go someplace else. But what if being a witness begins at home? What if being a true disciple and a true servant of Christ, and a true worshiper of Christ begins with demonstrating that at home. So that the people around you see that you begin life with worshiping Christ and serving Christ.

What if it begins at your workplace where the people around you see that you serve God and you serve others? What if witnessing begins in a place in which you are placed wherever you are and your attitude is that of worship and service?

If we think about all Christians as disciples and all disciples are learning about God, then there needs to be this aspect of how we are sharing God with other people with those around us. And in order to do that, what are we doing for ourselves to continue to grow in our faith and in our walk? What are we doing? How are we being encouraged? Are there people walking alongside us to encourage us? Or maybe, are we walking alongside other people to encourage them, to be that witness to be that person?

In his article, Jonathan Parnell writes this, "Someone who, because of God's awakening grace, conforms his or her words and the ways to the words and the ways of Jesus, is a disciple." Let me read that again. "Someone who, because of God's awakening grace, that pouring out of the Holy Spirit within our lives, conforms his or her words and ways to the words and ways of Jesus."

That is what we are called to be. And each of us has a different way in which we can demonstrate and live that out. But when we call ourselves Christians, when we call ourselves believers, it doesn't just mean this is something I know. We are also disciples and this is something I live. And Luke shares a little story about that. Right after that piece in **Acts 11:27-28**, it says, "**27** ... some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. **28** One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world." And then it says this in **Acts 11:29-30**, "**29** The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. **30** This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."

Notice what it says. The disciples - as each one was able to share their gifts. Some of us have a gift of time that we can share. Some of us have a gift of prayer that we can share, or a gift of teaching, or a gift of encouragement. Some of us have a gift of finance that we can share. And God says, "Whatever I have gifted you with, I gifted you with that as a disciple of Christ, so that you can, first of all, worship me and thank me for all that I've given you. Second of all, that you can serve the brothers and sisters in Christ. And you could witness by sharing your gifts."

So today, God invites us through Luke, who wrote these stories, to say, "What is it that we have been gifted with? And how are we going to share those gifts with other people?" And are there people who need to come alongside us that we need to say, "You know what? I need a little bit of help in this area. Let me go talk to so and so because I know they can help me." Because we are all on a journey. And the journey of a disciple is a learning journey. You are a lifelong learner. You're constantly learning about God's grace, and forgiveness, and truth. You never graduate. Sorry for those who don't like school but you are always in school when you're a disciple. Graduation comes when you reach eternity and God says, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Amen.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You. Lord, we thank You that You have called us to be Yours. That You have called us to be disciples as lifelong learners and Lord that you have filled us. Lord, we pray that You will fill us not only with Your Holy Spirit, but with a desire to continue to grow in our faith and Lord, to share the gifts that we have.

And Lord, when we need help, we will seek help to walk alongside us. That we will seek a Barnabas to come along beside us and to share so that we too may grow and use the gifts that You've given us. But Lord, the gifts are for Your glory. And so Lord, we ask that You will fill us with Your Spirit that we may know Your love for us in a deeper way. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*