

Sermon on **Acts 11:19-26** – 5.9.21 – Mother’s Day  
St. Paul’s Lutheran Church – New Ulm – Pastor N. Scharf

*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. 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. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. 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. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (NIV 2011)*

Did you have a nickname growing up? Or as one of my children calls it, “a nickname.” There are some people in my life that I would have to think for awhile before coming up with their real names since I only called them by their nickname. People get their nicknames from something they did whether great or embarrassing, or they get it from a pronounced physical trait or from some internal talent or quality. Some nicknames we like, some we outgrow, and some we despise. While some people may try to make a nickname for themselves, most are bestowed with one. Today we hear about nicknames and how to truly encourage one another.

**Christians Encourage with Christ.**

They were knocked down and seeing stars. The brief golden years of the early church were over. At Pentecost they had the initial surge of people turning from unbelief to faith in Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel message the disciples preached. They gathered in relative peace to meet, to study, to proclaim. But Jews like Saul and the members of the Sanhedrin rushed to destroy the new church. Mob violence took over and they put to death a leader in the church named Stephen (Acts 6,7). After a short trial they stoned him to death. Zealous Jews went on the hunt for followers of Jesus. Believers fled Jerusalem, and carried the message of a Savior from sin, Jesus Christ, with them. The church grew.

Can God bring something good out of an awful situation? Yes. He does. He’s promised it to you. Paul wrote to the Romans (8:28), *“and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* Stephen made a beautiful public confession of Christ (read it in Acts 7), and after a short suffering as the Jews threw stones at him, he got to meet his Savior face to face. For the other believers, the ones who scattered in fear and panic, God used them to turn others to Christ, and in doing so, showed them the power of the gospel they believed and shared, and God saved many. Jesus really is *“with us always, even to the very end of the age”* (Matthew 28).

*“Those who had been scattered”* - At first the refugees shared the good news of Jesus only with the Jews, helping them connect the dots that the Messiah promised in the Old Testament Scriptures had come – the Lord Jesus Christ! Sometimes it makes more sense to start with people who have some knowledge, rather than going to people who have no knowledge. But believers from Cyprus, the island 60 miles off the coast of Syria, and believers from Cyrene in modern day Libya came to Antioch and shared the gospel with the Greeks living there. Why? *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”* (John 3:16). They were part of the world and so are you. This gospel message of a Savior from sin is for all. God blessed their work. God used that Christ-centered good news to turn hearts to the truth and away from lies and eternal damnation.

*“The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”* The only way people can come to faith is through the Lord’s power. The Holy Spirit has promised to work through the means of grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. And here the Lord poured out his blessing. As I look out here, has not the Lord poured out his blessing? He has - you have this same Gospel message in your heart,

faith kindled by the Holy Spirit working through the Word, through baptism, strengthening it through the Lord's Supper. The Lord still works through these means!

The church in Jerusalem heard about God's blessing in Antioch and sent *Barnabas* (a trip of between 200 and 300 miles depending on how you go) to encourage and to provide what might be needed. "*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.*" We won't find a perfect church in this world. But we will find believers gathered into congregations, fellowships, church bodies and synods, doing the work the Lord has called us to do – to share this message of Jesus Christ, Savior of the world, with all people. **Encourage one another with Christ.**

"*Barnabas*" was a nickname. His name was Joseph, from the island of Cyprus, from the tribe of Levi. But believers gave him the name, "*Barnabas*" which means "son of encouragement." And here Luke tells us, "*He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.*" Is there a better description for a believer? A similar description was given of Stephen. I like that name.

Some nicknames I don't like. Sometimes I really tried to stop nicknames people gave me. Either they were picking out my worst qualities (usually a brother or sister were good at giving those), or some embarrassing thing I did. What if we got nicknames like that? How about "son of judgmentalism," or "daughter of gossip," "man of grumpiness," "son of theft," "child of arrogance and misbehavior," "son of good at church but swears a lot at work," "daughter of dirty jokes," "son of drinking too much," and the names could go on, couldn't they, they could get a lot more direct and even more perverse, but, sadly accurate.

We need a *Barnabas* now more than ever, don't we? When we see our sin and our unworthiness before God and his Word, we see that our offenses have broken our relationship. We deserve all those nicknames. But God sent us a Barnabas who did far more than encourage. He preached and taught. He lived as our substitute, suffered in our place, died the death we deserved, and rose again to assure us we will rise – to save us, to encourage us, to forgive us and free us from those nicknames that we earned. In fact, he took all the bad nicknames on himself and paid for them, erased them once and for all on the cross. And by his empty tomb, a new nickname is given to us – "forgiven, freed, child of God, loved."

God has given us other "Barnabases and Barnababes." The etymology of that second one might not pan out, but you get what we're saying. God gave us people to bring God's Word and Sacraments to us. He gave us mothers, fathers, friends who shared the good news of Jesus with us and gathered us into God's house to hear his Word, to be brought to the baptismal font to have all the awful nicknames of our sins washed away in the waters of baptism, to be instructed that we might partake of the Lord's Body and Blood for our forgiveness in the sacrament. Early believers relished in the names "*believer, saint, his holy people, brothers and sisters in Christ.*" These are nicknames that are true, that were earned for us by our Savior Jesus. This is what God sees us as, and we are changed by his grace.

Barnabas knew what the power of forgiveness in Christ Jesus can do in your life. He had seen it in the life of a man who had had once approved of Stephen's death and who was responsible for much of that early persecution. But Jesus turned this violent man's heart to believe. Jesus stopped *Saul* and brought him into the Kingdom of God – put faith in his heart by the working of the Holy Spirit. Barnabas saw that God's grace had changed him. "*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. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*" God's grace had done this – for Barnabas, for Saul, and for you and me. Saul no longer persecuted believers in Jesus. He was one. People called them "*Christians.*" They believed in and followed their leader, "Christ." There isn't a better nickname is there? "Christian." That's what you are – saved by, connected to, and following Jesus Christ.

Dear *Christians*, God's grace has changed you. Follow him. Gather to hear the Word, to be taught and to teach. Take your faith with you wherever you go – into the factory, the classroom, the field, your home, or dorm room. Live it. share it. Trust the Word. Trust Christ. We are Christians. This is what we do. It's who we are. We are Christians. You are Barnabases and Barnababes. **Christians Encourage with Christ.** I can't think of a nickname I'd rather have. Can you? You are a *Christian*. There's nothing better. The Grace of God has done this. Amen.