As we return to our journey through Acts, the gospel is spreading like wildfire throughout the ancient world. Let’s turn to Acts 11:19-30 and read aloud together.

Over the past few weeks we’ve been looking at the very specific story of Peter’s divine appointment with the Roman Centurion Cornelius that took place in the coastal town of Caesarea. The story was a very specific illustration of how God was arranging for disciples of Jesus to share the Gospel with Gentiles (non-Jews). Since Peter was the leader of the Apostles, it makes sense that Luke gives specific focus on his engagement with Cornelius and his household. However, as Luke zooms back out in the first part of our thought unit this morning, we get the sense that these divine appointments between disciples of Jesus and Gentiles were happening in other places at the same time. Look at our text beginning with vs. 18. Luke writes:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

Let’s refresh ourselves on our geography for a minute. Remember that the movement of Christianity began in Jerusalem in the region of Judea. That’s where Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected. That’s where the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. And for several weeks, months, or perhaps even a year or so, the spread of Christianity was confined to Jerusalem and a few of the outlying villages. However, if you recall, when the disciple named Stephen was stoned to death for his faith, a widespread persecution broke out and the church in Jerusalem scattered. Luke describes how far the believers were dispersed in vs. 18, beginning with Phoenicia. Phoenicia was a region of coastal cities that ranged about 100 miles long and 15 miles wide including significant cities such as Tyre and Sidon. The region of Phoenicia was about 130 miles or so northwest of Jerusalem.

The disciples also fled to Cyprus, which was an island 100 miles west of Phoenicia and just south of what is now modern day Turkey.

Finally, the disciples fled as far as Antioch, which is over 300 miles north/northwest of Jerusalem, and that is where the remainder of our story takes place.

Historians believe that Antioch was the third largest city in the world in the first century, second only to Rome and Alexandria, boasting a population close to 600,000 people. Antioch hosted a very diverse population consisting of Greeks, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, Arabs, Persians, Egyptians, and Indians. The Jewish community was thought to
number around 25,000 in Antioch. Just outside of town you would find the city of Daphne which hosted the Temple of Apollo. If you know anything about Greek and Roman mythology, the god Apollo was consumed with lust for the virgin Daphne, who eluded him and finally asked her father, the river god, to transform her body into something unattractive to Apollo. According to the myth, just as Apollo was taking hold of Daphne, her father turned her into a laurel tree. Thus, the Temple of Apollo, in the city of Daphne, was set amongst a grove of laurel trees. The worship of Apollo, as well as two female gods (Artemis and Astarte) was thought to include temple prostitution. Needless to say, Antioch and the suburb of Daphne were frequently visited by men from many parts of the world. One writer said that Antioch was essentially the “Las Vegas” of the Roman Empire! The city was famous for its immorality.

So why would many of the disciples from Jerusalem disperse all the way up to Antioch? Simply put, it would have been easy to disappear in that city, and with so much immorality, the likelihood of Jewish authorities from Jerusalem making the trip there on the hunt for Jesus followers was very slim. Now note, there were no famous “disciples” or “apostles” known to have fled to Antioch. Those believers who fled to Antioch remain unnamed. They would have been first generation converts, perhaps even some of those who witnessed the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, but we really don’t know much about them. What we do know is what Luke reports in vs. 20: that some of the believers who fled to Antioch would share their faith only with the Jews. However, other believers, particularly those who hailed from Cyprus and Cyrene, began to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the Greeks. Luke reports in vs. 21: “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.”

Let us stop for a minute and simply appreciate what we’ve just read. Antioch will become one of the epicenters of the early Christian world. Antioch will serve as the home of many of the early church fathers, and the city will become famous as a stronghold of the church during the last chapter of the Roman Empire. But did you hear how the church in Antioch got started? There were no missionaries, no apostles, no church planting strategies, no professional clergy. There were simply men and women who had come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and they could not keep themselves from sharing the Good News with the citizens of Antioch.

I mentioned to you that two weeks ago we had a very bright man named Jim Tomberlin in town to help us think through how we are operating and functioning as a church. Jim said something during that weekend that is beautifully represented in this text. Here’s what he said: in every disciple, there is the seed of a church. In every believer who is devoted to following Christ, there is the seed of a church. That’s exactly what we see here in our text. Wherever disciples of Jesus landed, a church would begin because they would inevitably share their faith, leading others to become followers of Christ, and the assembly of believers would gather together and a church would be planted.

How did this happen? Because the hand of the LORD was with them...God did it, but He did it through simple men and women who were willing to share their faith with another person.
I spoke with a lady from our church last week who has been hosting a Discovery Bible Study in her home now for just over a year. She has 8-10 women from her sphere of influence who attend regularly, and they are gradually growing into disciples of Jesus. Let me tell you something: that lady is leading a church! The seed of the church that God planted in her when she gave her life to Christ is taking root in those other ladies, and that’s how it works. Let me ask you something: if you were hijacked tonight and dropped onto an island filled with people, but there were no Christians, would there be a church a few years later because YOU lived there now? That’s the picture that we see here in the book of Acts…wherever the believers landed, a church would sprout up, because within every believer there is the seed of a church waiting to be planted.

Now the leaders of the early church who resided in Jerusalem begin to hear rumors about this explosive movement in Antioch, so they decide to send an ambassador to check things out...somebody they trusted to discern the situation and to speak wisdom on their behalf...so they send our old friend Barnabas. Remember that Barnabas is already a proven leader and a God-honoring presence in the Jerusalem church. We have already learned that Barnabas hails from Cyprus; he has demonstrated his devotion and generosity by selling his land in Cyprus and handing the proceeds over to the Apostles; and Barnabas was the first to befriend the converted terrorist, Saul, when Saul arrives back in Jerusalem and is met with suspicion. Barnabas is a “son of encouragement,” and Luke writes in vs. 24 that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Clearly he’s the right man for the job. So what does Barnabas find when he arrives in Antioch? Luke writes in vs. 23-24

When [Barnabas] came and 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 great many people were added to the Lord.

When Barnabas arrives in Antioch, when he assesses the situation, when he spends time with the assembly of believers, when he breaks bread with them in their homes and joins them in there worship, here’s what he will report back to the Apostles in Jerusalem: he saw the grace of God! Let me ask you a question: what do you think the rumor is about the church in Kansas City? What do you think the rumor is about the church called Colonial? If a mature believer from another town were to visit our church for the first time...if he were to worship with us, meet our people, eat in our homes, and assess the situation that he finds here in our church, what would his report consist of?

I know this sounds a bit corny, but that actually just happened two weeks ago when Jim Tomberlin came to visit us for the weekend. Jim was the founding pastor of Woodmen Valley Chapel in Colorado Springs, he served with Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago for 5 years, and he’s been coaching and serving the local church throughout the world now for several decades. Jim came at my request…I along with the Elders wanted to get a third party perspective on how things are going here at Colonial as we anticipate the next chapter of our life together. Jim attended services at both sites, visited our children and youth ministries, visited with the pastors, staff, and elders, and

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got a pretty decent picture of who we are and what we are about. Would you like to know what his evaluation was, as a seasoned Christian leader along the lines of Barnabas? Here’s what he said: “There is a palpable sense that God is moving in and through Colonial.” He saw the grace of God! Listen friends: that’s always the goal, right? That people would come in contact with the church of Jesus Christ, and they would see the Grace of God. I’m not PROUD that Jim saw the grace of God here at Colonial, but I am relieved and grateful. I’m also not surprised, for that is my experience with this community of believers as well. God’s grace has brought us together; God’s grace has kept us together; and God’s grace is leading us to become and help others to become passionate, selfless followers of Jesus.

Barnabas is “glad” as a result of what he sees in Antioch. Now rest assured, these new believers were likely far being saints. We must imagine what an outbreak of new believers might look like in Las Vegas! There would have been attitudes and habits and lifestyles that were under construction to be sure, but Barnabas saw through all of that…he saw the grace of God and he was glad indeed. Barnabas also springs into action as an encourager and one who is willing to pour into this new community of believers. We can only imagine how excited the believers in Antioch were to meet a man like Barnabas. I imagine Barnabas was in great demand as a counselor, coach, and mentor. And the numbers keep growing. Twice in this short descriptor Luke mentions that many people were added to the Lord.

Barnabas needs help, so he sets off to find Saul in Tarsus. If you remember, the last time Saul was mentioned, he was heading off on a ship bound for his hometown in Tarsus where he has now been living for the past eight or nine years. What was Saul doing during those years? We really can’t say for sure. We know some of the time was spent in Tarsus, and some of the time was spent in the desert in Arabia where he was led by the Holy Spirit. Some scholars believe that it was during his time in Tarsus that he was flogged; it was during this time that his family disowned him because of his faith; and perhaps it was during his time in the desert that he had a profound vision where he saw the third heaven and received even greater revelation from God. Saul shares in his letters that all of these things happened in his life after becoming a Jesus follower, we just don’t know when…but clearly some of those trials, tribulations, experiences with God occurred in the years that Saul was in Tarsus. The fruit of that time will soon become evident as we move through Acts: Saul has matured as a Jesus follower and as an apostle. He is powerful in his preaching and teaching, and his time in Tarsus and in the desert has now prepared him to be an evangelist, a church planter, and eventually…a martyr.

If we were watching a movie, this scene would be similar to the search for Luke Skywalker after he has been away for a long time learning how to be a Jedi. It’s one thing to be young, talented, and enthusiastic…it’s quite another to have suffered, endured, and matured. Saul left as a hot-headed, argumentative young man, but he returns now to Antioch with Barnabas as a more mature, seasoned leader. We should think that Barnabas is a good bit older than Saul and a very different personality in comparison with the lawyer-like brilliance of Saul, and yet these two men together create a phenomenal partnership that will change the world.
Luke reports that for a year Barnabas and Saul pour into the church in Antioch that continues to grow and flourish. Their ministry is teaching…teaching everything that Jesus commanded…teaching what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Can you imagine sitting under the teaching of Saul and Barnabas for a whole year?

The impact of their ministry was gigantic. Luke writes in vs. 26, “In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”

Most scholars agree that the believers in Antioch were labeled as “Christians” as a derogatory term. The term would have literally meant what we think of when we hear the words “Jesus Freak.” Clearly the name of Christ was so readily upon the lips of the believers in Antioch, their lifestyles so stuck out in contrast to the prevailing culture of immorality, that the pagans in Antioch made up a name to taunt and ridicule them.

Of course their efforts at creating an insult backfired, for these believers soon considered the title of “Christian” to be a badge of honor they were willing to live for and to die for. As the fervor of the church increased, so did the persecution, particularly under the rule of Roman Emperor named Nero. In the years that followed the book of Acts, thousands of Christians would be rounded up and imprisoned, tortured, burned, disemboweled, and fed to the lions as a way of entertaining the Roman crowds in the coliseums. Still, the Christians persevered with joy. So great was their devotion for their Master and Savior, Jesus Christ. That’s what being a Christian meant in the beginning of Christendom, and the label of Christian continues to be costly in many places around the world. The word Christian never meant “my family’s heritage” or “I grew up as a Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran…fill in the blank.” To be a Christian then and now means to follow Jesus as His disciple; to call Jesus Lord and to rely upon Him as our sole hope of forgiveness and redemption.

Luke concludes our thought unit with an example of how the church responded to needs in the community and among the larger church in vss. 27-30;

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

We don’t hear a lot of about New Testament prophets, but here is one example that sticks out. Agabus has the spiritual gift of prophecy, and his particular gift allows him to know through the Spirit what is soon to come: a major famine upon the entire Roman Empire is immanent. By the way, that’s what the term “the whole world” meant in the first century…the whole Roman Empire. We know from various sources in the ancient world that these seasons of famine did in fact come to pass throughout the varied regions of the empire.
So what did the church do in light of the pending famine? They did what churches continue to do to this day: they took up a collection from the sacrificial generosity of the assembly and distributed the resources to the elders in the cities where the need was the greatest. This practice of giving sacrificially to help meet the needs of fellow believers who are struggling around the world has been a hallmark trait amongst Christians for close to 2000 years. We also take up collections and provide assistance to unbelievers who have suffered hardships as well. Generosity and selfless, sacrificial giving have always marked the lives of Christians and their life in community as the local church.

Actually, if you’re paying close attention, you can really see many of the marks of a healthy church presented in this text: 1) the grace of God is evident; 2) many people are hearing the gospel, believing, and turning to the Lord; 3) the church empowered by the Holy Spirit can not be ignored…the word will spread locally and abroad; 4) new people will be added regularly…the church will grow; 5) the church will provide excellent teaching; 6) the church will stick out and the unbelievers will ridicule their devotion to Christ; 7) the church will be generous and respond with sacrificial giving when needs are presented, even if the needs are not in their immediate community; and 8) healthy churches are led by elders, who encourage and exhort the believers to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose and faith.

I love this picture of the church, and in many ways I feel that we are becoming that kind of a church here at Colonial. I say “becoming” because I don’t suspect we’ll ever arrive! There is always room to grow, to stretch, to rely more deeply upon the work of the Holy Spirit, to teach and preach with deeper faith and conviction; to become more sacrificial in our giving and in our obedience to Christ. There are so many to reach and so little time. And I’m still a work in progress… I’m pretty sure I have a lot of room to grow in my walk with Christ, and I suspect you do as well.

One thing is for certain though: I am thankful. I am thankful to be your pastor; I’m thankful to be counted among the body of believers at Colonial; I am thankful for my family; but more than anything, I am thankful for Jesus Christ, who died the death I deserve so that I might be forgiven and inherit HIS LIFE, which I so definitely do not deserve.

To be a Christian means a great many things that we’ve covered here this morning, but let’s conclude with this final quality: to be a Christian is to live a life of gratitude. If you’re not grateful…if you have no gratitude in your heart…I can tell you right now that you are NOT a Christian, and I would appreciate it very much if you could stop referring to yourself as a Christian…you are making the rest of us look bad! I love you…but I’m not kidding. Ungrateful, stingy, boring, gutless, self-indulgent, self-righteous, self-centered people who call themselves Christians need to stop doing so for two reasons: 1) you are misrepresenting the most beautiful, important, transforming, hopeful and generous movement the world has ever known, and you are defaming the very Son of God for which you will be held accountable on the day of judgment…that doesn’t end well, so stop already, OK! But listen, here’s the other reason, and I want you to hear this: the very worst thing in the world is thinking you are a Christian when you are not a
Christian. That would be like thinking you had been to the beach because you once visited a muddy farm pond. That would be like thinking you had downhill skied because you once went down your driveway on a plastic sled. That would be like thinking you knew the love of a spouse because you once had sex. That would be like thinking you were a parent because you had a cat growing up. That would be like thinking you were cured of cancer because you swallowed an aspirin.

Listen to me: if your perception of Christianity is tired, boring, predictable, uninspiring, shallow-thinking, moralistic, and generally unappealing…and yet you are pretty sure you are a Christian, please know…you are NOT a Christian, and the picture in your mind is NOT Christianity…and that’s GOOD NEWS!

Read the book of Acts from beginning to end when you get home today, and you will know what it means to be a Christian and what Christianity is all about. If you need further resources, pick up a copy of C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* and read every page. If you need further resources, buy a plane ticket to India and join me as I travel to Odisha in February to encourage and equip 200 church planters who risk their lives every day to share the gospel in a Hindu country because they are so grateful that Jesus healed them, cast out their demons, and gave them a new life of joy, love, passion and purpose. If you still need further evidence, go with our team to visit the prisons and hear the testimonies of countless inmates who have experienced complete transformation from hardened criminals to bighearted Jesus lovers who can’t wait for each new day, even though they are confined behind bars.

Please do not call yourself a Christian if you do not have passion, joy, purpose, gratitude, and a whole lot of love in your heart towards just about everybody including your enemies, because I can tell you friends…the real Christianity…the kind we have been reading about here in Acts…the kind that lots of people in this room know about…the kind of Christianity that changed the world and continues to change lives today…is so much better than whatever religion you subscribe to. You see…here’s the secret: it’s not a religious thing…it’s a relationship thing. You need to know JESUS…because once you meet HIM, once you have developed a relationship with HIM, your life will never be the same. Jesus changes everything. It is impossible to have Jesus in you…to be filled with His Holy Spirit…and to be a boring person void of passion, faith, and generosity. If Christ is in you…if Christ is in us…the grace of God will be evident. If the grace of God is not evident, then it’s time to call a spade a spade, get on our knees, confess our sin, and ask Jesus to take the wheel. Jesus won’t ride in the passenger seat…He only gets in the car if we let Him drive. He will take us places we would never choose to go, but it’s in those places…in those relationships…in those challenges and the victories...even the defeats…that we see the glory of God shine through us, through those we meet, and we catch a glimpse of eternity. It is AWESOME, but you have to let Jesus drive…you must hand over the keys and trust Him with your life. You must surrender your freedom to finally be set free!

There will never be a better time than now to enter into the greatest adventure of your life. Jesus is calling…will you respond? Let’s pray.