

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Easter 6 – May 14th and 17th, 2009

Acts 11:19-30

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to 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 ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, 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.

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 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.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Dear Children of our Heavenly Father,

Does anyone know how old St. Luke's Church is? It is over 160 years old. Granted it hasn't been Wisconsin Synod Lutheran all those years, but for over 160 years St. Luke's has been feeding the souls of its members here in Watertown with the powerful Gospel message found in God's Word. That leads me to another question. How many more years will St. Luke's be feeding the souls of its members here in Watertown, WI? The answer to that question is a little more difficult to answer, because we don't know how long God will allow this earth to be around and what will happen in the future we don't exactly know. History is an interesting subject and the history of St. Luke's is very interesting. If you ever have the time, we have a booklet that contains the history of St. Luke's church for the first 150 years and Dr. Lehman has been writing little articles for the Newsletter about the history of St. Luke's that would certainly remind all of us of the wonderful blessings that God has given to the people here at St. Luke's.

You might be asking where I am going with this history about St. Luke's. This morning I want all of us to think for a moment what St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church means to you. I want you to think about a question, why is St. Luke's important for me? And I also want you to think for just a moment what has been the steadying influence here at St. Luke's. I will give you a small clue. It isn't one of the Pastor's or past presidents. As you are thinking about these questions, I want you to also think about the text for today's sermon, because all the way back in the New Testament Bible times, God was working through his people. This morning we will see him working in the city of Antioch. And what you will notice is that whether it is Antioch 2000 years ago or St. Luke's in Watertown in the year 2009 ...

The Lord's Hand Is With His Church

- 1. He gives the growth**
- 2. He provides the workers**
- 3. He opens the hearts to be generous**

The background to this story points to a very tense situation. It hadn't been that long since Stephen's powerful sermon was given to the Jewish ruling body. He spoke of how the grace of God had blessed, protected, nourished, guided and sustained their forefathers. But then, very bluntly Stephen told his audience, **“You are like your forefathers, stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart. You always resist the Spirit.”** That wasn't well received. The people covered their ears, and stoned Stephen.

Following that murder, things got real tense. The Christians in Jerusalem were hit with persecution, and were forced to leave town. Some went to Phoenicia on the Mediterranean coast, some to the island of Cyprus, and some farther north to Antioch. Luke describes it this way, **“Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to 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.”**

What we will notice as we look at this account and as we look at the history of St. Luke’s and God’s kingdom for that matter is **“the Lord’s hand was with them.”** One of the things that you notice as you listen to this account in Antioch is how many times it talks about the growth in the Christian congregation in Antioch, **“a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.”** A little later it says, **“and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.”** And again it says, **“and taught great numbers of people.”** Certainly the people were not afraid to talk about their Savior. They weren't bitter and they didn't feel they needed to hide their Christianity. In fact, wherever they went they spoke of the good news about Jesus. The news of His resurrection was still fresh. Those fugitives from Jerusalem planted in others the seed of a debt paying and death defying living Savior. That's quite significant, in that they no longer confined their mission outreach to their own people. And that amounted to another large step in the march of Christianity, breaking down ethnic and cultural barriers as it spread. Those people were embracing all with the love of God, because that's what Jesus did.

But there is one thing that we need to remember as we listen to these words from Antioch. Was the growth because of all the people or was the growth from God? It is easy to pat ourselves on the back and say what a good job we did and start to give some of the credit to ourselves. We need to remember that we are only the spokespeople for Jesus. God the Holy Spirit does the work of bringing people into his kingdom. This doesn't mean that we can just sit back and watch the Holy Spirit work. It is quite the opposite. The Holy Spirit is only working where the Gospel message has been preached and told to others. That is where we come in. God is looking for faithfulness from his children on earth. That is all that God asks of us. Be faithful. This is something we need to think about as we look at St. Luke's. St. Luke's has been blessed with growth beyond belief, but does that mean that we can say what a good job we have done to cause this growth. No! What we can say is that God has been very gracious to us and has blessed the faithful work of the people here. But we need to remember that if there was no growth, God still would be with us and would be watching over us.

Back in our text, it seems the center of activity was the congregation in Antioch. A beautiful thing happened there. **“News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, 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.”** As our text says, Barnabas, the past or sent to Antioch from Jerusalem, **“saw evidence of the grace of God”** there. Those people were showered with the undeserved love of God. The Lord provided them with a Savior. By the Spirit's power they were brought to faith. By the power of the Word, they turned away from being slaves to sin, and trusted in their Savior's salvation, bought with the price of Jesus' blood.

I want to talk just a little bit about Barnabas. Barnabas was a man sent by God to serve the people of Antioch. He was their pastor. He was watching over the people of God in that city. This is something that we need to think about as we look at how God watches over his Church as he sends out called Pastors and

Teachers to work in his Kingdom. If we would look back at the last 160 years here at ST. Luke's, we would notice that there have been many different Pastors and Teachers with different gifts and different abilities. When I first arrived at ST. Luke's, people would like to talk about Pastor Uetzman or Pasto Vomhof and that was nice. We never want to forget the Pastors, but we need to be careful that we don't pick out one or more Pastors as better than the rest. God has a purpose for each one of those Pastors or teachers who have served the Lord here at ST. Luke's or TSL. They were certainly not the same, but they were still beneficial to the people at ST. Luke's and they certainly glorified their Savior with their faithful service. Again, we never want to forget where these Pastors and Teachers came from. God sent them just like he sent Barnabas to serve the Christians at Antioch.

Those people loved the Lord and were faithful to His Word. And their love for the Lord showed itself in how they honored Saul and Barnabas for their service. We know the gifts of Saul and how he faithfully used them. Barnabas is singled out here. He's a "good man" reliable, responsible, one in whom the congregation had confidence because of his faithfulness to the Word. The Spirit had filled him with faith and love. The congregation held those two men in highest regard because of their work. That's another outstanding mark of a Christian congregation, that it regards ministers of the Word as servants of Christ, as under shepherds of the Good Shepherd. And by listening faithfully to the Word, good, responsible leaders are trained. For those reasons Barnabas **"encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts."** These are the words of a faithful servant to a Christian congregation. Simple words, but words made necessary because of the work of the devil. He works to prevent faithfulness.

A final characteristic of a Christian congregation is the generous hearts. Christians are considerate of others. There was this Agabus, who in a trance was given specific information about a famine that would overtake the entire Roman world. It did happen. Even secular historians write of how severe it was in the land of Judea. But it was the congregation of Christians in Antioch to the rescue. **"The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea."** Here was this congregation of mixed Jews and Gentiles focusing on the needs of their brothers and sisters in the faith. They took care of it in the right way. They took an offering among themselves. They didn't ask the community or any organization outside the congregation to help with the privilege of the congregation. It was a freewill offering, each giving according to his ability. In that way they lovingly responded to the love of Jesus with love for the less fortunate. A beautiful fruit of faith!

Once again this led me to think about how generous the hearts of God's people are here at St. Luke's. What a miracle that each week there are thank offerings collected each week here in Church. But once again we need to realize that it is by God's grace alone that any offerings are collected. God through his Law and Gospel opens up his people's hearts to be generous. We can't make people generous. We can't and shouldn't make people give thank offerings. We once again preach the truths of God's Word and the Holy Spirit continues to work in the hearts of his people.

And this is something we need to remember as we bring our offerings to the Lord. How do we look at our offerings? Are our gifts given out of a sense of an obligation or to pay the bills or to keep the Church going, or are many gifts given out of love for a Savior who has given me everything? Each and every day there is a struggle as we bring our joyful and generous gifts to God's house, but I pray that just like the congregation in Antioch we are led by God to be generous as we each search our hearts to see how we can serve God and the many people we serve with our thank offerings as we bring generous gifts to thank and praise our God and to serve God faithfully with these thank offerings.

A Christian congregation is not a perfect organization, just people who love Jesus and His Word. Where we see weakness in loyalty to Jesus, the Lord sees it also. We take it to Him in confession. Through His continuing love and forgiveness, let each of us commit ourselves to a closer relationship with Jesus and with others. That will reduce unfaithfulness, and more people who are our brothers and sisters in Jesus will find great joy in being part of a congregation that loves the Word of Jesus, is faithful to it, and passes it on throughout the world! Amen