

Evangelize Because the Lord's Hand is with You

Acts 11:19-26 (NIV)

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.

After Jesus rose from the dead and before he ascended into heaven, he told his people to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20) This is something a little different for God's people. They are used to being separate by how they worship and what they believed. They were used to having people come to them instead of going out into the world to share the good news of God with others, to evangelize foreigners. Their numbers in and around Jerusalem were growing daily following Jesus' ascension, but so also the opposition against them was growing in response to their evangelism. Followers of Jesus began to be killed for spreading the good news of Jesus, martyred, martyred like a man named Stephen. This caused those followers of Jesus to scatter to other parts of the world out of self-preservation.

Even while these followers of Jesus Christ were fleeing for their lives, Luke records, "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." (verse 19) The Jewish followers of Jesus were now taking the Light of Jesus out into the world. As they did, they went to those who would understand and make the connections like they did. They spread God's Word only among Jews. It was what made sense to them. It was probably even more comfortable to them. They were Jews like them. They knew the Old Testament. They knew God's promises. The groundwork was already laid for them to show them how God's prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus.

"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." (verse 20) Some of these who were scattered because of persecution for following Jesus were even bolder. They took Jesus' words to heart to make disciples of all nations, that there were no restrictions as to whom Jesus was for. So, they went to their new neighbors, to people who had no background knowledge of God and his Word. They evangelized the Greeks, bringing the good news of everything Jesus had done for them to people very different from themselves.

If you were one of these first century followers of Jesus, would the prospect of this evangelism scare you? Does the idea of doing evangelism today scare you? When you think of evangelism is the first and most prominent thought of you walking up to a stranger's door in order to share your belief in Jesus? If this idea excites you, great! If that's you and your personality and you haven't told me that yet, please do so right away. There is much work to be done here. In fact, we have a group of missionaries coming from Truth in Love Ministry to do this very thing for a couple of days in June right here in Layton. You can join them

However, if this idea of going door to door to strangers' homes sharing the good news of Jesus is the most unappealing and scariest thing for you, I get it. Evangelism can be scary when you think of trying to formulate a relationship with someone as you intrude on their property, their home, their sanctuary. You might just be a very shy person who doesn't do well meeting new people. You might be scared of rejection, that this person will slam a door in your face because they don't want to hear about Jesus. It's hard not to take that personally because Jesus and what he has done for you is an intimate and integral part of who you are and why you do the things you do. And in a community where many people are connected by a single religion and your beliefs are the minority, you fear being ostracized, shunned. You might be scared of sharing Jesus because you feel like you don't know all the answers and you are worried you are going to say something stupid or embarrassing, that you will never live down what you did knocking on that door that one day. If any of these things scare you when it comes to sharing the good news about our Lord Jesus, you are more certainly not alone. Every follower of Christ in every generation has feared sharing the good news of Jesus for similar reasons.

Yet they did it. They spread the word, the good news about Jesus. How were they able to get over these fears in sharing the good news about Jesus? They shared Jesus because they couldn't hold him in. They couldn't be silent about this most precious and

marvelous gift that God had given all of them, the gift of himself. Just like us, these followers of Christ were very conscious of their sins, their short-comings, their inadequacies. But they now knew that Jesus had come specifically to forgive them their sins, their weaknesses, their faults and flaws. Jesus lived for them and for us, keeping God's laws perfectly in our place, not just as an example for us, but to keep these laws in our place, to be the perfection we could never be. Because Jesus did this and then sacrificed himself on the cross, shedding his blood to take the payment required for our sins, and rose from the dead, they knew that they were now citizens of heaven. Jesus' resurrection meant that his payment for our sins was accepted by God and that they would live forever with him, free from all persecution and fear and rejection and embarrassment. They couldn't hold this message back. They couldn't hold Jesus back. Can we do any different?

I guessing you still have fears about evangelism, sharing Jesus. Hopefully it's helpful to tell you that going door to door cold-calling to share Jesus is not the only way to share the good news about the Lord Jesus. We share Jesus through natural conversations, talking to your kids about why we go to church, about what we heard in church, making those connections to life and what God says. You talk about it with friends and family as the opportunity arises when you can relate something from a Bible study to what they are going through. I marvel and thank God at how the connections here have grown simply because you have invited family and friends to hear what you hear Sunday to Sunday, because you want them to know Jesus like you do. You invite them because you love Jesus so much and want them to know how much Jesus loves them as well.

And there are many more ways beyond face to face conversations to share Jesus. You post videos on-line that tell who Jesus is and what he has done for you, sharing sermons and worship service and Bible passages that encapsulate one of the many ways God loves you. You invite people to a church event, something like an arts and crafts time or Trunk or Treat to hopefully open a door later to share Jesus. Maybe you are not the one who starts these conversations. Maybe you are like Barnabas who encourages the people who are sharing Jesus to so many others, taking time out of the day to pray for those who are sharing Jesus that God would give them strength and courage to do so and that he would bless the efforts to spread his story of how he has saved us, how he has already made us perfect forever. Maybe you, like Barnabas, see all the work that needs to be done, all the sharing of Jesus that you want to happen, and you go find a Saul, a person who has that skill set and desire to teach people about Jesus.

Even with all those different ways of sharing Jesus – and there are plenty more – you may still be very afraid at this prospect of evangelizing, of sharing Jesus. Then realize one more thing about being a follower of Christ. These “disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” (verse 26) had a distinct message of Jesus to share that was different from those around them, just like it is for us. As they told Jews and non-Jews the good news about the Lord Jesus, we are told that “the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” (verse 21)

The Lord's hand is powerful and mighty. Anyone who goes up against the Lord will not defeat him. God says that no one can snatch any of his followers out of his hand. This is the Lord we believe in, the Lord who is with us. His hand is just as powerful and mighty as it was in ancient Antioch. When our strength and courage is gone, it's Jesus and his Word that drives us to have that one more conversation with someone, to send that one more invite. The Lord's hand shields and protect us when we are afraid, and that makes you just a little bit bolder to share Jesus because whatever this person does, they can't overcome my God. Because the Lord's hand is with me, I know that his love for me is not dependent on how well I can answer people's questions and accusations against God. God will not leave me defenseless as people reject him, reject me. We have God. His mighty hand is with us to the end and beyond.

I know. It is scary to share the good news about the Lord Jesus. It's scary for me too. But the Lord's hand is with us just as it was with those Christians fleeing persecution. They still shared the good news about Jesus in spite of their fears. Because the Lord's hand was with them, a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. This was the grace of God at work, his hand. We rejoice like Barnabas did in Antioch with what God is doing here. His hand is with us because Lord promised to be with us always as we go and make disciples of all nations, starting right here in Layton. We share our Jesus because he is the best news that we have to share. We share Jesus because he lived for me, died for me, and made me perfect before God. We share Jesus because we know the grace of God changes people and saves people. We share Jesus because the Lord's hand is with us, just as it always has been with all Christians since they were first called that at Antioch. Amen.