

11 June 2023
Commemoration of Saint Barnabas, Apostle

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“New Names”

Text: Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3; Mark 6:7-13; Isaiah 42:5-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

It was NOT a compliment! It was ridicule, scorn. The Jews in Antioch ridiculing those who believed that a crucified man who so obviously failed and did nothing to restore the nation of Israel could possibly be the promised Messiah, and the Hellenists, the cultured and polytheistic Greeks and Romans who lived there scorning them for only believing in *one* God. *Christians*, they said with a snort. *Christians*, they said while spitting on the ground. *Christians*, they said as they squinted their eyes, slammed their doors, or patted them condescendingly on the head. *Christian* meant fool. *Christian* meant stupid. As it still does for some people today.

And yet, we heard, ***the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.***

Maybe this was the reason, in fact, for the label. If they stayed small and irrelevant they could be easily ignored. But if their numbers were increasing, they had to be dealt with. And one way to deal with folks we don't like, we want to belittle, marginalize, or push to the fringe, is to label them, call them names. Shame them so that perhaps they will ease up, lay low, or go underground, or so no one will want to join them and be known as one of "them."

And it works. At least some of the time. Maybe an equivalent term today to what Christian meant then would be "Jesus freak." That used to be a label, anyway. (Maybe I'm just showing my age!) So someone might say: *Those people who go to Saint Athanasius are Jesus freaks! Weirdos.* We can either embrace that, a term they mean for ridicule and scorn, or cave - back off and try to fit in; show we're not so weird; not speak out or speak up so much about those issues that break from the Word of God in our world today. Because, you know, it's not a very big step from being a "Jesus freak" to being - to use *today's* labels - a phobe, a bigot, a hater, or even a terrorist.

The name *Lutheran* was the same - it was NOT meant as a compliment! It was to ridicule, scorn, belittle, separate, shame, and marginalize those with the theology of Luther, and so of the Scriptures, once the Reformation movement could no longer be ignored. I don't know how much it worked then, but it seems to be working now, as some churches no longer want

that name in their church's name . . . But I wonder . . . if you take the name Lutheran and the name Christian out of your church name to fit in . . . how much longer until you're neither Lutheran nor Christian in order to fit into the society, into the culture, and what people want to hear?

But *in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians*, and since the name stuck, that indicates to me that they didn't try to get away from it, but embraced it. It became not just a name but *an identity*. You could be a Jew or a Greek, you could be poor or rich, you could be from the city or the country, and be a *Christian*. And that's what was happening in Antioch. The Christ, Jesus, who died for all, was calling all into His Church, into His kingdom, into His life. And when the apostles and the church in Jerusalem noticed, they sent *Barnabas* to help them and encourage them.

Barnabas, which was, ironically, not this person's given name, but a name, a label given to him! The first time we hear of him, a little earlier in the book of Acts, we learn his name was actually *Joseph* - but the apostles called him Barnabas, which means *son of encouragement* (Acts 4:36). So giving names works both ways, for Joseph received a new *good* name.

For one of the things Barnabas did was that he sold a field that belonged to him and gave the money to the apostles for the care of the church and the poor (Acts 4:37). And while the apostles called him *Barnabas*, son of encouragement, maybe there were others who called him *Barmoros* - son of a fool, or son of a moron, cuz' by the world's thinking, that's a pretty stupid thing to do! What are you doing, Joseph? Keep your inheritance. Keep your money. Why help the poor like that? They're probably just lazy or addicts anyway.

Stupid and foolish could also be applied to other *Christians*, the disciples in the Gospel we heard today from Mark. We heard there that Jesus sent out the twelve with *nothing*! No food, no money, no extra supplies. *Nothing for themselves, but with plenty for others*. For He sent them with His Word to heal the sick, cast out demons, and forgive sins. And to those they gave, from them they would receive - not only what they needed for their journey, but encouragement. But to those who don't know Jesus, who don't know what He did, who don't know what He still gives, or know it and don't believe it - this is all stupid and foolish. Moronic. Stupid Christians being stupid *Christians*!

Maybe you've been on the receiving end of a sneer like that, or worse. Because you believe that the world was created, not evolved. Because you believe gender is of the body, not of the mind. Because you believe in sexual purity, and that marriage is between one biological man and one biological woman. Because you believe in the sanctity of life. Because you believe there is such a thing as right and wrong. Because you believe the Bible is actually the Word of God. You stupid, moronic, close-minded, non-thinking *Christian*!

So you have a choice. Know what you believe and why you believe it and why it is good and embrace it, or try to blend in and be acceptable. Now, I'm not saying to be rude, to

name-call back, and make others think even worse things of Christians! We shouldn't do that. **We want to be Barnabases** - encouragers. Encourage people to believe the truth, and that there is a truth. Encourage people to believe there is a better way than the craziness in our world today. Encourage people to look to Jesus for life and hope and forgiveness.

Or how about this? How about this word, which is growing in our world today: **be an influencer**. These are especially on social media, people who try to influence others to believe and do as they do. We are influenced by the world - it's hard not to be! It's why we have to keep reading and hearing, and learning and re-learning, the truth of God's Word. But maybe, just maybe, we could influence others, too. And show them there's another way to look at things, another way to live, a life that transcends just this, just what's here and now. A life that is eternal.

That's the life that Isaiah was talking about when after describing Jesus and all the wonderful things He would do, He says: ***Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth.*** "New song" there not meaning one that was written in the last few years, but a *Gospel* song - and song of the Lord who makes everything new by His death and resurrection. Who makes us new with His forgiveness, who makes us new with the new birth of baptism, who feeds us with the new food of His Body and Blood. Speak and live this new life - that's what Barnabas did. And it's what we do. Even if we are ridiculed for it. Because that's who you are. It's not just what you believe or what you do, it's who you are.

Because it's not just the believers in Antioch who received a new name, and not just Barnabas who received a new name, you have received a new name. The Lord who, as Isaiah said, does not share His glory, *does* share His name with you. He put His name on you in Holy Baptism and said: you are my child. All that I have is yours. And this name, unlike Barnabas who earned his new name, is completely undeserved. A pure gift from God to us. Which is good, cuz' I could never earn it! But just because it is a gift, it is no less real. It is who you are. It is your identity. Our world is all about identity today - how do you identify? How about: *I am a baptized child of God?* Yeah, you might get called stupid, moron, crazy, fool, or worse. But is a few easier months or years - before the world moves on to its next crazy idea! - worth giving up Jesus and His truth for?

Today, in just a moment, you're going to hear Leander say: *No, it's not!* And *I will not*, by the grace of God. I intend to remain steadfast in the Word of God and my identity as a child of God, even if it costs me my life. Most of you have made similar promises. *Audacious*, to say the least! Overconfident, proud, to think that you can do so? That you'll not back down or be influenced by the world. No. It is by the grace of God. Only by the strength of His Word, only by the strength of His work in you, only by His Spirit given to you, is that possible. And by His forgiveness when you fail, which you do. Which I do. Which I did just the other night, at a store, when I should have forgiven but was stubborn instead. And when Leander does, too. But our identity as child of God is not that we are perfect, but that we live in and *rely on* Jesus' cross-won forgiveness. **As our new processional cross depicts for us.** :-) That's what I deserve. That's what I deserved the

other night. Thank God Jesus took my place. To give me what I need. That maybe I can do better next time.

Leander has learned this. Of his sin, and how great it is. Of His Saviour and how much greater He is than his sin. Of how to pray. Of how his baptism has given him a new life. Of a life of repentance. And of the food and nourishment he needs to sustain him in this new life - the Body and Blood of Jesus. Today he will confess before you and His heavenly Father: *yes, this is who I am*. He'll need our help. He'll need our encouragement, for you to be his Barnabases. And he'll be yours.

Now, maybe you think him an unlikely candidate for this! But any more unlikely than Saul the persecutor, Peter the smelly and impulsive fisherman, James and John the glory-seekers . . . or you? Not really. For remember when Paul said this: *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are* (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). And God chose Leander, and God chose you, and Barnabas, and Peter, and who knows how many others across the centuries? And what were they like? And we thank God for such grace.

So this day we commemorate Saint Barnabas, Apostle . . . is actually a pretty good day for a confirmation! For the world's not getting any easier, and we need more Barnabases, encouragers, influencers. Barnabas lost his life for this. Maybe Leander will, too, sticking to the promise he makes today. Maybe you will. But when you know who you are, your identity in Christ, and the truth of His Word, and the life you have in Him, far greater than any life we have now, while being a Christian may not be easy, it is good. It is the way of life. To go into this world with nothing but Jesus and His Word, and to go out of this world with nothing but Jesus and His Word, and know - *that is enough*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.