

Acts 11: 19-26

**When Followers became Christians**

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If anyone of you have ever taken a group tour (like the one we took with Globus exploring Italy), you know that most of these tours start with an informational group meeting. This is your first glance at your tour director and the people you are spending the next two weeks with.

Our group meeting took place on the eve of July 7<sup>th</sup> at 5 pm – they started earlier and we got there late after a day on our own exploring Rome. After some general instructions, the tour guide invited us to introduce ourselves, adding any information we wished to share with the group.

Mine was a rather generic introduction – name, where I live and work, and asking the group if anyone had a Fitbit charger because I forgot mine. I did not tell the group neither that I was a minister nor that I was married to Jamie. Why? Because I did not want to be put in a box because of what I do or how I live my life. I want people to get to know me, and not make any assumption about me because of what I do for a living or with whom I share my life with. Now by the end of the tour everyone knew that I was a minister and married to Jamie, and it seemed just fine. One gentleman in the group took me aside one day and said that it is so nice to have “us ladies” part of the group. We had made it such fun. I took that as a compliment.

But let me go back to the choice I made not telling people that I was an ordained minister in the UCC and working at the CCN and, with that, a pretty committed Christian. People will automatically make assumptions about you.

She is a minister – she cannot be fun! She is having wine with dinner? She should be more serious! A female minister? It can't be, because in Italy, Christian=Roman Catholic. Maybe it is just my impression but once people know you are a minister, different expectations are placed upon you. Being oneself gets a little bit more complicated!

And then, the title “Christian” comes with all sorts of assumptions, if not baggage. By non-Christians or disillusioned Christians the Christians of today's North America (which many people associate with the right wing, conservative, fundamentalist side of Christianity) are thought of as “anti-gay...anti-feminist...anti-artificial birth control...anti-science...anti-life...anti-equality and justice for all people.” That is not what I am about as a Christian.

Needless to say “Christian” is a loaded label. There are times and places I don’t want to be associated with those followers of Christ who have taken his ministry and message and turned it into a tool that supports a status quo of inequality and injustice, or demonizes one group over another, or uses the term ‘Christian’ for their own, selfish gain.

Interestingly, Jesus never actually gave a name to His followers. The early Church never called themselves Christians. In the Bible, the title most often used was “saints.” The Greek word is “hagios” which means “consecrated to God, holy, sacred, pious,” and it is always used in plural, meaning that there are no individual saint but a connection to a group of people set apart.

The term *Christian* was first coined in the first century. In fact, you heard it mentioned for the first time ever in our scripture reading from Acts. As the Jesus followers expanded beyond its Jewish origins, people could no longer consider the Jesus movement a mere development of Judaism. It was the residents of Antioch, and most likely the powers that were - who coined the term “Christian” to describe the people who belonged to Christ — people who believed that Jesus Christ was their crucified and risen Lord. And right from the start, it was not a compliment, or a title/description of reverence. They flippantly were dismissed as ‘little Christs’ or ‘those of the ‘Jewish party’ because they did not fit into any religious category known to the ancient world.

They came to Antioch fleeing persecution after the death of Stephen. Their message was meant for Jews only. And even though there were many converts among Jews living in the diaspora (away from Jerusalem), the good news of Jesus Christ found fertile ground among the Gentile population – people of different cultural, religious and racial backgrounds. I imagined that this was a surprising development for those first Jesus followers but it sounds like that they built upon it by bringing in Barnabas and Saul.

What was it that made this good news of Christ so attractive to the Gentiles? Everyone was invited to participate. Christian spirituality was populist and egalitarian. It offered redemption to everyone, regardless of social class or race. The ministry of Christ was marked by transcending boundaries – be it social, cultural, political, ethnical - a message that found its budding success among the gentile population of Antioch and other city centers away from Jerusalem. This practice of transcending boundaries is one key characteristic of the good news, and as important today for us 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians as it was 2000 years ago.

We are no strangers when it comes to keeping boundaries. We are most comfortable among our own, right? We manage amongst ourselves to talk about our faith but we rarely take it beyond our own walls. I am not saying that we don’t do it. We do it by volunteering and sending our outreach monies to places in need, but do we actually talk about our faith to people beyond our boundaries? Think about the last time you actually mentioned that you are an active Christian to a perfect stranger, or someone at work? I know I am hesitant to do this because the market of evangelizing strangers has been taken up by many of the conservative Christian groups I don’t want to be associated with.

I know that we love to hear the good news for ourselves but taking it out to the 'market place' is maybe our biggest challenge. And yet, as followers of Christ, as Christians, we are in the business of transcending boundaries, of overcoming them in a way for ourselves and other that is life giving and life affirming.

There is a place of safe, personal boundaries, don't get me wrong, but there are boundaries that limit our faith journey and expression. Our Statement of Welcome that is printed in every bulletin, is our reminder that we are in the business of radical welcome and hospitality. Unfortunately this statement only gets read when people have entered our building. Our challenge is to take this statement out into the world to let people know who we are and what our ministry is all about.

Being a Christian is not easy. The first apostles and converts make it sound like it is the most joyous and delightful task to bring others into the faith and keeping them in faith, while in fact it is hard work (that can be and is very joyous!). And remaining Christian in a cynical world that has very little respect for religion, is even harder.

It is difficult partly because we have expectations from living with faith and being a committed Christian. It demands our very best: service, sacrifice, dedication, humility, patience, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion – the things that manifest Christ-like love. Following Jesus can be messy, grueling, and uncomfortable, and requires an extraordinary amount of time, energy, effort and grace.

There are times when we expect our faith to be a crutch or mechanism to avoid the harsh realities of life. We know that this is not the case. In fact, faith is often a journey that embraces truth and confronts the world in brave, honest, and often painfully difficult ways.

There are times when we expect our faith to fix those things that are broken – be it our bodies or minds, our relationships or the troubles that have such a tight grip on us. We hope that enough faith is the magic solution to life's difficulties, but again, we know it is not.

Our faith will not answer all our questions but in fact create more doubt. Which really means that we never stop learning, and that we need to accept the fact that our faith is a growing faith, not a static certainty we acquired in kindergarten.

Our faith will not stop us from making stupid mistakes. Despite of faith we will at some point in our lives fail, stumble and make horrible decision. To have faith does not mean that the bad and the ugly will pass us by.

But having faith, following Christ, does have its advantages. No matter how badly I behave or things are going, I do have assurance that God loves me, and because of Christ I know that I am God's beloved child. God's love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness are available to me no matter what. This message is radical and controversial and absurd—but according to the Bible, it's true. You are a child of God and so am I, and so is the

stranger next door. That is our message to internalize and that is message we are to take out into the world.  
Amen.